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Examining the impact of social-emotional learning on academic achievement through CPD

Mustafa Atas, Egypt

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School context

Salahaldin International School Alexandria (SIS) is an international school in Alexandria, Egypt, that opened its doors in September 2014. The majority of students are Egyptian nationals, but the school also has students from other countries, with a total of 550 students and 85 teachers. Salahaldin International School Alexandria offers students a world-class education, with a focus on technology, innovation and individual growth.

Salahaldin International School Alexandria offers a comprehensive and broad K-12 British curriculum, and students have the opportunity to participate in a wide range of national and international competitions. The school offers its students British and international educational traditions, as well as the benefits of access to the rich culture and heritage of Egypt. Salahaldin International School Alexandria offers a mix of curricular and co-curricular activities, with a wide variety of programmes and facilities that meet the needs and interest of its students.

Salahaldin International School Alexandria also has a variety of other facilities to support students' learning and development, such as smart technologies, well-equipped science labs, two auditoriums where the students can showcase their potential in different platforms, 3D-experience room, robotics room and

music rooms. At Salahaldin International School Alexandria we believe that individual growth is the goal. We accept students' differences and provide students with the support they need to reach their full potential. We are committed to providing our students with a well-rounded education that will prepare them for success in college and beyond.

About the author



Mustafa Atas is an experienced English language teacher and academic coordinator with over 21 years of diverse experience in international school curricula across various educational levels. He has held several leadership positions in Albania and Egypt, including Head of the English Department, K-6 Assistant Principal, K-12 Deputy Director, Middle School Assistant Principal and K-12 Academic Coordinator, and he currently serves as K-12 Academic Vice Principal.

His expertise encompasses curriculum development, data-driven decision making, and the implementation of impactful school-wide initiatives aimed at enhancing student achievement. Throughout his career, Mustafa has been dedicated to empowering learners and creating an engaging, technology-enhanced educational environment that enables students to reach their full potential.

Key findings

The integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) has led to several positive outcomes:

- **increased student engagement:** a 25 per cent increase in participation in classroom activities
- **improved emotional expression:** about 70 per cent of students feel more comfortable expressing their emotions
- **supportive environment:** a 30 per cent reduction in classroom conflicts has fostered a nurturing atmosphere.

However, challenges remain:

- **inconsistent implementation:** 40 per cent of teachers feel unprepared to apply SEL strategies effectively
- **professional development needs:** while 85 per cent attended workshops, 60 per cent desire ongoing support rather than one-time training
- **student feedback:** 55 per cent of students seek more relevant SEL activities.

Action Research rationale

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an essential aspect of school improvement and innovation in my school setting for several reasons. As an academic leader, I recognise the need to prioritise SEL as a key component of our school's improvement and innovation efforts.

1. First and foremost, research has consistently shown that SEL has a direct and significant impact on students' academic achievements (What the Research Says, ASCD, 2018). By helping students develop skills like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making, SEL programmes allow them to better regulate their emotions, build stronger peer relationships and engage more effectively in the learning process. This, in turn, leads to improved grades, test scores and overall academic performance.
2. Furthermore, in the diverse, multicultural context of our international school, SEL is particularly important for supporting students' holistic development and fostering an inclusive, supportive learning environment. SEL helps students from various backgrounds learn to understand, empathise and collaborate with their peers, which is essential for their social-emotional well-being and academic success.
3. By investing in comprehensive SEL programming, we can empower our students to become self-motivated, resilient learners who are equipped to navigate the challenges of the 21st century. This strategic focus on SEL will undoubtedly contribute to enhanced academic outcomes and the overall growth and development of our students.

Exploratory Action Research questions

1. **What are my own perceptions and beliefs about the importance of SEL in our school's improvement and innovation efforts?**
2. **How do students feel SEL programmes and initiatives are impacting their learning experiences and social-emotional well-being?**
3. **What patterns or trends have I noticed in how students are demonstrating social-emotional competencies in the classroom and broader school community?**

Data collection tools

Methodology

The methodology incorporated a mixed-method approach, including focus group discussions, surveys with a focus group of students and a survey of teachers. Consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study and their rights.

