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THE EFFECT OF TARGETED SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING ON PRE-ADOLESCENTS: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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Abstract

The study explored the effects of a 15-hour Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program on 4th and 5th graders in Karachi, Pakistan. The current study hypothesizes that direct and focused SEL instruction improves social-emotional skills. Using a quasi-experimental design, 49 students were divided into control and experimental groups. Both groups were assessed using the WCSD-SECA tool after the program. Results showed a significant increase in social-emotional competency scores for the experimental group (M=3.81) compared to the control group (M=2.75). It indicates that explicit SEL instruction significantly improved students' social-emotional skills. These findings suggest that incorporating systematic, direct, and focused SEL programs into school settings can benefit preadolescents.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, SEL Skills, Preadolescent, Quasi-Experimental Design, Systematic SEL Program.

Introduction

Education is one of the state's primary and most fundamental pillars. An educational system aligned with scientific learning principles and pedagogy efficiently serves the people. However, the academic landscape in Pakistan is wrought with irregularities, outdated content and methodology, and unempirical pedagogical practices (Ahmed et al., 2014). There is an urgent need to implement what is known and has been investigated repeatedly.

The National Curriculum Framework (2018) provided five essential aspects of education to form a comprehensive system. These aspects are psychological, socio-cultural, economic, philosophical, and historical. The purpose of including psychological elements is to ensure adequate personality development manifested via analytical thinking skills and functional prosocial behavior of the pupils, leading to a sense of kinship and

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community. A plan without implementation remains mere words on paper. Even if it is backed by an evidence-based international agenda to enhance the quality of education. United Nations (2015) devised and propagated a road map to establish a peaceful and sustainable community by 2030. The cornerstone of the map is quality education.

According to their goal, education should not be limited to increasing the enrollment of students in schools. Instead, it must elevate its status in quality by enhancing student outcomes that lead to a cohesive and safe society. How one might achieve that goal remains a question. Three kinds of learning experiences, as recommended by Singh and Duraiappah (2020), provide an answer to the dilemma. The experiences centered around enhancing social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills ought to elevate the quality of education. Social-emotional learning, a central theme of the present paper, is critical to promoting education of the highest standards.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), since the late 1900s, is a representative organization showcasing unified and systematic efforts of researchers and practitioners in introducing and establishing social-emotional learning as a scientific endeavor worldwide. There are five aspects of Social-Emotional Learning. These are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship, and decision-making skills (CASEL, 2020). The group of pioneer researchers at CASEL proposed that SEL skills, like any other form of literacy, can be taught to the students in a direct, structured, and explicit manner in an environment conducive to learning these skills. The child can learn new knowledge and skills, practice them under supervision, and gain feedback, ultimately adding to his learning experiences (Weissberg et al., 2015). These benefits are yet to be assessed systematically and empirically in the Pakistani region. Therefore, the question arises: *Does direct and structured instruction in social-emotional skills increase the social and emotional skills of the students in Karachi, Pakistan?*

Rationale

The study aims to assess the effectiveness of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program in enhancing the social and emotional skills of children aged 8-12 years. The findings will provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers, informing evidence-based practices in promoting the holistic development of students within this age group.

Research Question

What is the effect of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program on the social and emotional skills of students aged 8-12 years, compared to a control group, after undergoing the program for fifteen hours over one month?

Research Objective

To investigate the impact of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program on the social and emotional skills of students aged 8-12 by comparing the participants who undergo the program for fifteen hours over one month with those in a control group.

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Study Hypothesis

The present study is devised to address the student's behavioral, social, and emotional needs at a mass level by launching a structured SEL program for students in elementary school. Scholars abroad have investigated this extensively. However, we do not have any empirical evidence for the efficacy of such an intervention in Pakistan. Therefore, the current study will present evidence and a roadmap to devising, implementing, and assessing the impact of SEL sessions. Following is the hypothesis:

H_1: There will be an increase in students' social and emotional skills (aged 8-12 years) after undergoing a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program for fifteen hours for one month compared with the control group participants.

