

# Strategy for Holistic Development: Integrating Social-Emotional Learning into Basic School Curricula in Tamale Metropolis

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**Abstract:** *This study investigated the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into the curriculum of basic schools in the Tamale Metropolis, emphasising strategies for holistic student development, the impact on academic and personal growth, and the challenges encountered in its implementation. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used to collect data from 100 respondents, including teachers, headteachers, and supervisors, through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and Spearman's correlation were used to analyse the data. The findings reveal that project-based learning, workshops, and school-wide initiatives are the most effective strategies for embedding SEL, with project-based learning receiving the highest approval (mean = 3.30 ± 0.70). SEL integration demonstrates significant positive correlations with academic development ( $r = 0.285, p = 0.004$ ) and personal development ( $r = 0.278, p = 0.005$ ), while the strongest correlation exists between personal and academic development ( $r = 0.339, p = 0.001$ ). Despite its transformative potential, SEL implementation is hindered by barriers such as limited resources (loading = 0.866), teacher resistance (loading = 0.849), and time constraints (loading = 0.816). Recommendations include enhancing professional development, increasing resource allocation, and embedding SEL seamlessly into curricula to minimise perceptions of overload. The study underscores SEL's critical role in fostering well-rounded individuals prepared for academic, social, and emotional challenges. Addressing implementation barriers is essential to unlocking SEL's full potential, benefiting students' holistic development and long-term success.*

**Keywords:** social-emotional learning, curriculum, holistic development, integration

## 1. Introduction

Today's schools are increasingly multicultural and multilingual with students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Educators and community agencies serve students with different motivation for engaging in learning, behaving positively, and performing academically (Shen, et al., 2024). Social and emotional learning (SEL) provides a foundation for safe and positive learning, and enhances students' ability to succeed in school, careers, and life (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024; Zins, et al., 2007).

In the dynamic arena of contemporary education, the impetus for a holistic approach to student development has led to the growing prominence of SEL within curricular frameworks (Buckley & Lee, 2021). The burgeoning field of SEL, which encompasses vital competencies such as emotional regulation, empathy, social skills, and resilience, is seen as essential to cultivating well-rounded individuals (Crescenzo et al., 2023; Shahjahan et al., 2022). The integration of SEL into the curriculum necessitates a thorough examination of its multifaceted role in education, with particular emphasis on strategies for effective implementation and the benefits it offers for students' overall development (Lapidot-Lefler & Israeli, 2024; Kim, et al., 2024). This inquiry is anchored in the recognition that SEL is not merely an adjunct to academic learning but a foundational component that prepares students

for the complexities of both academic pursuits and everyday life (Abrahams et al., 2019).

Recent studies underscore the efficacy of SEL in augmenting academic performance, enriching interpersonal relationships, and nurturing a positive educational milieu (Dahleb et al., 2019; Gimbert et al., 2023). With the growing recognition of these benefits, the demand for integrating SEL into educational curricula has gained significant momentum among educators and policymakers. This has led to an increased focus on developing effective methodologies for embedding SEL within educational frameworks and evaluating its impact on the comprehensive development of learners (Allbright et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the acknowledged significance of SEL in fostering comprehensive student development, the integration of SEL into educational curricula remains fraught with challenges. Consequently, Attaya and Hilliard (2023) observed that institutions grapple with a paucity of in-depth comprehension of SEL's constituents, constrained resources, and insufficient educator training. Additionally, the endeavour to synchronise SEL initiatives with extant academic objectives and benchmarks presents a considerable hurdle (Barker et al., 2023; Ingram et al., 2021). As a result, the full range of benefits that SEL could provide across students' social, emotional, and academic development are frequently not fully realised in many educational contexts. This disparity between

the theoretical appreciation of SEL and its practical application within curriculum development highlights a critical gap that this paper seeks to bridge. This study fills a critical gap in understanding how SEL integration influences holistic development in diverse educational settings.

### Objectives

The objectives of this study include to:

- 1) Explore effective strategies for integrating Social-Emotional Learning into the curriculum.
- 2) Assess the impact of SEL integration on students' academic and personal development.
- 3) Identify challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programs.

### Research questions

- 1) What strategies are employed by teachers in basic schools within the Tamale Metropolis, Ghana, to integrate Social-Emotional Learning into their teaching practices?
- 2) What are the challenges encountered in embedding SEL into educational programmes?

### Hypothesis

H<sub>0</sub>. There is no statistically significant relationship between Integrating SEL into the curriculum and students' holistic development.

## 2. Literature Review

SEL is widely acknowledged as a transformative educational framework designed to enhance students' personal and academic development. SEL aims to equip learners with essential competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These core competencies enable students to understand and regulate their emotions, build positive relationships, and make informed decisions, all of which are vital for success in both academic and life contexts. By fostering these skills, SEL not only supports students' emotional well-being but also enhances their ability to navigate complex social dynamics and achieve academic excellence.

