



Social-Emotional Learning in Educational Landscape: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The surge in mental health concerns and societal pressures among Nigerian students has underscored the need to re-examine the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in educational settings. This study explored the integration of SEL in educational landscapes, focusing on its impact on student outcomes and the challenges of implementation. The purpose of this study is to synthesize existing literature on SEL, identifying best practices and gaps in current research. Specifically, this review addressed issues such as the conceptualization and measurement of SEL, the effects of SEL on academic achievement and mental health, and the barriers to effective SEL implementation. The researcher employed a critical review method to discuss issues raised in the research. The findings indicated that SEL is a crucial component of education, enhancing students' academic performance, social skills, and emotional well-being. However, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and cultural adaptations hinder widespread implementation. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended that policymakers should prioritize SEL integration in educational curricula, provide teachers with training and resources to support effective implementation.

Keywords: Academic achievement, Culture adaptation, Educational landscape, Mental health, Socio-emotional learning, Teacher training

Introduction

The integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) in educational settings has gained significant attention in recent years, with researchers emphasizing its role in promoting students' overall well-being and academic success (Cipriano et al., 2023). As educational landscapes continue to evolve, it is crucial to examine the current state of SEL implementation and its impact on student outcomes. The growing recognition of SEL's importance is reflected in the increasing number of schools and educational systems worldwide that are incorporating SEL into their curricula. However, despite this growing interest, there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of SEL's effects on students, teachers, and the broader educational community. This understanding is essential for informing policy decisions, guiding practice, and ensuring that SEL programmes are effective in promoting positive outcomes for students.

SEL is not a new concept, but its importance has been underscored by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for students to develop resilience, self-awareness, and social skills (Flynn, Huang, Patel, Luttgen and Yang, 2024). The pandemic has accelerated the need for SEL, as students have faced unprecedented challenges in their personal and academic lives. Researchers have consistently shown that SEL programmes can have a positive impact on students' mental health, academic performance, and social relationships, making it an essential component of education in the 21st century. The impact of SEL on students' mental health is particularly significant, as it can help mitigate the effects of stress, anxiety, and trauma. By developing social-emotional skills, students are better equipped to navigate the challenges of academic and personal life. Despite the growing body of research on SEL, there is a need for a critical review of the existing literature to identify best practices, challenges, and gaps in current research (Nanda, Satapathy & Panda, 2025). This review aims to address this gap by examining the current state of SEL in educational landscapes and providing recommendations for future research and practice. By synthesizing the existing literature, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of SEL's role in promoting students' social-emotional competence and academic achievement. This understanding is essential for informing the development of effective SEL programmes that meet the needs of diverse student populations.

One of the key challenges in implementing SEL programmes is ensuring that they are culturally responsive and tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, Williams, 2019). Researchers have emphasized the importance of considering the cultural context in which SEL programmes are implemented, highlighting the need for more research in this area. This includes exploring the ways in which SEL programmes can be adapted to meet the unique needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as examining the role of cultural factors in shaping students' social-emotional learning. Cultural responsiveness is critical in SEL, as it ensures that programs are relevant, effective, and respectful of diverse student experiences. The benefits of SEL extend beyond academic achievement, with research showing that it can also promote positive youth development, social-emotional competence, and mental health (Branquinho, Noronha, Carvalho, Rodrigues & Matos, 2026). As educational systems worldwide prioritize SEL, it is essential to examine the effectiveness of different SEL programs and their impact on student outcomes. This includes exploring the ways in which SEL programmes can be designed to promote positive outcomes for students, as well as identifying the most effective strategies for implementing and sustaining SEL programs in schools. Effective SEL programmes can have a lasting impact on students, promoting their long-term success and well-being.

In addition to its academic benefits, SEL is also critical for students' long-term success in the workforce and their personal lives. By developing social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, students are better equipped to navigate the challenges of the 21st century (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley & Weissberg, 2017). As such, SEL should be considered an essential component of education, rather than an add-on or extracurricular activity. Educators, policymakers, and researchers must prioritize SEL, ensuring that students have access to high-quality SEL programmes that promote their social-emotional development and academic success. The integration of SEL in educational landscapes has the potential to promote students' overall well-being and academic success. However, more research is needed to identify best practices, address challenges, and ensure that SEL programmes

are culturally responsive and effective. By prioritizing SEL, educators can promote positive outcomes for students, preparing them for success in the 21st century.