Literature Review

Social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020), embedded within the educational system, has distal and proximal gains established by robust recent research. It is now deemed an inevitable part of education that allows young children and adults alike to gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes to have a healthy self-concept, gain the capacity to manage emotions, work towards the attainment of personal and collective goals, experience and express empathy leading to fulfilling relationships and make responsible decisions. It is a common practice to teach such skills to only those who actively seek to master them within the walls of a counseling or therapy room. However, if introduced as a structured and focused curriculum, these can be just as quickly taught in a classroom by an experienced, competent, and trained individual.

Direct and focused instruction of SEL skills leads to positive behavior outcomes (Bierman et al., 2010), enhanced academic performance (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012), and reduced emotional distress among students. Such students become adept at tackling everyday challenges and learn better ways of coping with stress. Ultimately, it decreases self-destructive tendencies among students who are emotionally and mentally not in the 'right head space' (Katz et al., 2013). In a nutshell, SEL supports academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2022), builds skills that are key to future readiness (Jones et al., 2015), and improves school climate and safety and students' well-being (Cipriano et al., 2023). If the intervention is planned and executed correctly, these effects of social-emotional learning instruction can last up to 18 years.

A study done in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2014) attempted to test the impact of a six-hour SEL program on primary school students. The program reduced disruptive behavior among students but had little to no effect on their social skills. The reason lies in the short duration of the program and reliance on parents as the sole informant for the social and behavioral skills of the participants. There is a shortage of empirical studies demonstrating the development of the SEL program within Pakistan. Malik and colleagues (2019) gathered information about the emotional and behavioral challenges of students in the capital of the state. The data is supported by the most recent study (Najummusaqib & Mushtaq, 2023), where many students were found to have externalizing problems. Inam and colleagues (2015) focused on the cultural adaptation of an SEL program called

PATHS. Others explored the psychometric properties of SEL measures (Finch et al., 2018).

United Nations launched Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) almost a decade ago. Among those goals, promoting quality education was deemed the most important goal by the policymakers in Pakistan. However, we have yet to see concrete measures to realize the goal. The lack of actionable steps may have been due to inadequate funds (The News, 2021). It has been brought to knowledge through rigorous research that the students are increasingly showing signs of emotional distress along with behavioral challenges in the school (Najummusaqib & Mushtaq, 2023; Malik et al., 2019). Constant neglect has worsened the situation and demands immediate, effective intervention from the researchers and practitioners. The solution is to develop and implement a social-emotional learning program (Rahman, 2005).

Methodology

Pilot Study

The pilot study assessed the feasibility and utility of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program for preadolescent students aged 10-11. Conducted in a trust-based school, the study involved 24 students purposefully selected for a preliminary examination of SEL lessons. A screening tool based on OECD (2018) categories and sub-categories was used and transformed into a Likert scale. Lesson plans were developed targeting 15 SEL goals. The researcher administered the checklist, devised plans, and conducted monthly sessions, modifying plans based on feedback. However, the researcher worked as an English language teacher previously. It clashed with the role of a researcher, resulting in ethical concerns. The primary study took care of it when the researcher took leave as a teacher for the program implementation and assessment duration.

Data analysis included pre-intervention scores, dividing students into two groups. However, the post-intervention data collection phase was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While lacking quantitative evidence, the qualitative data gathered via insights and feedback suggested positive outcomes and recommendations, i.e., the importance of behavior reinforcement, motivation, and content relevance. Despite challenges, the pilot study indicated the potential of SEL sessions to positively impact preadolescent students, offering a foundation for future research.

Main Study

Sample

From a pool of 95 students in the 4th and 5th grades, the researcher selected forty-eight students (M=10.2, SD=0.92) for the study and assigned them to either the control or experimental groups through convenience sampling. The school's administrative limitations influenced the selection and assignment of participants. The students were grouped according to their classroom schedules. The students who reported attending similar workshops/training in the past were excluded from the study.