This study adopted Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as its guiding framework to examine the intricate interplay between individual and systemic factors in the integration of SEL. Bronfenbrenner's theory conceptualises human development as occurring within a series of interconnected systems, ranging from the immediate environment (microsystem) to broader societal influences (macrosystem). For example, a student's personal competencies, such as emotional regulation and self-management, operate within the microsystem of their classroom and family, where direct interactions with teachers, peers, and parents significantly influence their growth. At the mesosystem level, the interactions between home and school environments further shape SEL outcomes, emphasising the importance of collaboration between families and educators. The exosystem, encompassing institutional policies and community resources, indirectly impacts SEL implementation by determining the availability of funding, materials, and training opportunities. Finally, the

macrosystem, which reflects societal values, cultural norms, and educational priorities, sets the overarching context in which SEL initiatives are framed and executed.

By grounding this study in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, it acknowledged the multifaceted and dynamic nature of SEL integration. This theoretical approach highlights the need to address not only the individual competencies of students but also the systemic factors that influence their learning environments. The interplay between these levels underscores the importance of a holistic approach to SEL, where success is determined by coordinated efforts across individuals, schools, families, communities, and policy frameworks. This comprehensive perspective enables a deeper understanding of the barriers to SEL implementation and the strategies required to create supportive ecosystems for holistic student development. SEL is centred on five core components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Gimbert et al., 2023; Lanza et al., 2023; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2023; Grund & Holst, 2023; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). These components provide the foundational framework for SEL and are vital for fostering students' holistic development. As Grund and Holst (2023) suggest, effective SEL programmes are constructed around these competencies, with the goal of nurturing not only academic abilities but also emotional intelligence and social skills. Self-awareness, identified by Gimbert et al. (2023) as the first competence, entails an individual's understanding of their emotions, thoughts, and values and how these factors influence behaviour. It also involves recognising one's strengths and limitations, thereby fostering a well-grounded sense of confidence. Complementing self-awareness, self-management is the capacity to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours effectively across various situations (Antonopoulou, 2024). Together, these competencies contribute to the development of personal resilience and a positive mindset, which are crucial for both academic and personal success. The interpersonal dimensions of SEL are embodied in social awareness and relationship skills. Social awareness involves the ability to comprehend and empathize with others, including individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures (Wigelsworth et al., 2022). According to Wigelsworth et al. (2022), relationship skills encompass the capacity to establish and sustain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. These skills include effective communication, active listening, cooperation, resisting inappropriate social pressure, resolving conflicts constructively, and seeking help when necessary (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2023). Finally, responsible decision-making is a critical aspect of SEL that involves making ethical and constructive choices concerning personal and social behaviour (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Dyson et al., 2023). As noted by Dyson et al. (2023), responsible decision-making requires consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, a realistic evaluation of the consequences of various actions, and respect for the rights of others.

The focus on holistic development underscores the necessity of integrating SEL into educational programmes (Lapidot-Lefler & Israeli, 2024; Kim et al., 2024). As Meland and Brion-Meisels (2024) and Lapidot-Lefler and Israeli (2024)

have noted, effective SEL programmes, which are grounded in core competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, offer benefits that extend far beyond the enhancement of academic skills. These scholars argue that SEL programmes contribute to the comprehensive development of students, equipping them with essential life skills that extend well beyond the traditional academic curriculum. Gimbert et al. (2023) and Jones and Bouffard (2012) in support indicated that while conventional educational models have primarily emphasised cognitive and academic competencies, SEL introduces a more comprehensive framework for fostering student growth. By cultivating emotional intelligence, SEL programmes help students recognise and manage their emotions, a critical ability for both personal well-being and academic success (Hoffman, 2009; Cristóvão et al., 2023; Amadori et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence, as developed through SEL, contributes to improved stress management, heightened focus, and increased resilience in the face of academic challenges. Moreover, SEL programmes play a vital role in developing social skills and fostering social awareness among students. Rivers and Bertoli (2024) and Kaspar and Massey (2023) argue that incorporating SEL activities into the curriculum enables students to interact effectively with others, understand diverse perspectives, and cultivate empathy. Such social awareness is fundamental in preparing students to navigate an increasingly diverse and interconnected global society. The ability to form and sustain healthy relationships—a skill honed through SEL—is essential for both personal and professional success in later life (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024; Rivers & Bertoli, 2024). Additionally, SEL curricula emphasise the importance of responsible decision-making. Students learn to evaluate the consequences of their actions, consider ethical standards, and make choices that demonstrate respect for themselves and others. These decision-making skills are invaluable, equipping students to handle a wide range of real-world situations beyond the classroom (Amadori et al., 2023; Allbright et al., 2019). By intertwining academic learning with emotional and social skill development, SEL programmes create well-rounded individuals who are not only academically proficient but also emotionally intelligent and socially responsible (Antonopoulou, 2024; Dahleb et al., 2024). These competencies are crucial for navigating the complexities of contemporary life, ensuring that students are prepared not only for academic endeavours but also for the broader challenges and opportunities they will face in their personal and professional futures.

