

The Socio-Emotional Learning in School: The Views of Educational Leaders

BAUTISTA, Jessebel G.

0009-0006-0364-6845; Universidad de Manila. Manila, Philippines. jessebel.bautista001@deped.gov.ph

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ABSTRACT

The goal of promoting students' social skills is to enhance social emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. The main topic of this research is the strategies employed by junior high school principals to foster a SEL-friendly school culture and create a compassionate campus. This research is intended to collect SEL baseline data from five (5) junior high school administrators in District 1 in the Division of Manila. Data was collected using a validated interview questionnaire sent by Google form and a direct interview using a structured questionnaire. Qualitative data was sorted and analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2019) thematic analysis framework. Furthermore, the findings of the research revealed that the principals of the Public Secondary schools in the Division of Manila identified their roles as managers and enhancers of the emotional quotients and skills of the teachers, promoting their positive mindset, optimistic, and reflecting with oneself and others. Principals took into consideration various methods that can help in making SEL embedded in the daily routine, practices, and policies of their schools by taking positive steps for the implementation of SEL. Moreover, the identified challenges met by the principals in the implementation of SEL in the curriculum were stated to be lack of resources, lack of adequate training of teachers, and time constraints. The study proposed a SEL challenge navigating manual which was designed by the researcher to address the results and findings of this study.

RESUMO

O objetivo de promover as habilidades sociais dos alunos é aprimorar a aprendizagem socioemocional (SEL) na sala de aula. O tema principal desta pesquisa são as estratégias empregadas pelos diretores do ensino fundamental para fomentar uma cultura escolar favorável ao SEL e criar um campus compassivo. Esta pesquisa tem como propósito coletar dados iniciais sobre SEL de cinco (5) administradores escolares do ensino fundamental no Distrito 1 da Divisão de Manila. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário de entrevista validado enviado via Google Forms e uma entrevista direta utilizando um questionário estruturado. Os dados qualitativos foram organizados e analisados utilizando a estrutura de análise temática de Braun e Clarke (2019). Além disso, os resultados da pesquisa revelaram que os diretores das escolas públicas secundárias da Divisão de Manila identificaram seus papéis como gestores e facilitadores dos quocientes emocionais e habilidades dos professores, promovendo uma mentalidade positiva, otimismo e reflexão consigo mesmo e com os outros. Os diretores consideraram vários métodos que podem ajudar a integrar o SEL na rotina diária, nas práticas e nas políticas de suas escolas, adotando medidas positivas para a implementação do SEL. Além disso, os desafios identificados pelos diretores na implementação do SEL no currículo foram a falta de recursos, a falta de treinamento adequado dos professores e restrições de tempo. O estudo propôs um manual de navegação de desafios do SEL, projetado pelo pesquisador para abordar os resultados e descobertas desta pesquisa.

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Introduction

Socio-emotional learning (SEL) has become a pivotal aspect of modern education, reflecting a shift from traditional academic-focused approaches to more holistic development strategies. Educational leaders, particularly school principals, play a crucial role in integrating SEL into the school environment. Their perspectives on SEL reveal a deep understanding of its significance, implementation challenges, and the evolving trends and issues at global, regional, national, and local levels.

In the Philippines, SEL is gaining traction as the Department of Education (DepEd) recognizes its critical role in student development. Filipino principals view SEL as essential for addressing issues such as bullying, mental health problems, and social inequalities. They advocate for its inclusion in the K-12 curriculum and highlight successful initiatives, such as the integration of SEL into daily classroom activities and the establishment of school-based mental health programs. However, challenges persist, including insufficient funding, lack of training for teachers, and societal stigma around mental health.

Although social-emotional learning (SEL) has been extensively studied in Western educational systems (Durlak et al., 2011), there remains a paucity of research examining how school leaders in the Philippine context integrate SEL into daily routines, practices, and policies. Moreover, limited studies focus specifically on junior high school principals as key implementers of SEL in public schools.

This study investigates how junior high school principals in District 1 of the Division of Manila integrate SEL into their school culture. It aims to understand their perceptions, strategies, and the challenges they encounter. To examine how principals help with SEL, the study relies on Daniel Goleman's theory. Goleman (1995) points out that successful leaders require self-awareness, the ability to control their emotions, motivation, empathy, and social skills. People with these abilities are able to create a supportive atmosphere, uplift everyone, care for emotional well-being, and encourage collaboration in school. This research compares what principals do and how they think to Goleman's ideology, pointing out that SEL integration is easier when school leaders are emotionally intelligent (Goleman, 1995).

Furthermore, the study seeks to develop a guiding manual to assist schools in embedding SEL in their policies and practices. The intention of the current study was to determine the views of educational leaders regarding the socio-emotional learning (SEL) of students in school.

