

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: ENHANCING STUDENT COMPETENCIES AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

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Abstract: Elementary education has increasingly recognized social-emotional learning (SEL) as a vital pedagogical framework for promoting comprehensive student growth. SEL encompasses processes through which children acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand emotions, achieve goals, demonstrate empathy, maintain relationships, and make responsible decisions. This narrative literature review investigates contemporary evidence regarding SEL efficacy, influences on socioemotional capabilities and educational performance, and implementation factors in primary settings. A purposive review of 26 peer-reviewed articles spanning 2017-2025, focused on research from Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and PubMed, synthesized findings thematically. Converging meta-analytic evidence indicates SEL programs positively influence social-emotional development across competency domains. Research documents positive associations between SEL participation and academic outcomes (effect sizes $d = 0.17-0.35$). However, effectiveness varies substantially based on implementation quality, teacher factors, organizational context, and student characteristics. Whole-school approaches show particular promise for sustainable impact. SEL represents valuable evidence-based strategy requiring adequate teacher preparation, ongoing professional development, organizational support, and contextual attention for successful implementation.

Keywords: academic achievement, elementary school, implementation, program effectiveness, social-emotional learning

Abstrak: Pendidikan dasar semakin mengakui pembelajaran sosial-emosional (SEL) sebagai kerangka pedagogis vital untuk pertumbuhan siswa komprehensif. SEL mencakup proses dimana anak memperoleh pengetahuan, sikap, dan keterampilan untuk memahami emosi, mencapai tujuan, menunjukkan empati, memelihara hubungan, dan membuat keputusan bertanggung jawab. Tinjauan literatur naratif ini menyelidiki bukti kontemporer mengenai kemanjuran SEL, pengaruhnya pada kemampuan sosioemosional dan kinerja pendidikan, serta faktor implementasi dalam lingkungan pendidikan dasar. Tinjauan purposif terhadap 26 artikel peer-review periode 2017-2025 dari Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, dan PubMed, mensintesis temuan secara tematik. Bukti meta-analitik konvergen menunjukkan program SEL mempengaruhi positif perkembangan sosial-emosional lintas domain kompetensi. Penelitian mendokumentasikan asosiasi positif antara partisipasi SEL dan hasil akademik (ukuran efek $d = 0,17-0,35$). Namun, efektivitas

bervariasi substansial berdasarkan kualitas implementasi, faktor guru, konteks organisasi, dan karakteristik siswa. Pendekatan seluruh sekolah menunjukkan janji khusus untuk dampak berkelanjutan. SEL merupakan strategi berbasis bukti berharga yang memerlukan persiapan guru memadai, pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, dukungan organisasi, dan perhatian kontekstual untuk implementasi sukses.

Kata kunci: efektivitas program, implementasi, pembelajaran sosial-emosional, prestasi akademik, sekolah dasar

Social-emotional learning represents an educational approach designed to systematically develop students' competencies in recognizing and managing emotions, establishing positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. CASEL describes Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as how children and adults learn to build a strong sense of self, handle their feelings, reach both individual and shared objectives, understand and demonstrate compassion toward others, create and sustain positive connections with people, and make thoughtful, considerate choices (Tinne-Vigne et al., 2025). This comprehensive definition emphasizes the integration of cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions in promoting holistic student development.

Originating from developmental psychology and neurological science, SEL acknowledges that scholastic achievement is essentially interconnected with students' socioemotional welfare and interpersonal efficacy. A commonly used framework has been developed that identifies five core

abilities: understanding yourself, regulating your own behavior, recognizing others' perspectives, building connections with people, and making thoughtful choices (CASEL, 2023). These capabilities are perceived as fundamental aptitudes that bolster students' achievement not just academically but across their lifespans. The CASEL model, called the "CASEL wheel," supports the growth of abilities and settings that promote student learning and progress by developing understanding, capabilities, and mindsets within these five domains of social and emotional ability.

