

# OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR SCHOOL STUDENTS AND SEVERAL DIRECTIONS FOR APPLICATION IN SCHOOLS

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**Abstract:** Social and emotional learning is an important orientation in contemporary general education, contributing to the development of students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. This article reviews studies on social and emotional learning for school students, focusing on concepts, theoretical foundations, the effectiveness of social and emotional learning programs and conditions for application in schools. The review shows that social and emotional learning has positive effects on personal skills, social behavior, mental health, academic outcomes and school climate. However, its application in schools should avoid fragmented, campaign-based or purely communication-oriented implementation. The article proposes several directions for application, including developing an appropriate competency framework, integrating social and emotional learning into curricula and educational activities, enhancing teachers' capacity, organizing group activities, connecting social and emotional learning with school psychological counseling and developing mechanisms to assess students' progress.

**Keywords:** social and emotional learning; school students; social and emotional competence; school mental health; school.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary general education, student development is no longer limited to academic knowledge but also includes emotional and social competencies as well as adaptability. Students need to be able to recognize emotions, regulate behavior, cooperate, empathize, resolve conflicts and make responsible decisions in both learning and everyday life. These competencies have direct significance for mental health, peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, school connectedness and academic outcomes.

Social and emotional education is commonly approached through the term *social and emotional learning* or SEL. According to CASEL (2020), SEL is the process through which learners acquire and apply knowledge, skills and attitudes to understand and manage emotions, set positive goals, show empathy, build healthy relationships and make responsible decisions. Thus, social and emotional learning is not merely about teaching students to "control their emotions" rather, it is an orientation toward holistic competency development, linking individual emotions with social relationships and ethical behavior.

International studies have provided substantial evidence on the effectiveness of SEL. The meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) which examined 213 programs showed that students participating in SEL programs demonstrated improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, positive social behaviors, reductions in problem behaviors and emotional distress and

enhanced academic achievement. Taylor et al. (2017) further showed that the positive effects of SEL were maintained after the interventions, confirming the long-term significance of social and emotional learning for the positive development of children and adolescents.

In Viet Nam, the 2018 General Education Curriculum emphasizes the development of learners' qualities and competencies, among which self-control and self-learning; communication and collaboration; problem-solving and creativity share many points of compatibility with social and emotional learning (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). In addition, Circular No. 31/2017/TT-BGDĐT on psychological counseling for students in general education schools also identifies support contents related to psychology, life skills, social relationships and students' personal development orientation (Ministry of Education and Training, 2017).

However, in practice, contents related to social and emotional learning in general education schools are often implemented in the form of life skills education, thematic class meetings, experiential activities, school psychological counseling or emulation movements. This approach is flexible, but it can easily lack a clear competency framework, an educational sequence, practical activities and mechanisms to assess students' progress. Therefore, it is necessary to review existing studies in order to clarify the scientific basis, approaches and several directions for applying SEL in schools.

## 2. METHOD OF LITERATURE REVIEW

This article employs a structured narrative literature review. This type of review is appropriate for theoretical articles in the fields of education, psychology and social work, where the primary aim is to systematize concepts, models, research evidence and directions for application rather than to calculate effect sizes as in a meta-analysis.

The selected sources include four groups: foundational works on social and emotional learning and emotional intelligence; systematic reviews and meta-analyses on the effectiveness of SEL; documents on school mental health, holistic education, and whole-school approaches and Vietnamese policy documents related to the general education curriculum and school psychological counseling.

The analysis of the literature was conducted according to four themes: the concepts and components of social and emotional learning; the role of SEL for school students; approaches to implementing SEL in schools and several directions for application in the context of Vietnamese general education.

## 3. CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social and emotional learning is an educational process that helps students develop and apply the competencies necessary to understand themselves, manage emotions and behaviors, establish positive relationships, demonstrate social responsibility and make appropriate decisions. According to CASEL (2020), SEL consists of five core competency areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

**Table 1. Core competencies of social and emotional learning**

Core competency	Main content	Manifestations among school students
<b>Self-awareness</b>	Recognizing emotions, thoughts, values, strengths, and limitations	Being able to name emotions, understand strengths and areas for improvement, and recognize the influence of emotions on behavior
<b>Self-management</b>	Regulating emotions, controlling impulses, managing stress, pursuing goals	Being able to remain calm under stress, control impulsive behavior, and maintain learning motivation
<b>Social awareness</b>	Showing empathy, understanding others' perspectives, respecting differences	Being able to listen, put oneself in others' positions, and avoid discrimination against peers who are different
<b>Relationship skills</b>	Communicating, cooperating, resolving conflicts, seeking and providing support	Being able to work in groups, negotiate, seek help when needed, and support peers appropriately
<b>Responsible decision-making</b>	Considering consequences and choosing safe, ethical, and appropriate behaviors	Being able to assess situations and choose behaviors that do not harm oneself or others

