



The Gulf Arab States Educational Research Center (GASERC)

GASERC

Social and Emotional Learning

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Specialized Scientific Reports
Volume (1) - Issue (2)



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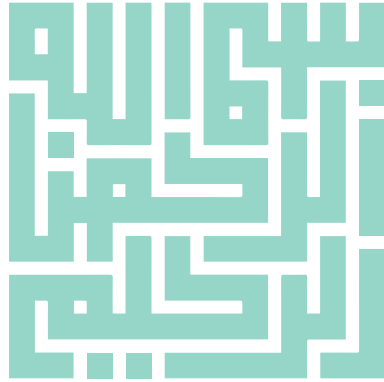


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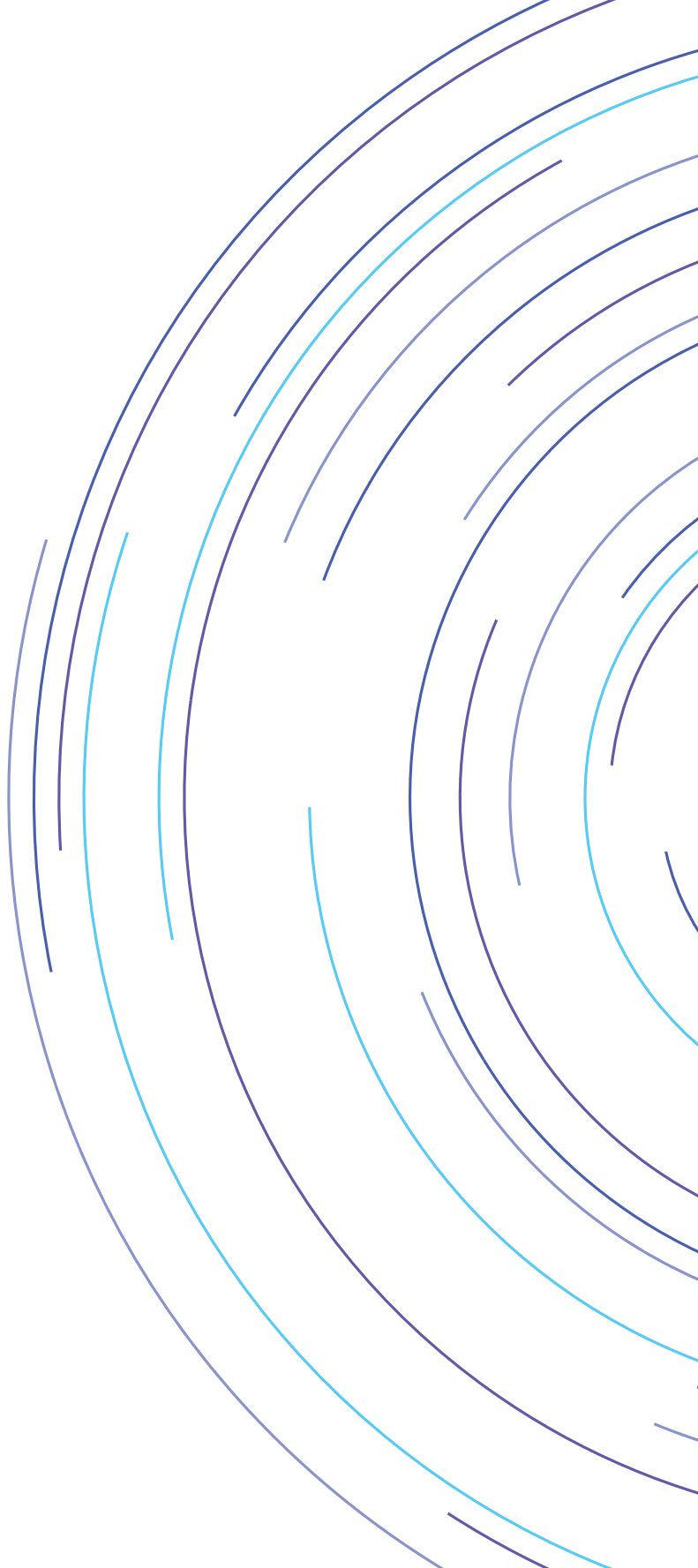
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Editorial by
Dr. Mohammed Mutair Al-Sharija