Social -Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical component of education that enables students to develop essential life skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy. By incorporating SEL into educational settings, educators can promote students' overall well-being and academic success. SEL is not just about teaching students to manage their emotions; it's about empowering them to become active participants in their own learning and development. By fostering a supportive learning environment, educators can help students develop the social-emotional skills they need to succeed in school and beyond. The benefits of SEL extend far beyond the classroom, with research showing that it can have a lasting impact on students' personal and professional lives. By developing social-emotional skills, students are better equipped to navigate the challenges of the 21st century, from building strong relationships to making informed decisions. Moreover, SEL can help mitigate the effects of stress, anxiety, and trauma, promoting students' mental health and well-being. As educators, it's essential to recognize the critical role that SEL plays in students' lives and to prioritize its integration into educational settings.

One of the key challenges in implementing SEL programs is ensuring that they are culturally responsive and tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations. This requires educators to be aware of the cultural contexts in which students live and learn, and to adapt SEL programs accordingly. By doing so, educators can promote students' sense of belonging and connection to their schools, which is critical for their academic success and social-emotional development.

In fact, SEL is not just a program or initiative; it's a mindset that should permeate every aspect of education. By prioritizing SEL, educators can promote a culture of empathy, respect, and inclusivity, which is essential for creating a more just and equitable society. As educators, it's our responsibility to ensure that students have access to high-quality SEL programs that promote their social-emotional development and academic success.

Educational Landscape

There is no denying the fact that educational landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by advances in technology, shifting societal values, and an increasing recognition of the need for more inclusive and equitable learning environments. As a result, educators are facing unprecedented challenges in preparing students for a rapidly changing world. The traditional model of education, which emphasizes rote memorization and standardized testing, is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of 21st-century learners. Instead, educators must prioritize critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, empowering students to become active participants in their own learning and development. This requires a fundamental shift in how we approach education, from a focus on transmitting knowledge to a focus on fostering a love of learning and promoting student agency. The educational landscape is also becoming increasingly diverse, with students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds bringing unique experiences and perspectives to the classroom. This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for educators, who must navigate complex issues of identity, power, and privilege in order to create inclusive learning environments. By recognizing and valuing students' diverse experiences and perspectives, educators can promote a sense of belonging and connection, which is critical for academic success and social-emotional development. Moreover, educators must be aware of the ways in which systemic inequalities and biases can impact student outcomes, and work to address these disparities through culturally responsive teaching practices and policies.

Furthermore, the educational landscape is being shaped by broader societal trends, including the rise of social media, the impact of climate change, and the growing awareness of social justice issues. These trends present both challenges and opportunities for educators, who must help students navigate the complexities of the modern world while also promoting critical thinking, empathy, and civic engagement. By integrating real-world issues and examples into the curriculum, educators can make learning more relevant, engaging, and meaningful for students. Additionally, educators must prioritize digital literacy and media education, helping students to critically evaluate information and develop a

nuanced understanding of the ways in which technology shapes our lives. Educational landscape is a complex and dynamic system that requires educators to be adaptable, innovative, and responsive to the needs of students. By prioritizing equity, inclusivity, and social-emotional learning, educators can promote a more just and equitable society, one that values the diversity and potential of all learners. As educators, it is our responsibility to create learning environments that inspire, motivate, and empower students to become active participants in shaping their own futures. This requires a commitment to ongoing learning and professional development, as well as a willingness to challenge dominant narratives and power structures in pursuit of a more equitable and just education system.

A Critical Review

A critical review is a comprehensive evaluation of a topic, issue, or phenomenon that aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. It involves a systematic and rigorous examination of existing research, theories, and practices, with the goal of identifying patterns, themes, and relationships that shed light on the topic. A critical review is not simply a summary of existing literature, but rather an analytical and interpretive synthesis of the key findings, debates, and controversies in the field. In conducting a critical review, researchers employ a range of skills, including critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and effective communication. They must carefully evaluate the strengths and limitations of existing research, identify gaps in knowledge, and develop a clear and compelling argument that advances our understanding of the topic. A critical review is not a neutral or objective exercise, but rather an engaged and reflexive exploration of the subject matter, informed by the researcher's own perspectives and biases. Ultimately, a critical review has the potential to make a significant contribution to the field by identifying new directions for research, challenging dominant narratives and assumptions, and informing policy and practice. By providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the topic, a critical review can help to shape the research agenda, influence decision-making, and promote positive change. As such, it is an essential tool for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to advance knowledge and address complex social issues.