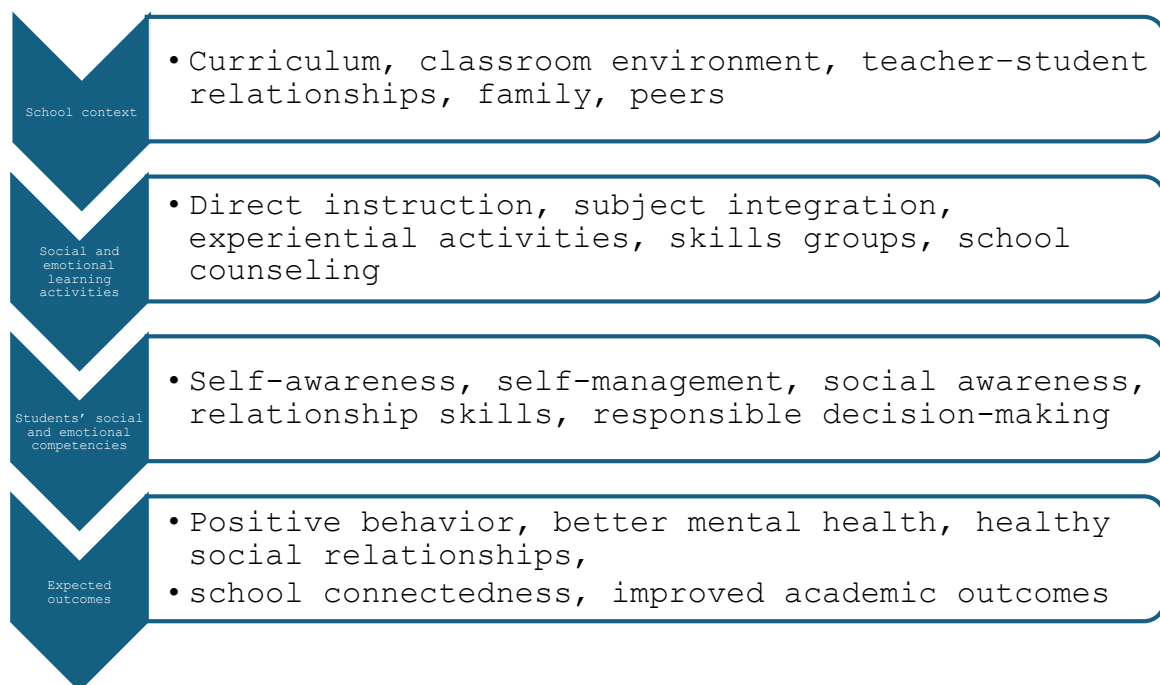
*Source: Synthesized from CASEL (2020).*

Social and emotional learning is closely related to the theory of emotional intelligence. Mayer and Salovey (1997) define emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive, use, understand, and regulate emotions. Goleman (1995) emphasizes components such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. However, SEL has a clearer educational scope because it situates emotional competencies within the school environment, in relationships with peers, teachers, families, communities and specific learning situations.

From an educational perspective, social and emotional learning is grounded in the view that academic learning and social-emotional development are inseparable. Elias et al. (1997) argue that effective education needs to promote academic, emotional, social and moral competencies simultaneously. Zins et al. (2004) also affirm that competencies such as self-control, cooperation, perseverance and positive relationships are important for academic success.

From the perspective of school mental health, SEL can be considered a universal prevention strategy. Greenberg et al. (2017) argue that SEL is compatible with a public health approach in education because schools can reach large numbers of students, promote positive competencies and reduce the risk of emotional and behavioral problems.

**Figure 1. Logical framework of social and emotional learning in schools**



Source: Synthesized by the author from CASEL (2020), Durlak et al. (2011), and Greenberg et al. (2017).

#### 4. MAIN RESEARCH DIRECTIONS ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR SCHOOL STUDENTS

Studies on SEL for school students can be summarized into four main directions.

The first direction focuses on concepts, structure and measurement of social and emotional competencies. Studies in this direction view social and emotional competencies as a set of skills that can be educated, trained and assessed. CASEL's five-competency framework is one of the most influential models because it is both comprehensive and easily transformed into specific educational objectives (CASEL, 2020). OECD (2021) also approaches social and emotional skills as individual characteristics associated with students' learning, well-being and life outcomes.