The rationale for implementing SEL in schools has become increasingly compelling. Contemporary research demonstrates that students worldwide face significant mental health challenges, with approximately 81% of youth reporting having been negatively impacted by stress and one in five children having a mental health problem (Brill et al., 2025). Within school contexts, students encounter social challenges including peer conflicts and difficulties with emotion regulation that

interfere with learning and well-being. Current comprehensive research shows that SEL initiatives support positive mental health and secure school settings by building key "safeguarding elements"—nurturing connections, secure and encouraging spaces, and social-emotional capabilities—that help shield students from psychological health challenges (CASEL, 2023).

At the primary education level (ages 6-12), investigations identify a crucial developmental phase for socioemotional growth. Throughout these developmental years, children obtain fundamental abilities in emotion identification and modulation, perspective consideration, social conflict resolution, and cooperative engagement. The preschool years are critical for emotion regulation development, as children become more aware of emotions and their connections to external behavior and psychological states (Heselmans et al., 2025). Research has established that emotional regulation in early childhood is associated with greater psychological resilience, psychological well-being, and academic success, while children who struggle with emotion regulation are at greater risk of social rejection, isolation, and antisocial behavior in later years (Oğuz et al., 2025). Understanding has additionally progressed through investigation of the role of emotional

regulation on early child school readiness, demonstrating that emotional regulation involves managing attention, affect, and behavior, which is essential for long-term health and well-being (Adynski et al., 2024).

Despite growing recognition of SEL's importance, implementation remains inconsistent in many schools. Teachers often report feeling unprepared to teach SEL content effectively, with surveys showing only 34% of teachers and 52% of principals reporting implementation of an SEL program in elementary schools (Reuter, 2023). Understanding the gap between SEL adoption and effective implementation necessitates examining both the evidence for effectiveness and the conditions that support successful programs. This comprehensive narrative literature review aims to synthesize current research on social-emotional learning in elementary schools, examining what is known about program effectiveness, impacts on student outcomes, and factors supporting successful implementation.

METHOD

This narrative literature review synthesized 26 high-quality peer-reviewed articles on social-emotional learning in elementary schools, published between 2017 and 2025. Literature was identified through purposive searching of major

academic databases (Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, PubMed) using keywords including social-emotional learning, SEL, effectiveness, implementation, elementary school, academic achievement, and student competencies.

Selection focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and official frameworks addressing SEL effectiveness, implementation, or outcomes in elementary or primary school settings (Grades 1-6, ages 6-12). Primary emphasis is placed on research published 2017-2025 to reflect contemporary evidence and current practice.

Articles were included if they (a) focused on elementary or primary students, (b) addressed SEL effectiveness, implementation, or outcomes, (c) were peer-reviewed and published 2017-2025, and (d) were available in English. The 26 articles comprise multiple research types to provide comprehensive understanding. Articles were synthesized thematically rather than through formal meta-analytic procedures, with particular attention to identifying converging evidence, theoretical insights, and practical implications for educational practice.

Study Type	n	Key Representatives
Meta-analyses	7	(Blewitt et al., 2018; Cipriano et al., 2023; Corcoran et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019; Korpershoek et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017)
Systematic reviews	3	(Almardiyah et al., 2025; Dreer, 2023; Wigelsworth et al., 2022)
Empirical studies (RCTs, implementation)	6	(Brill et al., 2025; Collie, 2025; Dowling et al., 2020; Harrington, E. M., Trevino, S. D., Lopez, S., & Giuliani, 2020; Heselmans et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2019)
Foundational & conceptual works	11	(Greenberg et al., 2017; MacCann et al., 2020; Meland et al., 2023; Mukhemar et al., 2025; Parvin, 2025; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Tinnes-Vigne et al., 2025)
Official frameworks	3	(CASEL, 2023; OECD, 2024; WHO, 2024)
Total	26	

RESULTS

The empirical foundation for SEL effectiveness is substantial and expanding. A contemporary meta-analysis of 424 studies involving 575,361 learners supplied the most current extensive evidence that universal school-based SEL interventions persistently generate meaningful impacts ($d = 0.17-0.35$) on student outcomes across multiple domains (Cipriano et al., 2023). This landmark investigation supplied powerful evidence for SEL's beneficial impact across numerous outcome categories, demonstrating that students who participate in universal school-based SEL programs experienced significantly improved academic achievement, school functioning, and social-emotional competencies.