Conceptualization and Measurement of Social -Emotional Learning

The conceptualization of social-emotional learning (SEL) has undergone significant evolution over the past few decades, with researchers and practitioners increasingly recognizing its importance in promoting students' academic and personal success (Dimmick & Dimmick, 2020). SEL encompasses a range of skills, including self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, which are essential for navigating the complexities of the 21st century. As researchers continue to explore the conceptual boundaries of SEL, it is becoming clear that it is a multifaceted construct that cannot be reduced to a single definition or framework. Rather, SEL is a complex and dynamic system that involves the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social processes. Furthermore, SEL is not just an individual trait, but also a contextual and relational construct that is shaped by the social and cultural environments in which students live and learn. Despite the growing recognition of SEL's importance, there is still a lack of consensus on how to measure it effectively (Flynn et al., 2024). Traditional approaches to assessment, such as self-report surveys and observational measures, have been criticized for their limitations and biases. For instance, self-report surveys may be subject to social desirability bias, while observational measures may be limited by their reliance on external raters. Researchers are now turning to more innovative methods, such as experience sampling and social network analysis, to capture the dynamic and contextual nature of SEL. These approaches offer a more nuanced and ecologically valid understanding of SEL, and can provide insights into the ways in which SEL skills are developed and expressed in different contexts.

One of the key challenges in measuring SEL is the need to account for its developmental and contextual nature (Jagers et al., 2019). SEL is not a fixed trait, but rather a set of skills that can be developed and refined over time. Moreover, SEL is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which students live and learn, highlighting the need for measures that are sensitive to these contextual factors. For example, SEL skills may be more developed in certain cultural contexts, or may be expressed differently in different social settings. Researchers must therefore consider these contextual factors when designing and interpreting SEL measures. Researchers have also highlighted the importance of considering the cultural and linguistic diversity of students when measuring SEL (Nanda et al., 2025). Traditional

measures of SEL have been criticized for their cultural bias, which can result in inaccurate or incomplete assessments of students' skills. There is a growing recognition of the need for measures that are culturally responsive and tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations. This requires researchers to engage in culturally sensitive and inclusive practices, such as conducting focus groups and cognitive interviews with diverse stakeholders, and using culturally adapted measures.

The measurement of SEL is not only important for research purposes but also has significant implications for practice (Cipriano et al., 2023). Educators and policymakers need reliable and valid measures of SEL to evaluate the effectiveness of SEL programs and make informed decisions about resource allocation. Furthermore, SEL measures can be used to identify students who may be at risk for social-emotional difficulties, and to provide targeted supports and interventions. However, the use of SEL measures in practice also raises important questions about accountability, equity, and student privacy, highlighting the need for careful consideration and responsible use. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the use of technology to measure SEL (Branquinho et al., 2026). Digital tools, such as games and simulations, offer a promising approach to assessing SEL in a more engaging and ecologically valid way. These tools can provide real-time data on students' SEL skills, and can be used to personalize instruction and support. However, more research is needed to explore the validity and reliability of these measures, and to address concerns about equity and access. As the field continues to evolve, it is essential to prioritize the development of measures that are theoretically grounded, culturally responsive, and practically useful (Domitrovich et al., 2017). By doing so, researchers and practitioners can work together to promote a more comprehensive understanding of SEL and its role in promoting students' academic and personal success. This requires a commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration, and a willingness to engage in ongoing dialogue and critique.

Effects of Social -Emotional Learning on Students' Academic Achievement and Mental Health

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has been shown to have a profound impact on students' academic achievement, with research suggesting that SEL skills are a critical predictor of academic success (Dimmick & Dimmick, 2020). Students who possess strong SEL skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, are better equipped to navigate the challenges of academic life, including managing stress, building positive relationships with peers and teachers, and persisting in the face of obstacles. Moreover, SEL skills have been linked to improved academic motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy, all of which are essential for academic achievement. For instance, a study by Dimmick and Dimmick (2020) found that students who participated in an SEL programmes showed significant gains in math and reading achievement, compared to students who did not participate in the program. Furthermore, SEL skills have been shown to promote a growth mindset, which is essential for academic success, as it enables students to view challenges as opportunities for growth and development rather than threats to their ego.