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Measures

A Self-developed Demographic Form was administered to the participants verbally. In the pre-intervention stage, the researcher posed questions and filled out the sheet with inquiries about students' ages, grades, and living arrangements (hostel or at home).

***Washoe County School District Social and Emotional Competency Assessment Short Form*.** The teachers administered WCSD-SECA (Davidshon et al., 2019) to the participants. Initially, it was a self-report measure. However, after a discussion with the developers, the researcher turned it into an observational checklist. The scale included 17 items on a 4-point Likert scale. After the intervention, teachers were expected to review the assignments and rate the frequency of each student's behavior in the experimental and control groups. Each item's numbers were added to get the total scale score. The scale was created through a partnership between CASEL and the Washoe County School District.

According to Davidson et al. (2018), the scale has moderate measurement invariance and reliability (0.68–0.74). In a pilot study, fifteen educators used the scale to evaluate new phrases and make readability modifications.

Lesson plans for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). The main research instrument for this study is lesson plans for Social-Emotional Learning. The researcher carefully reviewed CASEL's guide (2019) and Navigating SEL from the Inside Out (Jones et al., 2017). The documents identified critical elements of a practical SEL lesson and linked them to activities. The three core elements—welcoming rituals, engagement strategies, and an optimistic environment—are signature SEL practices. The greeting introduces participants to the lesson topic and creates a sense of community among peers and the group. Encouraging them to participate ensures that the learning objectives are achieved.

Engaging strategies involve active, sequenced, and explicit activities aligned with the developmental needs of the learners that allow them to explore, synthesize their findings, and later apply them. Optimistic closure refers to neatly wrapping up the lesson by restating the purpose and its relevance to the student's personal narrative, leading to goal setting.

The signature SEL practices were applied through different instructional strategies highlighted in Navigating SEL from the Inside Out (Jones et al., 2017). These strategies are storytelling, introducing vocabulary, using visual and audio aids, games, arts and crafts, journaling, practicing meditation, peer and group discussions, and role plays. The researcher in the present study devised fifteen lesson plans with clear outcomes realized through as many strategies within the context of signature SEL practices.

Research Design

The current study uses a quasi-experimental design to examine the efficacy of a structured, systematic Social-Emotional Learning program on preadolescent students on a regular school day. The data was gathered from the participants and their teachers post-

intervention and analyzed to render differences across experimental and control groups. Through the quasi-experimental design, the researcher manipulated the independent variable, i.e., lessons on Social-Emotional Learning, on the dependent variable, i.e., the social-emotional skills of the students. The pure experiment could not happen due to compromised sampling and participant assigning to groups. Participants were selected using a nonrandom sampling method stratified by academic year. Randomization, the distinguishing feature of an experiment, could not be done due to administrative limitations.

The researcher accessed the list of students in the 4^{th} and 5^{th} grades. Each student was assigned an ID to ensure unbiased selection. Every third student from the list became part of the experimental group. Within the experimental group, the students belonging to the 4^{th} grade were grouped, and the same procedure was applied to the 5^{th}-grade students. This grouping was necessitated by the constraints imposed by the school administration, which allowed students from only one grade to be provided at a time. The limitation prevented students from missing various lessons throughout the day. Unfortunately, this procedural restriction hindered the researcher's intention to create mixed and matched groups.

Statistical analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 26 was used to make across-group comparisons in scores of social-emotional skills post-intervention. A reliability analysis was done to ensure the robustness of each item's result. Items negatively impacting the reliability index were removed for inferential analysis. Next, an independent samples t-test was run to compare the scores between experimental and control group participants.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical principles. The test developer approved using and modifying the scale (WCSD-SECA). The teachers were provided with a glossary to administer the observational checklist. The participants' and their parents' consent was obtained. The researcher ensured that the participants knew their right to withdraw from the study as they wished.