This study aims to determine the views of educational leaders regarding the socio-emotional learning (SEL) of students in school using a case study research design. It seeks to understand the strategies, challenges, and coping mechanisms of selected junior high school principals in District 1, Division of Manila, as they foster SEL within their respective school contexts.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: How do junior high school principals in District 1, Division of Manila, promote SEL in their schools? What challenges do they encounter in embedding SEL practices into daily routines, practices, and policies? What strategies do they employ to overcome these challenges? What inputs can be proposed for an enhanced socio-emotional learning manual?

Synthesis

An analysis of relevant research and literature is presented using the thematic format. All literature and studies cited or quoted in this research coming from both local and foreign sources were relevant and related to this study. By researching the literature related to the introduction to socio emotional learning the researcher was able to proceed in completing this study in an enlightened and well-informed manner.

Teachers' challenges, efficacy, and barriers in SEL implementation were taken up in the literature that was referenced in different areas of this study includes the following:

- (a) Saini, (2021) on application of social and emotional learning programs: educators' views on support and competence;
- (b) Holmes, (2021) focused on teacher s' efficacy in implementing SEL;
- (c) Dody, (2022) made a study on the SEL Implementation Monkey: Determining What Elements Act as Obstacles to the Effective Application of SEL in the Classroom and School Environment; and
- (d) Niles, (2021) posed a discussion to teachers regarding the implementation of an International Baccalaureate Elementary School's Social-Emotional Learning curriculum.

Meanwhile, the effects of integrating SEL, quality and effectiveness of SEL, and the study examines the self-efficacy of students who have been exposed to a curriculum that incorporates social emotional learning (SEL) abilities, as well as those students who have been studied in the following literature: (a) Jacob, (2021) on impacts on students' self-perceptions and abilities of concurrently integrating culturally sensitive education and SEL; (b) Kim et al, (2022) made the same study on a meta-analysis of the caliber and efficacy of social-emotional learning (SEL) intervention research conducted in Korea; (c) Mondri et al, (2021) made an assessment on advocating early childhood intervention to foster socioemotional learning; and (d) Agoglia, (2021) explored socio emotional learning: A case study for success.

Consequently, the school heads leadership practices such as policies, procedures, and school practices in reaching SEL have been taken up in the following literature: (a) Tobin et al. (2020) on the paper SEL initiatives are an approach of strengthening staff resilience and well-being through socially and emotionally competent leadership; (b) Haga (2022) made a case study on principals' use of servant leadership.

Furthermore, the school culture in the light of SEL were taken up in the following study: (a) Maponya (2020) on the effect of instructional management methods used by secondary school principals on students' academic achievement; (b) Miller (2020) made a study on school culture and transformative leadership of principals in Title 1 schools.

Moreover, the theme about challenges and resistance were explained in the following study: (a) Harrington (2020) made a discussion on an empirically supported social-emotional learning and how it affects teachers views of students' behavior: a study of RULER and the emotional intelligence pillars; and (b) Braswell (2023) on real-life experiences of social emotional learning implementation by elementary school teachers: shifting from in-person to remote settings.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore the perspectives and practices of five junior high school principals in public schools within Manila's District 1. The intent of this research was to collect baseline data on SEL-fostering routines, practices, approaches, policies, and challenges from principals to inform the development of the SEL Challenge Navigation Manual.

The study follows a case study research design (Yin, 2018), which allows for an in-depth exploration of bounded systems within real-life contexts.

The investigation was carried out in five schools located in District 1, Tondo, Manila: Juan Nolasco High School, Timoteo Paez Integrated School, Gregorio Perfecto High School, Antonio Villegas Vocational High School, and Tondo High School. These schools, where the researcher also teaches, range from medium to large in size. Five public junior high school principals—one per school—were purposively selected during the 2023–2024 school year. To maintain anonymity and facilitate impartial discussion, each principal was assigned a gender-neutral pseudonym. An open-ended interview questionnaire developed by the researcher was used to gather data. It was reviewed and validated by the research adviser and three external experts to ensure content validity.

On March 8, 2024, the researcher requested approval from the School Division Office (SDO) in Manila to conduct the study. Permission was granted on March 11, followed by formal communication with the selected principals on March 12. With no objections received, interviews proceeded after establishing rapport and clear communication. Participants were given ample time to respond.