The second direction examines the effectiveness of SEL programs in schools. This is a direction with strong evidence. Durlak et al. (2011) showed that universal SEL programs have positive effects on social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, emotional difficulties and academic achievement. Taylor et al. (2017) found that positive effects continued to be recorded during follow-up periods after the programs. Cipriano et al. (2023) further updated contemporary evidence,

showing that universal school-based SEL interventions remain a promising approach, although their effectiveness depends on the quality of design and implementation.

The third direction concerns the conditions for implementing SEL. Durlak et al. (2011) emphasize that effective programs often have SAFE characteristics, meaning that they are sequenced, use active forms of learning, focus on specific skills, and have explicit goals. Jones and Bouffard (2012) argue that SEL should not be viewed merely as separate programs but should shift “from programs to strategies”, meaning that SEL should be integrated into teachers’ daily practices, classroom climate, and school culture.

The fourth direction examines the relationship between SEL and mental health, behavior and academic outcomes. Studies show that SEL can contribute to reducing aggressive behavior, emotional disturbances and relational conflicts, while enhancing school connectedness and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018).

**Table 2. Summary of selected research evidence on social and emotional learning**

Author(s)	Type of study	Main content	Key findings
<b>Durlak et al. (2011)</b>	Meta-analysis	213 universal school-based SEL programs	SEL improved social and emotional skills, behavior, attitudes, emotional difficulties, and academic achievement
<b>Taylor et al. (2017)</b>	Meta-analysis with follow-up effects	82 SEL interventions	Positive effects of SEL were maintained after the programs
<b>Greenberg et al. (2017)</b>	Theoretical review	SEL as a public health approach in education	SEL has value for universal prevention and the promotion of positive development
<b>Jones and Bouffard (2012)</b>	Policy and practice review	Shifting SEL in schools from programs to strategies	Emphasizes integrating SEL into daily practices and school culture
<b>Cipriano et al. (2023)</b>	Contemporary meta-analysis	Updated evidence on universal SEL interventions	SEL continues to be effective, but effectiveness depends on design, context, and implementation quality

*Source: Synthesized by the author from the cited studies.*

## 5. APPROACHES TO APPLYING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

The literature review shows that SEL can be applied through various approaches. Direct instruction helps students acquire basic knowledge and skills related to social and emotional learning through separate lessons, themes or programs. This approach has the advantage of clear objectives and ease of assessment but it may become disconnected from school life if it is not reinforced in real situations.

Integrating SEL into subjects and educational activities is an appropriate direction for general education schools. Literature, Citizenship Education, Economic and Legal Education, experiential and career guidance activities, class meetings, and extracurricular activities can all serve as spaces for students to practice emotion recognition, empathy, cooperation, ethical decision-making discussions and problem-solving. However, integration is only effective when teachers clearly identify competency objectives and organize activities that include experience, feedback and reflection.

The whole-school approach is recommended by many studies because SEL does not take place only within a single lesson; it is also reflected in teacher-student relationships, codes of conduct, classroom climate, responses to misconduct, student support mechanisms and parental participation (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Weare & Nind, 2011). In this way, SEL becomes part of the school culture.

In addition to universal activities, schools also need to organize group and individual support for students with specific needs. Skills groups, emotion management groups, peer support groups, group counseling and individual counseling can support students experiencing difficulties in relationships, emotions, behavior or school adjustment.

**Table 3. Comparison of approaches to social and emotional learning in schools**

Approach	Advantages	Limitations to consider	Conditions for implementation
<b>Direct instruction</b>	Structured, clear objectives, easy to design materials	May be disconnected from practice if it only teaches theory	Requires programs, materials, and trained teachers
<b>Integration into subjects and educational activities</b>	Compatible with the existing curriculum, easy to disseminate	Highly dependent on teachers' capacity	Requires guidance for integration by theme and school level
<b>Whole-school approach</b>	Creates a broad and sustainable supportive environment	Requires commitment from school leaders, teachers, and parents	Requires a school-level plan and coordination mechanisms
<b>Group and individual support</b>	Responds to the needs of students with specific difficulties	Requires specialized personnel and confidentiality procedures	Requires counselors, school social workers and referral procedures

Source: Synthesized by the author from Durlak et al. (2011), Jones and Bouffard (2012), and Weare and Nind (2011).