The successful integration of SEL into educational curricula is contingent upon the adoption of strategic and innovative approaches. As the field of education evolves, so does the understanding of how SEL can be most effectively incorporated into the learning process. Smith (2022) posits that the key to effective SEL integration lies in its seamless embedding within existing academic programs. This perspective challenges the notion of treating SEL as an ancillary component, advocating instead for its integration as a fundamental aspect of the educational experience. Integrating SEL into the curriculum requires embedding its principles into core subjects such as language arts, mathematics, and science (Ramirez et al., 2021). For instance,

storytelling and role-playing in language lessons can enhance empathy and communication skills, while collaborative projects in science foster teamwork and problem-solving abilities. Ramirez et al. (2021) added that the integration of SEL into curricula, while recognizing its benefits, is not without its challenges. Several factors can impede the effective implementation of SEL in educational settings. These challenges are essential to understand and address to ensure the successful integration of SEL practices. This section delves into some of the common challenges faced in SEL implementation. One of the primary challenges in implementing SEL programs is the allocation of resources. SEL initiatives often require financial resources for training educators, purchasing relevant materials, and sustaining ongoing programs. Limited budgets can hinder the comprehensive implementation of SEL, leaving some schools with only partial or ad-hoc efforts (Taylor & Robinson, 2023). Effective SEL implementation relies on educators' understanding of SEL concepts and strategies. However, many teachers may not receive adequate training in SEL during their pre-service education. Martin and Garcia (2024) highlight this challenge, emphasizing that educators require training and professional development opportunities to effectively integrate SEL into their teaching practices.

Introducing new educational initiatives, including SEL, can face resistance from various stakeholders. This resistance can come from educators, parents, or even students who may be unfamiliar with or sceptical about the benefits of SEL. Overcoming this resistance requires clear communication and evidence-based advocacy for SEL programmes (Taylor & Robinson, 2023). The culture and attitudes within educational institutions can significantly impact the successful integration of SEL. Martin and Garcia (2024) note that a school's culture, including its values, norms, and practices, can either facilitate or hinder SEL efforts. A school environment that promotes inclusivity, empathy, and emotional intelligence is more conducive to SEL implementation. Balancing the incorporation of SEL with existing academic goals and standards can be a challenge. Schools often face pressure to meet academic benchmarks, and some may perceive SEL as competing with these goals. Aligning SEL initiatives with academic standards while demonstrating their value in enhancing academic achievement is crucial (Taylor & Robinson, 2023).

### 3. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the integration of SEL into basic education curriculum in Ghana. A cross-sectional survey was utilised to gather data from basic school teachers in Tamale metropolis. This approach allows for collection of data at a single point, providing a snapshot of teachers' perceptions of integration of SEL into the curriculum.

The target population comprised teachers, headteachers and supervisors. These stakeholders are directly involved in curriculum implementation and monitoring, making their perspectives essential to understanding the integration of SEL into the educational framework. The population was 3,881 made up of 3,840 teaching staff, 22 circuit Supervisors, and 12 management staff at the Tamale Metro Education Office.

The study adopted a multi-stage sampling procedure to select the sample. The first phase considered the identification of the number of circuits (collection of schools in a defined geographical area) as well as the number of schools and teachers in each circuit. The total number of schools was 337 and total teaching staff of 3,840 in 22 circuits. The second phase dealt with the selection of circuits and schools from the selected circuits. The simple random sampling was used to select seven circuits out of the 22 circuits. To determine the selected circuits, the lottery method was used, pieces of paper of equal size were numbered from one to 22 with each number associating to a particular circuit. These papers were folded and selected with replacement from a basket until seven circuits were selected. Two schools were selected from each of the selected circuits, totalling 14 schools. The purposive sampling technique was adopted in the selection of one primary school and one junior high school (JHS) each from the selected circuits. The criteria for the selection of primary and J.H.S was based on the schools with the highest female staff population. This approach was adopted to enable gender concern relating to integration of SEL into the curriculum to be captured. Simple random was used to select eight teachers from each school. This added up to 112 teachers selected for the study

The third phase, the purposive sampling technique was adopted to select eight management staff at the Metro Education Office (five school improvement supervisory officers, one Assistant Director in charge of training, one Assistant Director in charge of supervision and the Metropolitan Director of Education). These position holders were chosen by virtue of their role in monitoring the implantation of the curriculum in the schools. In all, the sample size was 120 respondents. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) a sample size of 30 is held by many to be the minimum number of cases if researchers plan to use some form of statistical analysis on their data in a quantitative study. They argued that where simple random sampling is used, the sample size needed to reflect the population value of a particular variable of both the size and the homogeneity of the population in question. All the stakeholders come from the same sociocultural background and using the same curriculum.