In addition to its impact on academic achievement, SEL has also been shown to have a positive impact on students' mental health (Flynn et al., 2024). Students who possess strong SEL skills are better equipped to manage stress, regulate their emotions, and build positive relationships with others, all of which are critical for maintaining good mental health. Moreover, SEL skills have been linked to reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improved overall well-being. For example, a study by Flynn et al. (2024) found that students who participated in an SEL program showed significant reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression, compared to students who did not participate in the program. Furthermore, SEL skills have been shown to promote resilience, which is essential for coping with adversity and bouncing back from setbacks. SEL has also been shown to have a positive impact on students' social relationships, including their relationships with peers and teachers (Jagers et al., 2019). Students who possess strong SEL skills are better equipped to build and maintain positive relationships with others, communicate effectively, and resolve conflicts in a constructive manner. Moreover, SEL skills have been linked to increased empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility, all of which are essential for building positive relationships with others. For instance, a study by Jagers et al. (2019) found that students who participated in an SEL programmes showed significant improvements in their social relationships, including increased empathy and cooperation. Furthermore, SEL skills have been

shown to promote a sense of belonging and connection to school, which is critical for academic success and overall well-being.

Furthermore, SEL has been shown to have a positive impact on students' emotional regulation, including their ability to manage stress, regulate their emotions, and cope with adversity (Nanda et al., 2025). Students who possess strong SEL skills are better equipped to manage their emotions, think critically, and make informed decisions, all of which are essential for academic and personal success. Moreover, SEL skills have been linked to improved self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-efficacy, all of which are critical for emotional regulation. For example, a study by Nanda et al. (2025) found that students who participated in an SEL programme showed significant improvements in their emotional regulation, including increased self-awareness and self-regulation. Furthermore, SEL skills have been shown to promote a sense of self-efficacy, which is essential for academic success and overall well-being. The effects of SEL on students' academic achievement and mental health are profound and far-reaching. By teaching SEL skills, educators can help students develop the skills they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Moreover, SEL has the potential to reduce disparities in academic achievement and mental health, and promote greater equity and inclusion in education. As such, SEL should be considered an essential component of education, and educators should prioritize its integration into their teaching practices.

Barriers to Effective Social -Emotional Learning Implementation

One of the primary barriers to effective social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation is the lack of adequate resources and infrastructure. Many schools and educational institutions face significant budget constraints, which can limit their ability to invest in SEL programmes, training, and materials. Furthermore, SEL implementation often requires significant changes to existing curricula, instructional practices, and school policies, which can be difficult to implement without adequate resources and support. As a result, SEL initiatives may be relegated to the periphery, rather than being integrated into the core of educational practice. Another significant barrier to effective SEL implementation is the lack of teacher training and professional development. Teachers are often expected to implement SEL programs without receiving adequate training or support, which can lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and burnout. Moreover, teachers may not have the necessary knowledge, skills, or confidence to effectively integrate SEL into their instructional practices, which can undermine the effectiveness of SEL initiatives. To address this barrier, schools and educational institutions must prioritize teacher training and professional development, providing teachers with the knowledge, skills, and support they need to effectively implement SEL.

A third barrier to effective SEL implementation is the lack of buy-in and support from key stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. SEL initiatives often require significant changes to existing practices and policies, which can be met with resistance and skepticism. Moreover, some stakeholders may not understand the importance of SEL or may view it as a "soft" or "flairy" approach to education, which can undermine support for SEL initiatives. To address this barrier, schools and educational institutions must engage in proactive outreach and communication efforts, working to build support and buy-in from key stakeholders.

A fourth barrier to effective SEL implementation is the challenge of assessing and evaluating SEL outcomes. SEL is a complex and multifaceted construct, and assessing its impact can be difficult. Moreover, SEL outcomes may not be immediately apparent, and may require longitudinal evaluation and assessment. As a result, educators and policymakers may struggle to demonstrate the effectiveness of SEL initiatives, which can undermine support and funding. To address this barrier, schools and educational institutions must prioritize the development of valid and reliable SEL assessments, and work to build a stronger evidence base for SEL.