1. **Focus group discussions:** In addition to the individual interviews, I will organise two focus group discussions, each with five students, to further explore their collective perceptions and experiences with SEL.
2. **Student surveys:** I will develop and administer a survey to a larger sample of 36 students across different grade levels. The survey will include a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions to gather both quantitative and qualitative data.
3. **Teacher surveys:** Recognising the crucial role that teachers play in implementing and supporting SEL initiatives, I will conduct surveys with 11 teachers who currently work with the target group students.



'The SEL activities helped us understand our feelings better and made us more connected as a class. It helped me make a plan for my exams, and improve my grades.'

Year 6 student Salwa Osama's feedback

Data analysis for the exploration stage

Key findings from exploration

SEL impact on academic improvement: Key findings

Data analysis indicates a positive correlation between SEL skills and academic performance. Students with higher SEL competencies tend to achieve better grades and demonstrate increased engagement in class. Teachers implementing SEL programmes reported a significant decrease in behavioural issues, creating a more conducive learning environment. This reduction in disruptions allows for more instructional time, benefiting both teachers and students.

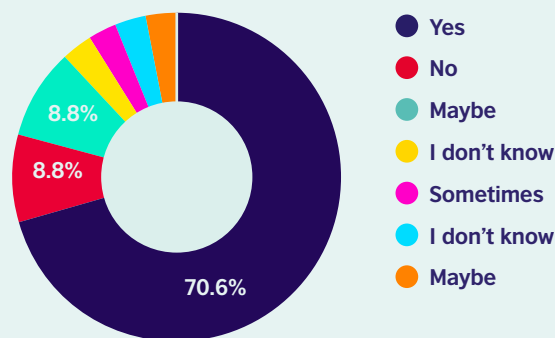
Additionally, students participating in SEL initiatives showed enhanced motivation and a stronger connection to peers and teachers, which positively impacted their academic efforts. Over 70 per cent of students report that SEL significantly enhances their academic performance. Improved peer relationships were also noted, with students exhibiting better collaboration skills, leading to successful group-work experiences.

However, challenges remain in SEL implementation. Issues such as inconsistent teacher training, limited time for educators to integrate SEL practices and insufficient parental support have been identified. Teachers face significant barriers, with 54.5 per cent citing lack of parent support, and 45.5 per cent struggling with time constraints and insufficient training. Addressing these barriers is essential for maximising the effectiveness of SEL programmes.

Exploratory action research question 2

Do you think SEL programmes can help you improve your academic performances at your school?

34 responses

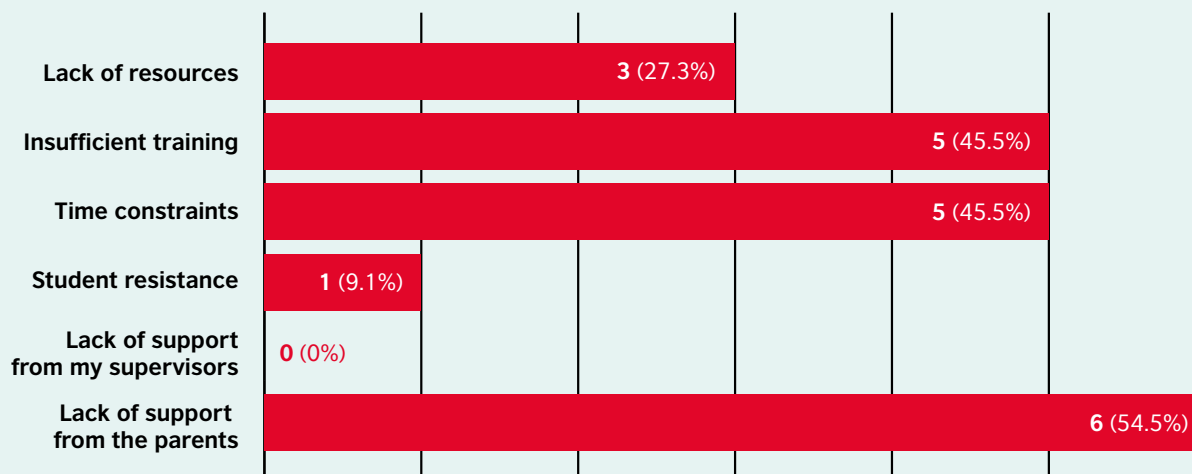


Overall, the exploration stage underscores the significant impact of SEL on academic outcomes. Integrating SEL into educational practices fosters individual student growth and enhances the overall learning environment. Future efforts will focus on refining and expanding SEL initiatives to ensure all students benefit from these vital programmes.