The primary tool for data collection was structured questionnaire designed to align with the research objectives. The questionnaire was divided into sections; demographics (gender, age, teaching experience and educational qualifications), Likert-scale items to assess respondents' perspectives on the strategies used in the integration of SEL into the implementation of the curriculum, respondents' opinions regarding the importance of SEL for holistic student development, the challenges encounter in the integration of SEL and the recommendations. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 respondents from a nearby district to evaluate the clarity, reliability, and validity. Feedback from the pre-test guided the refinement of the instrument. The reliability of the

questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and a coefficient of 0.75 confirmed the internal consistency of the Likert-scale items. The finalised questionnaire was distributed to respondents physically or electronically. Clear instructions were provided, and follow-up reminders were employed to improve response rates.

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to determine the strategies used for SEL integration in the curriculum. The normality of the data was tested using Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, which indicated significant non-normality across variables. To account for this, non-parametric statistical methods, specifically Spearman's rank correlation, were used to assess relationships between SEL integration, personal development, and academic development. This approach was selected for its robustness in handling non-normal distributions.

#### 4. Results

In all, 100 questionnaires were retrieved representing 83.3% of the respondents. The demographic characteristics of respondents are indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Freq.	Percent
Gender		
Female	42	42
Male	58	58
Total	100	100
Age (years)		
20 - 30	8	8
31 - 40	32	32
41 - 50	46	46
51 - 60	14	14
Total	100	100
Highest academic qualification		
Diploma	19	19
First Degree	65	65
Second Degree	16	16
Total	100	100
Years Teaching Experience		
6-16	28	28
17 - 27	43	43
28 - 38	31	31
Above 38	8	8
Total	388	100

The demographic data in Table 2 highlights a diverse and experienced respondent pool, characterized by balanced gender representation, a wide age range, substantial teaching experience, and strong academic qualifications. These attributes suggest that the respondents are well-positioned to provide valuable insights into curriculum management and teaching practices.

**Table 1:** Explore effective strategies for integrating social emotional learning into the curriculum

Strategy	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean $\pm$ SD
Workshops / Conferences	63 (63.0%)	25(25.0%)	12(12.0%)	0	100	3.20 $\pm$ 0.80
Students engaged in Project-based learning	67 (67.0%)	25(25.0%)	4 (4.0%)	4 (4.0%)	100	3.30 $\pm$ 0.70
School-wide initiatives (Advisory periods)	37 (37.0%)	45 (45.0%)	18 (18.0%)	0	100	3.25 $\pm$ 0.75

Source: Field survey, 2024

The results in Table 1 reflect respondents’ perceptions of various strategies for integrating social emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum. The strategy of engaging students in project-based learning received the highest mean score of 3.30 (SD = 0.70), with 67% of respondents strongly agreeing with its effectiveness, indicating a strong consensus on its positive impact on SEL. Workshops and conferences also

garnered favourable responses, with a mean score of 3.20 (SD = 0.80), where 63% of participants strongly agreed on their effectiveness. In contrast, school-wide initiatives, such as advisory periods, had a slightly lower mean score of 3.25 (SD = 0.75), with a more divided opinion reflected in the responses—37% strongly agreeing and 18% disagreeing.

**Table 2:** Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnova			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
<b>Personal Development</b>						
Self-management skills such as goal setting, time management, emotional regulation taught has helped me to meet assignment deadlines	0.433	100	0	0.587	100	0
Trainings on Self-awareness has helped me to cultivate Journaling, self -reflection and mindfulness practices.	0.34	100	0	0.636	100	0
SEL activities like Role-playing, group discussion, empathy- building activities that I participate in has developed my self -awareness skills.	0.445	100	0	0.595	100	0
Participating in studying Case studies, problem solving tasks has developed me in taking responsible decisions	0.336	100	0	0.713	100	0
<b>Academic Development</b>						
SEL integration has resulted in improved academic performance through setting realistic goals	0.307	100	0	0.743	100	0
Team work spirit has been enhanced through SEL – curriculum integration.	0.276	100	0	0.774	100	0
Problem solving skills has been developed.	0.356	100	0	0.635	100	0
My Resilience skill has been enhanced through SEL activities.	0.327	100	0	0.743	100	0

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 2 illustrates the normality of diverse metrics pertaining to personal and academic development via social emotional learning (SEL) activities, evaluated by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. All items pertaining to personal development exhibit significance values (Sig.) of 0.000, denoting a substantial divergence from normality. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics vary from 0.336 to 0.445, but the Shapiro-Wilk statistics range from 0.587 to 0.713. This indicates that respondents' judgments of self-management skills, self-awareness cultivation, and the effectiveness of SEL activities do not conform to a normal distribution, potentially impacting the assumptions of parametric statistical tests. In the realm of academic development, analogous patterns arise with notable p-values (Sig. = 0.000) across all items, signifying non-normality in replies concerning the influence of SEL integration on academic performance, collaborative spirit, problem-solving abilities, and resilience. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics for these items vary from 0.276 to 0.356, but the Shapiro-Wilk statistics range from 0.635 to 0.774.

