



Analyzing the multilevel interventions for effective implementation of social and emotional learning in the Jordanian school curriculum

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Abstract

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs are increasingly recognized for their critical role in fostering the holistic development of students. This paper evaluates the benefits of SEL and explores its integration into the Jordanian school curriculum, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive and context-specific approaches. Through a comparative analysis of leading SEL frameworks, such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the Strong Start in the US, the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) in the UK, the Strong Kids in Hong Kong, and the OECD's Social and Emotional Skills framework, this study identifies key components and implementation strategies that have shown effectiveness in various educational contexts. Each of these programs offers unique insights into age-appropriate design, instructional delivery, and outcome measurement. This cross-contextual analysis reveals that successful SEL implementation in Jordan requires a multi-level approach involving curriculum integration, teacher training, community and parental engagement, and supportive policy frameworks. The paper argues that while international models provide evidence-based guidance, a localized adaptation is essential for relevance and sustainability. Ultimately, the study concludes that embedding SEL into Jordan's education system will not only enhance academic outcomes and emotional resilience but also contribute to the broader goals of student well-being, social cohesion, and future readiness. The paper suggested the need to invest in pre-service and in-service training for educators on SEL competencies and delivery methods.

Keywords: mental health, school curriculum, social and emotional learning, student development

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health can be defined as how individuals perceive themselves and their lives (Tavakkoli et al., 2024). It further states that an individual's mental health impacts how they manage themselves in adverse situations. In today's times, children are faced with the challenge of unregulated exposure to various aspects of information outside and inside the school environment, along with challenges in their daily lives such as dealing with peer pressure, family problems, isolation, and bullying. For refugee hosting countries like Jordan, social and emotional stressors are even more concerning, with the impact of war and trauma affecting the mental health of not only adults, but also children and youth. Moreover, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), Jordan is one of the countries in need of extensive support for establishing an efficient mental health system (WHO, 2020). It was also chosen as the first country to

implement WHO's mental health action programme (mhGAP) from among six countries across the globe (WHO, 2024).

Jordan has a population of 3,352,122 children aged 0-14 years. It includes 150,964 registered refugee children between 5-11 years of age and 99,770 adolescents between 12-17 years of age. These children come from countries such as Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Sudan and Iraq (Agherdien et al., 2024). Because of the increased influx of refugees, the Jordanian government faces challenges in providing adequate mental health care services, and all communities, whether the locals or migrants and refugees, face formidable challenges in social and economic integration and provision of child and adolescent mental health care services (Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, a report by the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025) emphasizes on the urgent requirement for coping strategies to be developed for children, indicating that there was no support for children in distress from schools or communities, with children relying heavily on their families for social emotional support.

On observing a daily school study schedule for children from grades one to nine in a report by UNESCO (2020), it was observed for Jordan that theoretical subjects such as Arabic, English, and Math were prioritized, with classes ranging from seven to nine in number per week. There is no mention of social emotional learning as a subject at any grade level (UNESCO, 2020). Thus, it can be seen that although these skills are considered essential, they are often neglected by important stakeholders within educational systems; in favor of “hard” skills like literacy and numeracy, which are often considered easier to teach and measure.

According to Zins and Elias (2007), although there is a recognition of the demands of raising knowledgeable, responsible and caring children, there is a lack of realization that each aspect of these demands can be met by sustainable and effective attention to children's social and emotional learning, which can be effectively done through implementation of well-structured social and emotional learning programs in schools. In order to prevent and help deal with mental health issues, it is imperative that children are provided with an environment that will help to nurture, foster and maintain their social and emotional regulatory skills. Due to the role that schools play in education and because of obligatory attendance rules, these establishments become the ideal environment for the promotion of mental health support for youth (Foster et al., 2005). Social and emotional learning programs and frameworks have more effective outcomes when they are implemented in schools, because schools have a complete network of professionals, mentors and peers which cannot be found at home or in society. These professionals that include teachers, counsellors and administration, are well prepared to identify and handle various social and emotional issues faced by children. In addition, schools also provide more scope of access to mental health services (Rosenthal & Rubin, 2003).