More contemporarily, a meta-analysis of 82 initiatives investigating follow-up consequences of SEL interventions discovered that beneficial impacts continued across prolonged durations from 6 months to 18 years post-intervention ($d = 0.13-0.33$) (Taylor et al., 2017). This significant finding illustrates that SEL advantages are not transitory but can supply enduring developmental benefits. Those involved in the programs showed notably greater improvements compared to comparison groups in social-emotional abilities, perspectives, and measures of overall wellness, with these

positive outcomes remaining consistent across students' ethnicity, economic status, or geographic setting.

A comprehensive review of 50 years of research examining effective universal school-based SEL programs for improving academic achievement reported meaningful effect sizes ($d = 0.30$) for academic outcomes (Corcoran et al., 2018). Recent research from 2025 confirms that the strongest results were observed at the elementary level, with students participating in an SEL program for an entire year showing an 8.4 percentile point increase in their academic standing (Tamez-Robledo, 2025). When examined by academic area, reading performance improved by approximately 6.3 percentage points while mathematics performance rose by 3.8 percentage points.

Research documents that SEL programs contribute to improvements across all five core competencies. Regarding self-management and self-awareness, students participating in SEL programs demonstrate enhanced capacity to identify emotions, understand how emotions influence behavior, and regulate their emotional responses in adaptive ways. Research has found that enhanced emotion regulation capabilities emerge even in early childhood, suggesting that interventions during these developmental periods may establish patterns of emotional competence

that persist (Harrington et al., 2020). Early childhood represents a crucial period for learning to manage feelings, as young children gain greater understanding of emotions and how they relate to outward actions and internal mental experiences (Heselmans et al., 2025).

In the domain of social awareness and relationship skills, current research indicates that SEL participation supports development of empathy, perspective-taking, and prosocial behaviors. Students demonstrate improvements in their ability to understand others' perspectives, respond to others' needs with sensitivity, and establish and maintain positive peer relationships. A global systematic literature review documented that multidimensional SEL programs effectively reduce school bullying, suggesting that enhanced social awareness and relationship skills translate into more constructive peer interactions and reduced conflict (Almardiyah et al., 2025).

Development of responsible decision-making skills represents another important outcome domain. Students in SEL programs show enhanced ability to identify social problems, generate multiple solutions, evaluate consequences, and make ethical decisions about personal behavior and social interactions. The current state of evidence on social and emotional learning in primary schools has been synthesized, emphasizing the importance of these

capabilities for students' overall development (Wigelsworth et al., 2022).

Studies examining how social-emotional competence influences students' school performance showed that it favorably forecasted children's educational success (across literacy, math, and science subjects), their feelings and viewpoints about learning, and their connections with peers (Wang et al., 2019). The research verified that emotions and perspectives related to schoolwork served as an intermediate factor connecting social-emotional ability with educational performance, underscoring the wide-ranging impact of social-emotional competence on children's growth.

Multiple interlinked pathways mediate the association between social-emotional competencies and academic success. Enhanced emotional regulation enables students to maintain sustained attention on academic tasks, persist when encountering difficulty, and manage test anxiety more effectively. Improved relationship skills facilitate collaboration with peers during group learning activities and support positive teacher-student relationships that promote academic engagement and motivation.