Table 3 demonstrates substantial favourable associations between the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and both personal and academic development among students. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests revealed significant non-normality in the data, prompting the use of non-parametric tests for analysis. Spearman’s rank correlation was employed to evaluate relationships, as it does not require data normality. The correlation between SEL integration and personal development is 0.278 (p = 0.005), and the correlation with academic development is 0.285 (p = 0.004). These results remain valid within the framework of non-parametric statistical analysis. The most significant association is noted between personal development and academic development, with a value of 0.339 (p = 0.001), indicating that enhancements in personal development are intimately associated with progress in academic development. All associations are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, highlighting the

**Table 3:** The impact of SEL integration on students’ academic and personal development

Variable Pair	Spearman's rho	p-value
SEL Integration ↔ Personal Development	0.278	0.005
SEL Integration ↔ Academic Development	0.285	0.004
Personal Development ↔ Academic Development	0.339	0.001

Source: Field survey, 2024

**Table 4:** Communalities and reliabilities for challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programmes

Communalities		
	Initial	Extraction
Barriers of integrating SEL into Curriculum	1.000	.668
Integrating SEL into the school's curriculum leads to curriculum overload.	1.000	.774
Teachers who are unfamiliar with SEL benefits resist all efforts to incorporate it into the curriculum	1.000	.779
Time constraints is one of the excuses given for not integrating SEL into existing schedules	1.000	.753
Limited resources such as insufficient funds, materials or personnel are cited for not integrating SEL into curriculum by school authorities.	1.000	.796
Sustenance or maintaining long term commitment is one of the challenges of integrating SEL	1.000	.637
Insufficient mentoring for integrating SEL into curriculum.	1.000	.492
Lack of enthusiasm/ motivation	1.000	.439
Poor supervision	1.000	.680
<b>KMO and Bartlett's Test</b>		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.558
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	307.778
	Df.	36
	Sig.	0.000
<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>		0.600

Source: Field survey, 2024

A principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on a total of nine factors that were associated with challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programmes. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test produced a result of 0.558, which was greater than the threshold of 0.5. Based on this result, it can be concluded that the sample size for this investigation is sufficient. As can be seen in Table 4, the outcome of Bartlett's test of sphericity was a statistically significant chi-squared value of 307.778. Additionally, the

associated significance level (Sig.) was 0.000, which suggests that the data are suitable for principal components analysis. An internal consistency and reliability of the study instrument was found to be quite high, as indicated by the Cronbach's alpha value of 0.600 that was recorded. The values that were reported from the communalities table ranged from 0.40 to 0.70, which is in line with the research that Costello and Osborne (2005) conducted.

**Table 5:** Total variance explained and pattern matrix for challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programmes

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings				
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %		
1	2.859	31.761	31.761	2.859	31.761	31.761		
2	1.595	17.725	49.486	1.595	17.725	49.486		
3	1.467	16.300	65.786	1.467	16.300	65.786		
4	.882	9.797	75.583					
5	.840	9.335	84.918					
6	.625	6.943	91.861					
7	.321	3.570	95.430					
8	.257	2.861	98.291					
9	.154	1.709	100.000					
				<b>Component</b>				
				1	2	3	4	5
Barriers of integrating SEL into Curriculum			.725					
Integrating SEL into the school's curriculum leads to curriculum overload.					.666			
Teachers who are unfamiliar with SEL benefits resist all efforts to incorporate it into the curriculum			.849					
Time constraints is one of the excuses given for not integrating SEL into existing schedules			.816					
Limited resources such as insufficient funds, materials or personnel are cited for not integrating SEL into curriculum by school authorities.					.866			
Sustenance or maintaining long term commitment is one of the challenges of integrating SEL						.756		
Insufficient mentoring for integrating SEL into curriculum.						.701		
Lack of enthusiasm/ motivation								
Poor supervision					.794			

Source: Field survey, 2024

The incorporation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) within educational frameworks faces numerous challenges, particularly underscored by the barriers exhibiting the most significant loadings. The foremost impediment is the limited resources (loading: 0.866), which encompasses insufficient funding, materials, and personnel. This deficiency in resources markedly constrains educational institutions' capacity to implement SEL in a meaningful manner, as it obstructs the provision of essential training and materials for both educators and learners. Following closely is the resistance from teachers unfamiliar with SEL benefits (loading: 0.849), suggesting that without adequate comprehension and training, teachers may exhibit hesitance in integrating SEL into their pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, time constraints (loading: 0.816) are often

reported as a significant barrier, as educators encounter difficulties in allocating sufficient time within current schedules to incorporate SEL instruction. Additional challenges encompass poor supervision (loading: 0.794), which may lead to insufficient oversight of SEL integration initiatives, and the need for sustaining long-term commitment (loading: 0.756) from school leadership to guarantee the consistent application of SEL principles. The existence of curriculum overload (loading: 0.666) also represents a challenge, as educators may perceive the task of integrating SEL content into an already congested curriculum as daunting. Finally, insufficient mentoring (loading: 0.701) for educators can result in them feeling inadequately prepared to impart these essential skills effectively.