The Collaborative for Social Emotional and Academic Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults are helped to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Elias & Shriver, 2024). For children to be able to learn in an effective and positive manner, they need adequate support from experienced adults and peers. It is only through these support systems and social and emotional learning programs, that students will be able to meet the overwhelming social and emotional issues they have in their everyday lives (Elias et al., 1997).

This paper evaluates the benefits of SEL recorded in various published research and explores its integration into the Jordanian school curriculum, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive and context-specific approaches.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, we identified key components and implementation strategies that have shown effectiveness in various educational contexts through a comparative analysis of leading SEL

frameworks, such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the Strong Start in the US, the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) in the UK, the Strong Kids in Hong Kong, and the OECD's Social and Emotional Skills framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tiered social and emotional learning frameworks for children

CASEL (2023) has established five interconnected groups of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies. These are defined as:

- (1) *Self-awareness*, to be able to identify one's feelings and thought processes and how they affect one's behavior, including self-assessment of one's capacities and limitations. Moreover, at the same time, one should be able to reflect positive and confident behavior.
- (2) *Self-management*, to be able to manage one's thoughts and actions in different circumstances. Moreover, at the same time, one should have the capacity for self-motivation and personal achievements.
- (3) *Social awareness*, to be able to understand and be inclusive towards diverse people. Moreover, at the same time, one should recognize customs and ethics of people from diverse backgrounds.
- (4) *Relationship skills*, to be able to initiate, manage and demonstrate healthy relationships within the family and the community. Moreover, one should be able to be a good listener and communicator, while at the same time be able to avoid conflict and resist submission to inappropriate pressure from peers and the society.
- (5) *Responsible decision making*, to be able to take correct decisions that reflect appropriate behavior in the family and the community. Moreover, one should be able to take these decisions keeping in mind ethics and safety of people around, and be able to analyze what the consequence of one's actions will be in the family and community.

A study undertaken by CASEL (Durlak et al., 2022) shows the difference in results for social and emotional success between students who participated in an SEL program at school, and those who did not. These results were based on studies by Durlak et al. (2011) and Taylor et al. (2017), which investigated short term and long-term benefits of SEL programs in schools, using the r(equivalent) method (Rosenthal & Rubin, 2003). The results of the study showed an improvement of more than 24 percent in social behavior and emotional distress management. They also showed an improvement of more than 23 percent in general attitude and an improvement of more than 22 percent in managing one's conduct. The greatest improvement was seen in social skills, which was 57 percent greater improvement in students undergoing the social and emotional learning program.

This clearly suggests that implementing social and emotional learning programs in schools has benefits not only in academic achievement, but also on overall social and emotional behavior, which is key for success in school life and after. Furthermore, according to Rosenthal and Rubin (2003), if social and emotional learning programs are based on a tiered framework for school mental health, they can focus on providing social and emotional learning supports to all children within the school context including levelled tiers organized to provide more intensive social and emotional learning supports for students who need them as a complement to other behavioral and mental health services. Walker et al. (2004) proposes a three-tiered prevention and intervention model for social and emotional learning programs in schools. According to Walker et al. (2004), these types of models can assist qualified educationists and health professionals in evaluating and categorizing students into three levels of risk (primary, secondary

and tertiary) and can further help in providing solutions and interventions for students at each level.

Interventions at different levels

Research at the ground level

An interview conducted by Save the Children in Jordan, reported that there is a lack of research about the link between social and emotional learning and wellbeing and learning outcomes in non-western contexts (Gunter et al., 2012). This brings to light the urgent need for evidence-based research regarding the positive outcomes for social and emotional learning curricula in schools for countries in the Middle East region, specifically in Jordan.