## 6. SEVERAL DIRECTIONS FOR APPLYING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

First, it is necessary to develop a social and emotional competency framework suitable for school students. This framework may refer to CASEL's five core competencies but it should be expressed in a way that is compatible with the 2018 General Education Curriculum and the developmental characteristics of Vietnamese students. At the primary level, attention should be given to recognizing emotions, sharing and basic cooperation. At the lower secondary level, emphasis should be placed on emotion management, peer relationships, conflict resolution and adaptation to changes during puberty. At the upper secondary level, stronger emphasis should be placed on self-awareness, managing academic pressure, healthy romantic relationships, career orientation, personal responsibility and help-seeking competence.

Second, SEL should be integrated into existing curricula and educational activities. Experiential and career guidance activities provide a favorable space for implementing themes related to the self, social relationships, careers and community responsibility. Subjects such as Literature, Citizenship Education, Economic and Legal Education, History, Physical Education and the Arts can also integrate situations related to emotions, empathy, cooperation, ethical choices and problem-solving.

Third, teachers' capacity should be strengthened. Teachers are the ones who create a safe classroom climate, observe students' emotional expressions, provide positive feedback, support communication and connect students with sources of help when necessary. Therefore, teacher training should include knowledge of students' psychological development, skills for organizing SEL activities, positive classroom management, recognition of signs of psychological difficulties and principles of student information confidentiality.

Fourth, group activities and peer support should be developed. Many social and emotional competencies can only be formed through interaction and practice. Forms such as skills groups, student clubs, student forums, role-playing, case discussions, emotion journals, sharing circles, and peer support can help students practice communication, listening, empathy, cooperation and problem-solving.

Fifth, SEL should be connected with school psychological counseling. SEL is universal in nature and targets all students whereas school psychological counseling provides deeper support for students with specific difficulties. When students show signs of prolonged stress, anxiety, sadness, withdrawal, serious conflict, violence or risk of self-harm, schools need appropriate support and referral procedures. This is consistent with the orientation of Circular No. 31/2017/TT-BGDĐT on psychological counseling for students in general education schools (Ministry of Education and Training, 2017).

Sixth, mechanisms should be developed to assess students' progress. SEL assessment should not rely solely on knowledge tests; rather, it should combine students' self-assessment, teachers' observations, peer feedback, parents' opinions, activity products, reflective journals and standardized scales where appropriate. Assessment should aim to support students' progress and avoid labeling or creating additional achievement pressure.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The literature review shows that social and emotional learning is a field with relatively solid theoretical foundations and empirical evidence. International studies have shown that SEL has positive effects on students' social and emotional skills, behaviors, attitudes, mental health and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). This supports the view that SEL is not merely a supplementary extracurricular activity but an important component of holistic education.

Compared with moral education or life skills education, SEL has the advantage of being based on a clear competency framework and substantial empirical evidence. Moral education usually emphasizes norms and values; life skills education often focuses on coping skills; whereas SEL connects self-awareness, emotion management, social relationships and responsible decision-making. Nevertheless, in the Vietnamese context, these approaches should not be placed in opposition to one another. SEL can be seen as a way to deepen moral education, life skills education, experiential activities and school counseling.

One issue that should be noted is that SEL should not be equated with psychological therapy. SEL primarily aims at competency development and universal prevention. Students with psychological disorders, trauma, risk of self-harm, serious violence or prolonged functional difficulties need support from appropriate professionals. Therefore, schools need to clearly distinguish among education, counseling, psychological counseling and referral to specialized services.

For Viet Nam, the application of SEL should be connected with the 2018 General Education Curriculum, especially the competencies of self-control and self-learning; communication and collaboration; problem-solving and creativity (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). This is an important advantage because SEL is not an entirely new content area but can be concretized within existing educational activities. However, to avoid dispersion, schools need to clearly identify objectives by school level, select priority themes, assign implementing personnel and develop assessment mechanisms.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Social and emotional learning is an important orientation in general education, contributing to the development of students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The literature review shows that SEL has clear theoretical foundations, noteworthy empirical evidence, and positive associations with academic outcomes, adaptive behavior, mental health, and school climate.

In the Vietnamese context, social and emotional learning is highly compatible with the orientation toward developing learners' qualities and competencies in the 2018 General Education Curriculum while also supporting the implementation of school psychological counseling. To apply SEL effectively, schools need to avoid fragmented or formalistic approaches; they need to develop a clear competency framework, integrate SEL into curricula and educational activities, strengthen teachers' capacity, organize group activities, connect SEL with school counseling and assess students' progress in a supportive manner.

Future studies in Viet Nam should focus on developing and testing SEL models appropriate for each school level, developing reliable assessment tools, analyzing the roles of teachers and student support personnel and evaluating the effectiveness of SEL programs in different school contexts.

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