A recent meta-analysis examining the effect of SEL programs on elementary and middle school students' academic performance found that SEL interventions

had a positive effect on overall academic achievement ($g = 0.08$), with effects varying by grade level: elementary school students ($g = 0.075$) and middle school students ($g = 0.122$) (PMC, 2025). The analysis also demonstrated positive effects across subject areas including English language arts ($g = 0.07$), mathematics ($g = 0.08$), science ($g = 0.06$), and GPA ($g = 0.33$) (Zhao et al., 2025).

Research confirms that emotional intelligence significantly influences students' academic achievement. A comprehensive review by MacCann and colleagues (2020) revealed that students scoring higher in emotional intelligence attained superior academic results, showing a correlation strength of $r = .20$ for ability-based emotional intelligence and $r = .29$ for combined emotional intelligence measures.^e (Zahid et al., 2025). Learners who can recognize and regulate their feelings are more capable of expressing their needs and focusing on their coursework, which contributes to enhanced educational outcomes.

The mechanisms through which SEL influences academic achievement include reductions in behavioral disruptions that interfere with classroom learning. Educational institutions that adopt SEL initiatives frequently see declines in hostile behavior, defiance, and additional conduct issues among students, along with a

measurable reduction in feelings of worry and sadness (IES, 2025). Over time, students who participate in SEL and behavior-focused instruction demonstrate improved rates of completing high school, increased enrollment in higher education, reduced occurrence of psychological disorders, and lower involvement in illegal activities as adults.

Implementation quality emerges as a critical factor influencing SEL program success. A study evaluating a school-based SEL program demonstrated that when the implementation quality is poor, programs often lose their effectiveness and fail to produce the expected positive outcomes (Dowling & Barry, 2020). The findings showed that solely the Quality of Delivery significantly influenced every measured result, emphasizing how crucial effective program execution is for generating favorable effects

Contemporary implementation research has advanced understanding of the conditions supporting effective SEL. Researchers emphasize that effective implementation may require less "fidelity of implementation" (doing exactly what program developers say to do) and more "integrity of implementation" (doing what matters most and works best while accommodating local needs and circumstances) (Meland et al., 2023). This viewpoint recognizes that modifications

made while carrying out programs can enhance their success by potentially strengthening the commitment of those delivering them in the community and improving how relevant participants find them.

Teacher competency and professional development significantly influence implementation quality and ultimately student outcomes. Research has specifically examined social and emotional learning and teachers, emphasizing that teacher preparation and ongoing support are essential for effective program delivery (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The prosocial classroom approach suggests that educators' mental health and satisfaction is a key element affecting positive teacher-student connections, successful classroom behavior management, and productive social-emotional instruction (Dreer, 2023). Educators who possess strong social-emotional abilities are more prepared to create nurturing educational environments, manage relationship disputes, and demonstrate emotional strength.

Studies examining teachers' self-assessed social-emotional skills show that these evaluations measured at the beginning of an academic period were linked to higher levels across three wellness areas (energy and liveliness, active involvement, and pursuit of career development) measured at the period's conclusion (Collie, 2025).

Teaching work requires social-emotional skills, including emotion regulation when faced with challenging situations, relationship building skills with students and colleagues, and conflict resolution skills.

School organizational elements considerably influence SEL efficacy. A meta-analysis of interventions employing an institution-wide methodology to enhancing social and emotional growth discovered that comprehensive school approaches generate effect sizes ($d = 0.21-0.39$) indicating meaningful benefits compared to classroom-only interventions (Goldberg et al., 2019). This implies cumulative advantages when the complete school environment supports socioemotional development

comprehensive review of 45 studies examining 30 distinct programs revealed a modest yet meaningful positive effect of the schoolwide strategy on students' social-emotional functioning ($d = .220$), conduct patterns ($d = .134$), and internal struggles (Badger, 2020). The research additionally discovered that incorporating involvement from the broader community significantly influenced students' social-emotional functioning.