There are many initiatives in place that attempt to cultivate social and emotional learning skills in countries like the United States, and these initiatives are gaining recognition worldwide. There is also a wealth of research on social and emotional learning conducted in America by prominent researchers such as James Comer, Roger P. Weissberg, Timothy Shriver and Maurice Elias, and a good support system for social and emotional learning programs like the Comer School Development Program, the W.T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, and CASEL (Bowles et al., 2017).

Western evidence-based researches regarding the effectiveness of social and emotional learning curriculum in schools are extensive and many in number. Some examples of benefits of specific SEL curricula in schools in three different countries are given below.

Strong Start, US

Strong Start was an early intervention SEL program, designed for children at risk of and suffering from social and emotional behavior difficulties. The Strong Start program included ten lessons with a duration of 35 minutes per lesson in the classroom and could be taken up by a school teacher or any certified educational professional (Gunter et al., 2012).

A study undertaken by Caldarella et al. (2009) analyzed the effects of this curriculum on 26 second grade students in a suburban school in Utah. The school on the whole, had 502 students with a mix of 87% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, and 3% students of other ethnicities. The use of a control group was also implemented to ensure fair results. The analysis showed statistically significant progress for students based on teacher assessment of social and emotional skills using pre-established criteria, especially for those students who were primarily in the greater risk category. On the other hand, when the control group students were assessed, results showed worsening of internalizing behaviors and decreased levels of positive social interactions among peers.

PATHS, UK

The PATHS Program for Schools (UK Version) was a social and emotional learning program designer for educators and counsellors. The main focus of this program was to encourage positive social and emotional aspects of behavior such as behavioral self-management, self-awareness and conflict resolution for students in primary schools (Reception to Year 6).

A study was conducted in Northern Ireland to evaluate the effect of this curriculum on students in twelve different primary schools. Six schools were used as the intervention group, while the other six were used as the comparison group (control). The study involved 1,711 students in all. The results of the trial, based on assessment using pre-established criteria, indicated strongly that the students in the intervention group developed better self-awareness and conflict resolution skills than those students in the control group (Ross et. al, 2011).

Strong Kids, HK

The Strong Kids programs were a set of social and emotional learning curricula that were created for children and teenagers. The main purpose of these programs was to be able to promote

social awareness and self-awareness, as well as promote responsible decision-making skills. The programs were designed keeping in mind prevention and early intervention strategies, with a focus on typical, at-risk, or emotionally challenged students. The Strong Kids programs had twelve lessons with a duration of around 45 to 55 minutes each to teach. The programs were created in such a way that not only teachers, but also any certified educationist and mental health professionals could teach it (Merrell et al., 2008).

A study undertaken in Hong Kong translated and adapted a shortened version of this social and emotional learning curriculum for primary school students and evaluated the social and emotional outcomes of this program. Each program lasted for six sessions only. A total of 27 primary school students from grades one to three, were part of this study. This group was also divided into an intervention and a control group. The evaluation showed a decrease in problematic behaviors in the intervention group participants, whereas the control group did not reflect any change in problematic behaviors (Wong et al., 2014).

In addition to the above, many research programs have been conducted to evaluate the impact of social and emotional learning curricula in schools globally. A meta-analysis undertaken by Durlak et al. (2011), consisted of 213 studies that involved 270,034 students and was undertaken over a period of more than twenty years, with seventy five percent of the papers being published during this period. Around forty nine percent of these studies used randomized control methods of testing and evaluation. Fifty six percent of these programs focused on young students at elementary school levels. Most of the programs were conducted in schools and given by teachers in the classroom. The programs lasted for anywhere between less than a year (seventy seven percent), to more than two years. Most of these programs were considered effective by educational systems and agencies. Most importantly, each program had to focus on one, or more than one of the five social and emotional learning competencies established by CASEL. In the end, social and emotional learning participants showed a marked improvement in social and emotional skills, and overall improvement in academics as well as behavior, with an increase of an 11-percentile-point in academic skills (Durlak et al., 2011).

Thus, in order to approach and develop social and emotional learning frameworks in schools, it is essential to identify core components of social and emotional learning based on evidence (Lawson et al., 2018). When such frameworks are backed by evidence-based research they become more effective and produce results that have long lasting effects, than using frameworks that are not backed by research (Greenberg et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016).