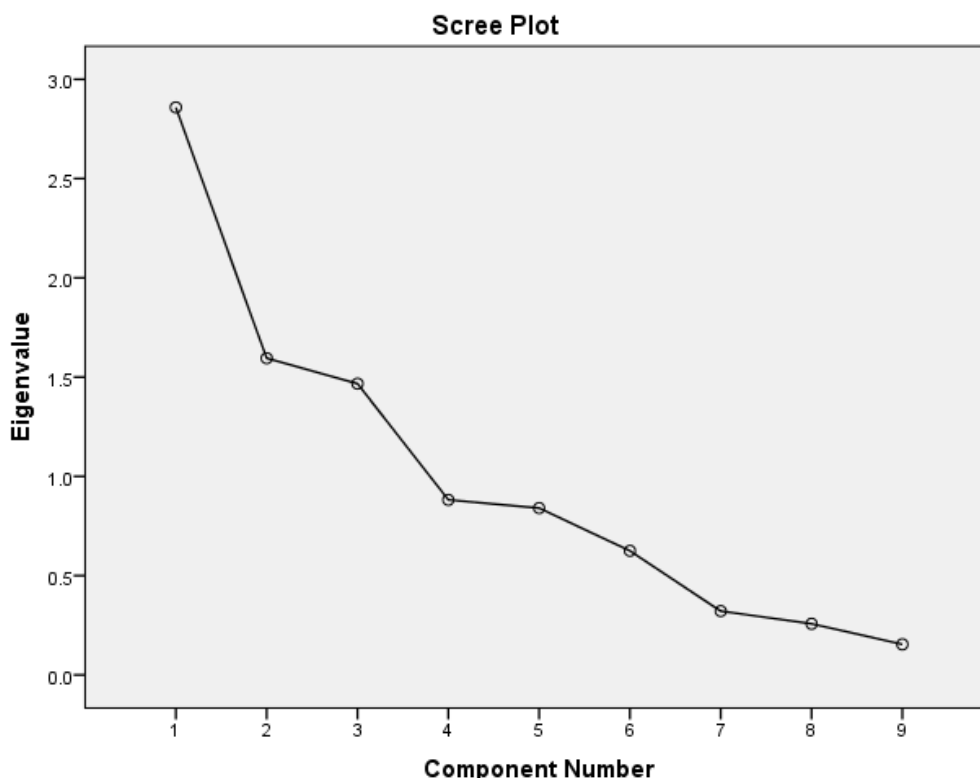


Figure 1: Scree plot for challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programmes

These three clusters of challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programmes have a cumulative 66.786% of the total importance of the 9 challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programmes. The scree plot was further inspected which reveals a break after the third challenges and barriers as shown in Figure 1. The steep slope

accommodates the challenges and barriers in embedding SEL into educational programmes with eigenvalues above 1, while the tailing off reveals the challenges and barriers with eigenvalues below 1. Subsequently, a varimax rotation was conducted to produce the rotated component matrix which further shows the loadings of the Challenges and barriers in

Table 6: Mean ranking of recommendations for educators and policymakers on the effective implementation of SEL in schools

Recommendations	Mean Rank
Self-management skills such as goal setting, time management, emotional regulation taught has helped me to meet assignment deadlines	6.45
Students receive guidance and instruction on coping skills and identify triggers of stress.	6.93
There is a designated time during faculty meetings to discuss SEL.	5.99
The majority of the school counsellor's time is spent in direct service to all students	6.69
Students have the opportunity to retake tests and are given guidance and support to improve their grades.	6.03
Students identify their own goals.	5.49
Students have multiple opportunities to extend their learning outside of the school building through field trips and studies connected to the curriculum	4.94
The school provides an orientation for students who are new to the school	5.41

Students in this school respect each other's differences (for example, gender, race, culture, etc.)	6.00
In my school, we have learned ways to resolve disagreements so that everyone can be satisfied with the outcome	6.18
In my school, we have learned ways to resolve disagreements so that everyone can be satisfied with the outcome	5.92
Adults in this school have high expectations for students' success	6.45