Exploratory action research question 3

What challenges do you encounter when implementing SEL in your classroom? (Select all that apply)

11 responses



Action Research

Action plan

The research outlines two action plans: one for integrating SEL into the curriculum and another for providing professional development for teachers. These plans aim to create a supportive environment that encourages both academic and emotional growth.

- **Integrate SEL into the curriculum:** Incorporate SEL activities, such as emotion regulation exercises and group discussions, alongside academic lessons.
- **Professional development:** Offer regular workshops for teachers on SEL strategies, including classroom management, emotional support and conflict resolution.



Action plan evaluation tools

- **Tool 1: Conduct classroom observations** to see how SEL activities are being implemented, and provide feedback and support.

Timeline: Throughout weeks 15–17 (22 December – 11 January)

- **Tool 2: Student feedback survey/discussions**
Use surveys or informal discussions to gather student feedback on the SEL activities and their impact on learning.

Timeline: Week 18–19 (12–25 January)



Data analysis and conclusions

Action plan implementation

The integration of SEL into the curriculum was met with enthusiasm from both students and teachers. Incorporating activities like emotion regulation exercises and group discussions alongside academic lessons sparked increased engagement. However, we faced challenges in ensuring consistency across different classrooms, as some teachers were more comfortable with SEL strategies than others.

Professional development workshops were well attended, yet some teachers expressed a need for ongoing support rather than one-time sessions. This realisation prompted us to establish a mentorship programme for teachers to share best practices.

Classroom observations revealed that while many teachers implemented SEL activities effectively, a few struggled with classroom management during these sessions. The student feedback surveys indicated that most students felt more connected and better able to express their emotions, but some noted that not all activities resonated with them.

Overall, the implementation of the action plan showed promising results, but highlighted the need for continual training and adaptation to meet diverse classroom needs.

Key findings

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However, challenges remain:

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- **student feedback:** 55 per cent of students seek more relevant SEL activities.



'I feel more comfortable sharing my ideas now; it's like we're all in this together. I don't feel the exam stress anymore, yet I need more activities from my teachers during the SEL time.'

Year Five student Yasmine Samir's feedback

Conclusions

To enhance SEL integration, we propose implementing a structured mentorship programme to provide continuous support for the 45.5 per cent of teachers who feel unprepared. Additionally, we recommend regular curriculum evaluations that focus on tailoring initiatives based on student input, particularly from the 55 per cent of students who desire more relatable content. By addressing these crucial areas, we can develop a more effective SEL framework that not only improves learning outcomes but also supports the emotional well-being of all students.

These findings underscore the critical role of SEL in enhancing not only academic performance but also students' emotional well-being.

Impact on our setting

The integration of SEL has created an inclusive atmosphere where students feel valued and understood, fostering collaboration and enriching the learning experience.

Possible enhancements in the school development cycle

Future actions to enhance SEL may include:

1. **ongoing professional development**
Establishing continual training for educators to boost confidence in implementing SEL strategies.
2. **student-centred curriculum design**
Incorporating feedback, especially from the 55 per cent of students seeking more relevant activities.
3. **mentorship programmes**
Developing structured mentorship for teachers to provide ongoing support.
4. **community engagement**
Involving parents and the community in SEL initiatives to extend benefits beyond the classroom.

By implementing these enhancements, we can strengthen our SEL framework, leading to improved educational outcomes and a positive impact on students' lives.

Future actions

Future actions on the impact of SEL on academic performance:

1. **Integrated SEL assessments:** Develop assessments that measure both SEL competencies and academic outcomes. This will help establish a clear link between SEL practices and improvements in academic performance.
2. **Longitudinal studies:** Conduct longitudinal studies to track the impact of SEL on students' academic achievements over time. This data can provide insights into the long-term benefits of SEL initiatives. (ex. Internal Cambridge Progression Tests).
3. **Parental involvement:** Engage parents in SEL education by providing resources and workshops that highlight the connection between emotional well-being and academic success. This can create a supportive home environment conducive to learning.
4. **Feedback loops:** Establish mechanisms for regular feedback from students and teachers on the effectiveness of SEL programmes in relation to academic performance. This input can guide continual improvement.

By implementing these actions, we can further enhance the positive impact of SEL on academic performance, creating a more holistic educational environment.

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