Government level interventions

Most studies and research regarding the curricula in Jordan provide evidence of it being based on traditional concepts and that pedagogy and learning that is heavily dependent on teacher instruction (UNESCO, 2020). In light of the evaluation of the Jordanian curriculum, an initiative for educational reform is being launched, following guidance and investment from the World Bank. This initiative is called the Education for Knowledge Economy Project (ERfKE) and its main components are based on a detailed and well-structured framework of curriculum development, teacher training protocols, development of assessment tools, and development of new learning resources. These resources also include teacher guides, new textbooks and e-learning materials. In order to establish a structured and evidence-based social and emotional learning program, it is essential that schools and community administrations have a strong collaboration with policy makers and curriculum developers (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Additionally, along with collaborative efforts within the scope of the ERfKE project, curriculum developers can make use of pre-existing evidence-based social and emotional learning curricula (Strong Start, Strong Kids, PATHS UK), and adapt them to fit the requirements of this region. Finally, to improve social and emotional learning programs and make decisions about their future, leaders should continuously assess stakeholders' perspectives, program

implementation, students' outcomes, school and district resources, new state and federal policies, and scientific advances (Greenberg et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016).

Interventions for educational professionals

At the school level, it is essential that educational professionals are socially and emotionally competent, along with having appropriate teaching skills. These factors, if applied well, have a positive effect in the classroom (Greenberg et al., 2017). Such skilled professionals can also model and foster social-emotional skills in students, while providing them with an environment where they can apply these skills successfully in varied circumstances. Thus, it is essential that teachers and educational professionals in Jordan are trained to be socially and emotionally competent as well as trained to have the right skills for implementing social and emotional learning curricula in the school and classroom.

Another useful resource for SEL implementation in schools could be through the use of strategies and evidence-based research provided by CASEL. CASEL provides a framework for school-based interventions of SEL programs. These are based on the concept of fostering supportive classroom environments that provide opportunities for both explicit social and emotional learning skill instruction as well as integration of social and emotional learning throughout all instruction (CASEL, 2023). The framework also mentions the following points regarding an effective classroom set up for social and emotional learning; presence of a supportive classroom atmosphere, creating a sense of emotional safety, encouraging students to maintain discipline, encouraging positive mindsets, and using interactive teaching methods with specific instructions. Thus, a resource such as CASEL can be used as a guide for SEL program implementation in schools and classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) holds significant potential to enhance student well-being, academic success, and long-term life skills when implemented through a structured and contextually appropriate approach. Drawing from global programs such as Strong Start (USA), PATHS (UK), and Strong Kids (Hong Kong), the analysis identified critical components that can be adapted to Jordan's unique cultural and educational context. Despite current efforts and recognition of mental health challenges within the Jordanian education system, SEL must be more than a supplementary idea—it must be embedded as a core subject within the curriculum. Effective implementation requires a multi-tiered strategy, including teacher training, parental involvement, curriculum alignment, and policy support.

Suggestion

To move forward, educational stakeholders in Jordan, including the Ministry of Education, curriculum designers, and school leaders, are encouraged to:

- (1) develop and pilot a national SEL curriculum tailored to Jordanian values and student needs;
- (2) invest in pre-service and in-service training for educators on SEL competencies and delivery methods;
- (3) create partnerships between schools, mental health professionals, and community organizations to provide ongoing support,
- (4) monitor and evaluate SEL programs regularly to ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

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Author contribution

All authors contribute in the research and/or writing the paper, and approved the final manuscript.

Hena Ahmed Conceptualizing the research idea, leading the investigation, and setting up the methodology, and writing the original draft.

Muraina Kamilu Assisting the investigation, reviewing the validity of the methodology, supervising the data analysis, and proofread the final draft.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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The use of artificial intelligence

We do not use any generative AI tools to write any part of this paper.

Additional information

Not available.

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