Source: Field survey, 2024

From table 6, the most highly rated recommendation pertains to students receiving instruction on coping skills and identifying stress triggers, which garnered a mean rank of 6.93. Furthermore, the teaching of self-management skills, such as goal setting and time management, also attained a commendable mean rank of 6.45, signifying that educators acknowledge the importance of these abilities in assisting students in adhering to academic deadlines. In contrast, the recommendations related to providing an orientation for new students (mean rank 5.41) and opportunities for extended learning outside the school (mean rank 4.94) received comparatively lower rankings, implying that these facets may be regarded as less vital within the immediate framework of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) implementation. The findings also illuminate critical themes concerning support systems within the educational milieu. For example, the recommendation that the majority of school counsellors' time be spent in direct service to all students achieved a mean rank of 6.69, underscoring a robust conviction regarding the necessity of readily available mental health resources. Moreover, the focus on elevated expectations from adults concerning student success (mean rank 6.45) is consistent with existing research suggesting that positive adult anticipations can substantially affect student motivation and achievement. It is noteworthy that, while there is acknowledgment of the significance of conflict resolution skills (with rankings of 6.18 and 5.92), the discrepancies in these scores imply that additional focus may be warranted to ensure uniformity in the instruction of these skills across various contexts within the educational institution.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The findings on strategies for integrating SEL reveal statistically significant preferences for three primary approaches: project-based learning, workshops/conferences, and school-wide initiatives. These strategies are substantiated by quantitative metrics and supported by insights from the literature. Project-Based Learning (PBL) emerged as the most effective strategy, with a mean score of  $3.30 \pm 0.70$  and 67% of respondents strongly agreeing on its impact. This high level of agreement reflects the strategy's ability to engage students actively and foster SEL competencies such as collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making. The relatively low standard deviation (0.70) indicates a strong consensus among respondents, underscoring the reliability of this finding. Meland and Brion-Meisels (2024) and Rivers and Bertoli (2024) support these results by emphasising the effectiveness of immersive and collaborative activities in developing SEL principles. Furthermore, Antonopoulou (2024) highlights how interactive methods like PBL enhance critical SEL skills, including self-awareness and teamwork, validating the observed high effectiveness of this strategy. Workshops and Conferences received a favourable mean score of  $3.20 \pm 0.80$ , with 63% of respondents strongly agreeing on their importance. The slightly higher standard deviation (0.80) compared to PBL suggests more variability in perceptions,

which may stem from differences in the quality or accessibility of professional development opportunities. This finding aligns with Martin and Garcia (2024), who emphasise the necessity of professional development for educators to gain the skills required to integrate SEL effectively. Additionally, Kim et al. (2024) highlight that teacher competence, bolstered through workshops, is crucial for successful SEL integration, reinforcing the importance of this strategy. School-Wide Initiatives, such as advisory periods, garnered a mean score of  $3.25 \pm 0.75$ , with 37% of respondents strongly agreeing and 18% disagreeing. The slightly lower consensus, as indicated by the broader range of responses, may reflect variability in implementation across schools. Despite these challenges, the literature underscores the importance of fostering a positive school culture to support SEL integration. For instance, Barker et al. (2023) stress that school-wide initiatives can promote inclusivity and emotional intelligence, essential for a supportive learning environment. The mixed responses highlight the need for consistent communication and stakeholder engagement to maximise the effectiveness of this strategy.

### The Impact of SEL Integration on Academic and Personal Development

The findings in Table 3 reveal moderate positive correlations between SEL integration and students' academic development ( $r = 0.285$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) and personal development ( $r = 0.278$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). These results emphasise the critical role of SEL in enhancing students' emotional and social competencies, which, in turn, contribute significantly to academic success. The strongest correlation, between personal and academic development ( $r = 0.339$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), underscores the interconnected nature of these two dimensions, affirming that personal growth serves as a foundation for academic achievement.

The results demonstrate significant positive correlations between SEL integration and students' personal and academic development, highlighting SEL's critical role in fostering holistic growth. It is important to note that the data exhibited significant non-normality, as identified by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. To address this, non-parametric methods, such as Spearman's rank correlation, were utilised. This choice ensures the robustness of findings, as non-parametric tests do not rely on normality assumptions. While the non-normality of the data imposes some limitations, the consistent use of non-parametric analyses reinforces the reliability of the results. The association between SEL and personal development aligns with Gimbert et al. (2023), who assert that SEL fosters key competencies such as self-awareness and emotional regulation, which are vital for building resilience, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Similarly, Grund & Holst (2023) emphasise SEL's contribution to emotional intelligence, a critical factor in effective decision-making and forming meaningful relationships. These findings reflect the ability of SEL to



create emotionally intelligent learners who can navigate social interactions and personal challenges effectively. For academic development, SEL's role in fostering skills such as goal-setting, collaboration, and problem-solving is well-supported by the literature. Payton et al. (2008) and Lapidot-Lefler & Israeli (2024) highlight that SEL competencies enhance students' cognitive focus, stress management, and teamwork, all of which contribute to improved academic outcomes. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2024) argue that SEL acts as a bridge between personal well-being and academic performance by equipping students with tools to manage challenges, fostering a balanced and proactive approach to learning.