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Analysis

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the experimental and control groups (N=48)		
Variables	Percentage	
	Experimental group	Control group
Age		
8-9 years	25	16.7
10-12 years	75	83.3
Gender		
Male	54	54
Female	46	46
Grade Level		
4th grade	50	45.8
5th grade	50	54.2
Living arrangements		
Hostel	16.7	8.3
Home	83.3	91.7
Did you feel any difference in your behavior, emotions, and thoughts after the sessions?		
Yes	95.8	N/A
No	4.2	N/A

According to Table 1, a big chunk of the participants in the experimental group were 10-12 years old (75%). The participants belonged to 4th and 5th grades in equal numbers. However, more than half of the participants were male students (54%). Around 16.7% of participants resided at the hostel. Around 96% of participants claimed that the SEL program had effectively changed their emotions, thoughts, and behavior.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on post-intervention scores of WCSD-SECA of control & experimental group (N=48)							
	M	SD	Skewness St.	Std. error	Kurtosis St.	Std. error	Cronbach alpha
[a]WCSD-SECA	47.72	0.87	0.19	0.34	-0.07	0.67	0.88
Note. M=mean, SD= Standard Deviation, St.= statistics							
a Washoe County School District-Social Emotional Competency Assessment							

The significance of skewness among scores on instruments post-intervention across experimental and control groups suggests the non-normality of the data. Moreover, items 9 and 14 influenced the reliability index of WCSD-SECA. Therefore, these items were removed from post-intervention t-test analyses to compare differences in mean across groups.

Table 3: Differences in scores among participants in the control group and experimental group on WCSD post-intervention

	Groups	M	SD	df	p	Cohen's d
[a]WCSD-SECA	Experimental group	3.81	0.51	47	0.000	2.03
	Control group	2.75	0.53			
**p.<0.01						
Note. Washoe County School District-Social Emotional Competency Assessment						

After SEL sessions were implemented upon participants in the experimental group, independent samples t-test analyses were done to yield the following results. Twenty-four participants in the experimental group (M= 3.81, SD= 0.51) showed better scores on WCSD-SECA than the participants in the control group (M=2.75, SD=0.53), t(47)=9.86, p=.000, d=2.03.

Discussion

The social-emotional learning movement is rapidly gaining momentum for its distinctive feature of building upon and including existing and emergent frameworks to provide a comprehensive approach to whole child development. With its alignment with conventional principles of character education and emerging concepts like 21st-century skills, social-emotional learning recognizes the overlap and advocates for equitable and inclusive opportunities for education that enhance personal growth and well-being and contribute to the accomplishment of collective goals (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Social-emotional learning practitioners and researchers adopt a proactive approach to provide a safe environment to nurture the innate tendencies of the individual through the systematic implementation of social-emotional learning programs. Systematic implementation requires intervention at each level: classroom, including students and teachers, school leadership, parents, and the community (CASEL, 2020). The present study is a precedent for the upcoming efforts of the authors to work towards systematic implementation of Social-Emotional Learning by first developing, monitoring, implementing, and assessing a Social-Emotional Learning intervention for students in elementary school.

The current study leverages the robustness of an experimental design, except random sampling, to establish the validity of a social-emotional learning program driven by the hypothesis that there will be an increase in social-emotional skills of students (aged 8-12 years) after they have undergone Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program for fifteen hours for one month in comparison with the participants in the control group. The hypothesis is evidenced to be accurate by statistical analysis. The researchers in Pakistan have focused more on exploring the treatment of illnesses rather than preventing them and promoting well-being (Inam et al., 2015). The present study is based on a strength-based approach towards students. Social-emotional learning is a methodology and a process that enhances the emotional intelligence of the learner. It boosts their mental well-being and decreases dysfunctional behaviors (Katz et al., 2013). However, the empirical evidence comes from countries other than Pakistan (Conduct et al., 2010; Domitrovich et al., 2007).