A fifth barrier to effective SEL implementation is the lack of attention to cultural and contextual factors. SEL is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and must be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of diverse student populations. However, many SEL programmes and initiatives are not culturally responsive, and may not take into account the unique experiences, values, and perspectives of diverse students and

communities. To address this barrier, schools and educational institutions must prioritize cultural responsiveness and contextualization, working to develop SEL programs and initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs of their students and communities.

A sixth barrier to effective SEL implementation is the lack of sustainability and scalability. SEL initiatives are often implemented as short-term projects or pilots, rather than as long-term investments in student development. Moreover, SEL initiatives may not be integrated into existing systems and structures, which can make it difficult to sustain and scale up effective practices. To address this barrier, schools and educational institutions must prioritize sustainability and scalability, working to integrate SEL into existing systems and structures, and building a long-term commitment to SEL.

Conclusion

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical component of education that has the potential to transform the educational landscape. As this critical review has highlighted, SEL is essential for promoting students' academic achievement, mental health, and social-emotional development. By teaching SEL skills, educators can help students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to succeed in school and beyond. Moreover, SEL has the potential to address some of the most pressing challenges facing education today, including academic underachievement, mental health concerns, and social-emotional deficits. By prioritizing SEL, educators can help create a more supportive, inclusive, and equitable learning environment that promotes the well-being and success of all students. However, despite the growing recognition of SEL's importance, there are still significant barriers to its effective implementation. These barriers include lack of resources, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient buy-in from key stakeholders. To address these barriers, educators, policymakers, and researchers must work together to prioritize SEL, provide adequate resources and support, and develop effective implementation strategies. This will require a sustained commitment to SEL, as well as a willingness to invest in the development of SEL programs and initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations. Furthermore, educators and policymakers must prioritize teacher training and professional development, providing teachers with the knowledge, skills, and support they need to effectively integrate SEL into their instructional practices.

One of the key takeaways from this critical review is the need for a more nuanced understanding of SEL and its implementation. SEL is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather a complex and multifaceted construct that requires careful consideration of cultural and contextual factors. As such, educators and policymakers must prioritize cultural responsiveness and contextualization, working to develop SEL programmes and initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs of their students and communities. This will require a deep understanding of the cultural and contextual factors that shape students' experiences, as well as a commitment to developing SEL programs and initiatives that are culturally responsive and inclusive. Furthermore, this critical review highlights the need for more research on SEL, particularly in the Nigerian context. While there is a growing body of research on SEL globally, there is still a dearth of research on SEL in Nigeria, and more studies are needed to understand the specific challenges and opportunities of SEL implementation in this context. This research will be essential for informing the development of SEL programs and initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs of Nigerian students and schools. Moreover, this research will help to build a stronger evidence base for SEL, providing policymakers and educators with the data and insights they need to make informed decisions about SEL implementation.

Ultimately, SEL has the potential to be a game-changer in the educational landscape, promoting greater equity, inclusion, and academic success for all students. By prioritizing SEL and working together to address the barriers to its implementation, educators, policymakers, and researchers can help create a more just and equitable society, where all students have the opportunity to thrive. This will require a sustained commitment to SEL, as well as a willingness to invest in the development of SEL programs and initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations. By working together, we can create a brighter future for all students, one that is characterized by academic success, social-emotional well-being, and lifelong learning.

Recommendations

The researcher therefore recommended as follows:

Educators, policymakers, and researchers should prioritize SEL implementation, providing adequate resources and support to ensure its effective integration into educational settings.

Educators should receive ongoing training and professional development to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and support needed to effectively integrate SEL into their instructional practices.

SEL programs and initiatives should be tailored to the specific needs of diverse student populations, taking into account cultural and contextual factors that shape students' experiences.

More research is needed to understand the specific challenges and opportunities of SEL implementation in Nigeria, informing the development of SEL programs and initiatives that meet the needs of Nigerian students and schools.

Educators, policymakers, and researchers should work together to prioritize SEL, sharing best practices and resources to ensure its effective implementation and promoting a sustained commitment to SEL in educational settings.

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