The strongest correlation, between personal and academic development, highlights a reciprocal relationship where personal growth through SEL directly enhances academic outcomes. This finding resonates with Rivers & Bertoli (2024), who emphasise that SEL programs not only improve students' ability to navigate academic complexities but also prepare them for success in broader social and professional contexts. By cultivating emotional resilience and social awareness, SEL equips students to thrive in increasingly complex and diverse environments.

### Challenges and Barriers to SEL Integration

Table 4 highlights several significant barriers to embedding SEL into educational frameworks, including limited resources (loading: 0.866), teacher resistance (loading: 0.849), and time constraints (loading: 0.816). These barriers reflect systemic challenges that restrict the seamless integration of SEL into school curricula and practices, consistent with the literature. Limited resources emerged as the most significant barrier, echoing findings by Attaya & Hilliard (2023), who emphasise that insufficient funding, materials, and personnel are critical obstacles to SEL implementation. Schools often lack the resources necessary to provide educators with training and students with materials, which undermines the scalability and sustainability of SEL initiatives.

Teacher resistance due to a lack of understanding of SEL's benefits underscores the importance of professional development. Martin & Garcia (2024) advocate for comprehensive training programs to enhance educators' comprehension and appreciation of SEL's value. Such training can reduce resistance by equipping teachers with the skills and confidence to implement SEL effectively. Similarly, Taylor & Robinson (2023) highlight the role of evidence-based advocacy in overcoming scepticism among educators and stakeholders.

Time constraints and curriculum overload (loading: 0.666) represent additional barriers. As noted by Barker et al. (2023), schools often prioritize meeting academic benchmarks, relegating SEL to a secondary role. This reinforces the need to integrate SEL seamlessly into existing curricula rather than treating it as an add-on, as suggested by Kim et al. (2019). Educators often struggle to allocate sufficient time for SEL within already crowded schedules, creating a perception that SEL competes with core academic content. Other barriers, such as poor supervision (loading: 0.794) and insufficient mentoring (loading: 0.701), highlight gaps in institutional support. These challenges align with Lapidot-Lefler & Israeli (2024), who stress the importance of strong leadership,

consistent oversight, and structured mentoring programs to ensure that SEL principles are consistently applied and sustained.

### Recommendations from Educators and Policymakers

Table 6 provides actionable recommendations for enhancing SEL implementation. The highest-ranked recommendation pertains to teaching students coping skills and stress management (mean rank = 6.93), reflecting educators' recognition of SEL's importance in helping students navigate emotional challenges. These findings are consistent with Gimbert et al. (2023), who emphasise that coping strategies and emotional regulation are foundational SEL competencies. The focus on self-management skills, such as goal-setting and time management (mean rank = 6.45), aligns with Antonopoulou (2024), who highlights the importance of these competencies in fostering academic success. Similarly, the recommendation for counsellors to dedicate more time to direct student service (mean rank = 6.69) underscores the critical need for accessible mental health support, as emphasised by Meland & Brion-Meisels (2024). Recommendations for field trips and extended learning opportunities received lower rankings (mean rank = 4.94), suggesting that immediate and impactful strategies, such as teaching coping and self-management skills, are perceived as higher priorities. This prioritization aligns with the urgency to address students' emotional needs within existing educational frameworks.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings highlight SEL's transformative potential in fostering both personal and academic development and the effectiveness of project-based learning, workshops, and school-wide initiatives as strategies for integrating SEL. However, systemic barriers such as resource constraints, teacher resistance, and curriculum overload significantly hinder its full realization. These challenges echo the emphasis on the need for targeted interventions to address gaps in funding, training, and institutional support. While these findings also reveal variability in implementation and outcomes, necessitating targeted interventions and localised strategies to address contextual challenges. The study confirms the transformative potential of SEL in fostering personal and academic growth while advocating for its seamless integration into educational frameworks. By addressing barriers such as resource constraints and implementation variability, policymakers and educators can optimise SEL outcomes, ensuring its full benefits for students.

## 7. Recommendation

Comprehensive training programmes on SEL should be provided to educators to reduce resistance, improve understanding, and foster competence in implementing SEL in the classroom.

Policymakers should prioritise funding for SEL initiatives, including materials, personnel, and training, to address resource limitations.

SEL should be embedded seamlessly into existing academic frameworks to minimise the perception of overload and ensure alignment with educational goals.

Schools need robust supervision and mentoring systems to ensure consistency and sustainability in SEL implementation.

By addressing these challenges and implementing these recommendations, educators and policymakers can unlock the full potential of SEL, fostering well-rounded students who are equipped for academic success, personal growth, and resilience in an increasingly complex world.

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