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For instance, a pre and post-measure design assessing the effects of an SEL program on hundreds of students demonstrated the program's effectiveness in reducing complaints of emotional distress (Carrol et al., 2020). In Asia, we are only now witnessing a surge in SEL-related studies (Kwong et al., 2016). However, most of these studies use cross-sectional design, compromising the reliability and validity of their results. A few experimental studies have been conducted. For example, a duo of Turkish researchers, Arda and Ocak (2012), successfully established the efficacy of the PATH program on preadolescent students through a pretest-posttest control group design. This replicates the study done in Hong Kong (Kam et al., 2011) on approximately three hundred students. The results demonstrated a slight increase in the emotional skills of the students in the experimental group. Interventions investigated through experimental or quasi-experimental designs to explore the impact of social-emotional learning programs are nonexistent in Pakistan. The present study is meant to bridge this gap by developing, implementing, and assessing the effects of a Social-Emotional Learning program.

Kalhoro (2021), in a comprehensive article, highlighted the reasons The Social-Emotional Learning paradigm is neglected in the state. First, he stressed its importance by calling SEL a tool to help students lead successful lives. According to him, the current education system produces herds of scholars who lack the analytical, problem-solving, communication, and emotion-regulation skills they need to experience a fulfilling and meaningful life. SEL may be the missing piece in our educational system that can address this challenge. However, we continue to see passivity among people of power in taking much-needed steps to promote SEL in the country. The reluctance may stem from an impractical, long, decades-old curriculum in the hands of untrained teachers who have many students with diverse intellectual and cultural needs in a classroom. It gives an apt insight into the challenges of designing and implementing SEL programs in Pakistani society.

The challenge of developing and implementing an SEL program required thorough planning in the present study. The stakeholder's (students, parents, teachers, and school leadership) interests and involvement are the key to attaining fidelity to the program. Collaboration among researchers, administrators, and intervention developers is necessary to ensure the program is executed as intended (Inam et al., 2015). The reason that the current program, despite the rampant challenges, succeeded in achieving the desired result lies in the meta-analysis done by Kim, Lin, and An (2022). The researchers offered recommendations for the effective implementation of an SEL program based on their analysis of twenty-two SEL-related articles in Korea. They proposed to have a minimum of ten lessons in the program, their duration mimicking that of a regular study unit.

Furthermore, it is an effective practice to have direct lessons and integrate Social-Emotional Learning philosophy into the academic curriculum. They also recommended considering the different needs of students. The present study was conducted according to the guidelines to ensure the program's success. The lessons lasted fifty minutes each, modified for hostel residents, who often complained of emotional distress and had frequent instances of disruptive behavior. As a result of these initiatives, the likelihood of

the social-emotional learning curriculum successfully transforming students in the desired ways has increased in the current study.

Conclusion

The quasi-experimental research is a comprehensive approach to designing, implementing, and evaluating the effect of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program for kids aged 8-12 years in a school setting for one month. The researcher created an SEL program, separated the participants into experimental and control groups, ran sessions for the experimental group, and gathered information from both groups following the session. The statistical analysis demonstrated a substantial difference in the social-emotional skills scores between the experimental and control groups, suggesting that the SEL program was beneficial. These results support the proposition that children can enhance their interpersonal interactions, self-awareness, comprehension of others, communication, identification of emotions, and management skills by receiving direct, structured teaching in SEL. In addition to providing valuable information on the dynamics of SEL, the current study gives a comprehensive framework encompassing every stage of a program, from conception to execution to impact evaluation.

Limitations and Recommendations

Aygun & Taskin (2022), with their mixed methods study in Turkey on 4th-grade students, point out the shortcomings of the present study. They collected the data pre and post-intervention from experimental and control groups. They discovered that direct and focused instruction of social-emotional skills leads to an increase in the social and emotional skills of the 4th graders. The program also improved the perception of the school climate and the student's academic achievement. In the present study, the data was not collected before the intervention. Related variables like academic achievement, absenteeism, and well-being were not explored. The sample is insufficient to establish the program's validity and reliability. The researchers interested in exploring SEL in the Pakistani educational landscape should consider having a social-emotional learning program at the school level that has a grade-wise progression of the lessons and addresses the developmental needs of the learners. Moreover, a multi-informant approach, instead of a single informant one, would be more feasible to capture the students' experience as they participate in the intervention. Related variables, evidenced by previous research, that are influenced by social-emotional instruction should be studied.

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