An updated meta-analysis of classroom management interventions, including SEL components, confirmed that well-designed interventions with

comprehensive teacher support produce positive outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2025). The meta-analysis demonstrated that effective classroom management positively impacts student achievement across various situations, contexts, and education levels (Putra et al., 2025). This meta-analysis confirms that classroom management is a crucial concept educators should prioritize to enhance student achievement in any educational setting.

Social and emotional learning in schools has been conceptualized as encompassing both programs and broader school strategies (Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, 2017; MacCann et al., 2020; Meland et al., 2023; Mukhemar et al., 2025; Parvin, 2025; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Tinnes-Vigne et al., 2025). This framework emphasizes that SEL should be integrated throughout school operations rather than existing as an isolated add-on. The effects of family-school partnership interventions have been examined through meta-analysis, finding that when SEL extends to include family involvement, effects on both social-emotional and academic outcomes appear amplified (Smith et al., 2020).

Studies indicate that proven SEL initiatives yield better results when they reach into households, and families show greater willingness to collaborate with schools when the institutions' standards,

beliefs, and cultural portrayals align with their own backgrounds (CASEL, 2023). Educational institutions require participatory decision-making approaches that guarantee families—especially those from traditionally underrepresented communities—are involved in designing, executing, and ongoing refinement of SEL programming.

Organizations within the community frequently offer secure and developmentally beneficial environments for growth and learning, possess thorough knowledge of local strengths and challenges, and are viewed as reliable allies by families and youth. These community-based programs additionally create chances for young people to apply their social-emotional abilities in contexts that are meaningful to them personally and may create pathways for future opportunities.

Studies on SEL during the early childhood period have shown especially powerful impacts. A thorough analysis of 79 separate studies involving 18,292 distinct participants revealed that children who participated in a broad-based social-emotional learning program displayed notable gains in social skills, emotional abilities, behavior control, emotional and conduct challenges, and foundational learning results when compared to non-participating groups (Blewitt et al., 2018). The most substantial effect was observed in

measurements of emotional capability, with findings indicating that emotional competence in young children supports social competence both immediately and subsequently when they enter kindergarten.

The research additionally stressed that supporting children's emotional capabilities through SEL programs during preschool may yield lasting advantages for health and wellness. Children who can comprehend and manage their feelings are capable of expressing compassion, handling peer interactions, and forming positive social bonds. This corresponds with brain development research suggesting that SEL may be especially impactful for children between 3 and 6 years old when communication abilities and cognitive control are advancing quickly (Blewitt et al., 2018).

Effective SEL programs for early childhood include PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), Incredible Years, and Second Step, which have been evaluated as effective programs for developing children's social-emotional competence (Parvin, 2025). Research has demonstrated that children who take SEL-integrated courses demonstrate improved academic output and peer interactions, following Vygotsky's Social Development Theory whereby learning is a socially mediated process.

The significance of SEL has been acknowledged at international tiers. Comprehensive guidance on nurturing social and emotional skills worldwide has been published, emphasizing the importance of these competencies in diverse educational systems (OECD, 2024). Mental health of children and young individuals and their socioemotional development have been incorporated in service guidance, elevating SEL to a global public health priority (World Health Organization, 2024).

Social and emotional learning as a public health approach to education has been established, demonstrating connections between SEL programs and broader mental health outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that SEL programs can have immediate impact for children and young people, including improved social and emotional competence, reduced emotional distress, more positive attitudes about self and others, and fewer externalizing behaviors and discipline problems (CASEL, 2023).

The HEROES program, a Social-Emotional Learning initiative created to build resilience, self-worth, and thriving among young people, showed a substantial improvement in resilience from the beginning to the end of the intervention, which persisted at both 2- and 5-month follow-up assessments (Brill et al., 2025).