In addition to semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool, document analysis of school policies, memoranda, and SEL-related programs was considered to support the findings. Where feasible, observations of school practices may also provide supplementary insights.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews and analyzed using the thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2019). Before each interview, the researcher explained the study's purpose, estimated duration, and participants' rights. Interviews lasted under an hour and yielded rich qualitative data due to the open-ended nature of the questions. All sessions were recorded with consent, transcribed, and securely stored. Participant folders and contact summary forms were created to document key themes.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was applied following the phases of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Data triangulation was also employed by comparing interview responses with available documents and field notes to strengthen the findings.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. The researcher protected the participants' privacy, made voluntary participation clear, and detailed confidentiality procedures. Furthermore, participants learned all about their rights, what the study involves, and the fact that they may leave whenever they choose.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the study employed member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails, and thick description. These strategies ensured that the findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives and enhance the reliability and transferability of the results.

Results and Discussion

The following research questions guided the study: How do school principals perceive their role in fostering SEL? What actions do school leaders take to embed SEL in their school culture? What challenges do school leaders face in implementing SEL? How can the findings inform the development of an SEL Challenge Navigation Manual?

Addressing Research Question 1, principals recognized their role in SEL as transformational leaders—promoting emotional intelligence, empathy, and a sense of safety among students and staff. They emphasized the importance of modeling calmness and respect to influence school-wide behavior positively.

Responding to Research Question 2, SEL was infused through both formal and informal methods. Schools implemented homeroom guidance programs and infused SEL themes across various subjects. Principals also initiated teacher trainings focused on emotional well-being and integrated SEL in student discipline policies.

In line with Research Question 3, principals cited numerous obstacles, including limited time due to an already packed curriculum, lack of professional development for teachers in SEL, and absence of institutionalized SEL frameworks.

Table 1.
Summary of Key Themes from Principal Interviews

Statement of the Problem	Emerged Themes	Description
How do principals perceive their role in fostering SEL?	Role Perception	Principals see themselves as SEL champions and emotional leaders
What actions do school leaders take to embed SEL?	Implementation Strategies	Homeroom guidance, teacher training, subject integration
What challenges do school leaders face?	Implementation Challenges	Lack of time, limited training, no unified SEL policy
What inputs can be proposed?	Practical Response	Development of SEL Challenge Navigation Manual

As an output to Research Question 4, a practical manual titled “Self-Enhanced Learning (SEL) Manual for SEL (SELM for SEL)” was developed. It included frameworks for school-wide SEL policy integration, classroom-based practices, professional development modules, and strategies to overcome resistance to SEL. The Navigating Manual for Public Schools to be developed shall set directions on how SEL shall be effectively implemented. It aims to make SEL teaching and implementation acceptable to all stakeholders, making them responsible and accountable in all dealings in and outside the school portals. This manual shall be made available to all high school and elementary educators in the Division of Manila.

The navigation manual aims to provide a localized, efficient, and effective course of action in the application of SEL in educational settings. It intends to achieve the following: develop a manual through stakeholders’ collaboration; seek teachers’ support and use; obtain

principals' support on the implementation of SEL in schools; foster growth and development of a culture of skilled teachers; and review and track the manual's impact, making changes as needed for ongoing progress.

To be able to properly develop a manual, the following steps shall be done: First, conduct a needs assessment to determine the specific challenges in the teaching of SEL and analyze data to find common themes, areas of strength, and opportunities for improvement. Second, create a team to work on the manual. Third, collaborate with stakeholders by building a team composed of teachers, students, and parents to work together and plan educational events for stakeholders to meet and practice collaboration and professional learning. Fourth, proceed with the actual writing of the manual. The expenses to be incurred shall be supported by the stakeholders. The manual's use shall be allowed only after the evaluation and validation of experts in the field.

Final Considerations and Conclusion

The research indicates that principal leaders support and drive Social Emotional Learning into the daily routines of the school. Experts found that when SL is guided by a strong purpose, it sustains students' social and emotional growth as well as promotes happiness and advancement for teachers in their profession. Many principals took the lead in turning schools into caring environments by demonstrating self-awareness, empathy, and encouraging policies for supporting emotional growth in students.

Even with issues such as short time, poor training, and scarce resources for schools, the determination of leaders made it clear that strong planning and working with the community could solve such problems. Developing the SEL Challenge Navigation Manual based on what practitioners know makes it easy for schools to apply and adapt it locally. In addition, the research pointed out the need for those affected to be involved. Teachers, students, parents, and administrators believed working together was important for maintaining a productive SEL environment. The manual has an immediate use and also forms the base for ongoing development with feedback and careful observation.

Put simply, SEL does not happen in an instant but needs time to become a regular cultural value. For a school to develop a compassionate campus, its leaders need to display SEL principles and weave them into the school's central goals. Further studies are encouraged to find out how the manual can be copied, what its lasting influence is on schools, and how it affects student results.

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