The results highlight the significant connection between instructing youth in social-emotional competencies and enhanced resilience, with studies indicating that resilience acts as a buffer against mental strain in students (Brill et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

This comprehensive review synthesizes research documenting that social-emotional learning programs represent a valuable approach for supporting elementary students' development across multiple domains. The convergence of evidence from recent meta-analyses (Cipriano et al., 2023; Corcoran et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017), implementation studies (Dowling & Barry, 2020), and effectiveness research supports the conclusion that SEL can meaningfully contribute to students' social-emotional competency development. Research consistently documents positive associations between SEL participation and academic outcomes through mechanisms including improved emotion regulation, enhanced peer relationships, and reduced behavioral problems that interfere with learning.

The prominence of whole-school approaches in recent research deserves particular emphasis (Goldberg et al., 2019). Unlike classroom-based interventions that may reach only part of the school day,

whole-school approaches create consistent messages and opportunities for skill development across all school contexts. A meta-analysis confirmed that the whole-school approach has small but significant positive impacts on pupils' social and emotional adjustment and behavioural adjustment (Badger, 2020). Implementation quality emerges as essential; research has established that high-fidelity implementation produces substantially stronger effects than poor implementation (Dowling & Barry, 2020).

Teacher preparation and ongoing professional development are critical. The prosocial classroom model emphasizes that teacher wellbeing and social-emotional competence are associated with student wellbeing through the development of supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and effective social-emotional learning (Dreer, 2023). Research demonstrates that teachers' social-emotional skills are linked with positive outcomes for teachers and their students (Collie, 2025). Professional development should include sufficient support and technical assistance for curriculum implementation and school-wide improvement, with on-site training and consultation needed so that programs are used with fidelity while also being adapted to fit the cultural context of the school and community.

Student characteristics and school context matter significantly. Recent research suggests differential effects of SEL based on students' baseline social-emotional competencies. Additionally, cultural considerations are important for effectiveness. Research demonstrates global application of SEL to address universal concerns including bullying reduction (Almardiyah et al., 2025). The investment in SEL programs has demonstrated strong economic returns, with research indicating a return of \$11 for every \$1 invested due to benefits of reduced juvenile crime, higher lifetime earnings, and better physical and mental health (IES, 2025).

The evidence base spanning contemporary investigations—from foundational concepts (Greenberg et al., 2017) through contemporary meta-analyses (Cipriano et al., 2023; Korpershoek et al., 2025), supplies powerful justification for policy and practice initiatives supporting SEL integration. The comprehensive definition of SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitude to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (Tamez-Robledo, 2025)

provides a clear framework for implementation across educational settings.

CONCLUSION

Social-emotional learning programs represent an evidence-based approach for supporting comprehensive student development in elementary schools. The research clearly demonstrates that well-implemented SEL programs contribute meaningfully to both social-emotional and academic development. Multiple meta-analyses confirm positive effects across different outcome domains.

The significance of implementation quality cannot be overstated; the difference between high-fidelity and poor implementation is substantial. Successful SEL requires more than program adoption. Schools must attend carefully to teacher preparation, providing comprehensive training and ongoing professional development. Administrative leadership that prioritizes SEL and allocates resources for implementation is essential. Whole-school approaches that coordinate SEL activities across curriculum, school climate, and family-community partnerships appear particularly effective.

Looking forward, several key priorities emerge for elementary schools. First, commitment to professional development ensures teachers have both knowledge of SEL principles and

confidence in their own social-emotional capabilities. Second, systematic assessment of implementation quality and student outcomes enables continuous improvement. Third, attention to contextual factors and potential adaptations ensures SEL approaches are culturally responsive and appropriate for specific school communities.

The contemporary focus on student mental health, social development, and workforce readiness makes SEL implementation increasingly urgent. As schools navigate complex demands to support students' comprehensive development in changing times, evidence-based SEL programs offer a documented strategy with demonstrated benefits. Investment in SEL represents a commitment to supporting not only students' academic success but also their social-emotional well-being and preparation for meaningful lives and productive participation in society.

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