The Editor-in-Chief and
Director of GASERC

The Gulf Arab States Educational Research Center is pleased to present the second issue of the ***Specialized Scientific Reports*** series, continuing our endeavor to enhance the role of educational knowledge in supporting decision-makers and informing policy development in the Gulf States. Through this series, we seek to offer in-depth analytical reviews of Gulf-based research literature, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of key educational issues and fostering evidence-informed policies that are attuned to the region's cultural and contextual particularities.

The theme of this issue - ***Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)*** - has been selected in response to a growing global shift in educational priorities. SEL has emerged as a pivotal element in the development of well-rounded learners, reinforcing

cognitive growth while cultivating the emotional and interpersonal skills increasingly required in contemporary societies. A substantial body of international research has underscored the importance of competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and the ability to build constructive relationships. These skills are now widely recognized as foundational to improving academic achievement, enhancing mental health, and promoting inclusive, safe, and equitable learning environments.

In light of this growing recognition, the current issue presents a systematic review of recent Gulf-based studies addressing various dimensions of SEL. These include investigations into its effects on students' academic outcomes and well-being, assessments of the extent to which students and teachers possess SEL competencies, and documented examples of educational interventions implemented across the region. The report aims to illuminate both the strengths and challenges of integrating SEL into educational

systems, and concludes with practical, evidence-based recommendations to guide educational policy and classroom practice in the Gulf States.

It is our hope that this report contributes meaningfully to the educational discourse in the region, particularly in advancing understanding of the value of social and emotional competencies in learning and development. We further aspire for this issue to support the ongoing transition toward more holistic, humane, and contextually grounded education systems - ones that invest in building the capacities of teachers and learners, foster meaningful partnerships between schools and communities, and prepare Gulf learners to navigate and lead in an increasingly complex and dynamic world.



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Report Topic: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Dear Reader,

The second issue of the *Specialized Scientific Reports* series, published by the Gulf Arab States Educational Research Center, turns the spotlight on one of the most prominent contemporary trends in global and regional education systems: ***Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)***. The decision to focus on this topic stems from the profound transformations and mounting psychological, educational, and social challenges facing Gulf societies, and developments that call for a redefinition of the aims and functions of education. No longer can educational systems focus solely on the cognitive development of learners; they must also attend to the cultivation of emotional and social competencies, empowering students to develop self-awareness, engage constructively with others, and make responsible decisions grounded in emotional maturity and holistic human understanding.

This issue presents a rigorous analytical review of the current state of SEL in the Gulf States, drawing on a selection of recent empirical studies that approach the topic from multiple angles. These include investigations into the impact of SEL on students' academic performance and holistic development; assessments of teachers' preparedness to foster students' social and emotional competencies, along with their awareness of their roles in this regard; and accounts of diverse Gulf-based interventions implemented in school settings to promote these competencies. The report concludes with a set of practical recommendations designed to inform and support the development of comprehensive, context-sensitive educational policies across the region.

Through this thematic focus, the issue aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on educational reform in the Gulf, emphasizing the importance of embedding SEL into the core of teaching and learning processes to better prepare students for the demands of a rapidly changing world.

The Editor

The Impact of SEL on Student Academic Performance and Holistic Development

Amid the rapidly evolving landscape of global education, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a comprehensive pedagogical approach that contributes not only to students' cognitive development but also to the cultivation of their emotional and social competencies. Academic success is no longer defined solely by scholastic achievement; rather, it increasingly hinges on students' abilities to manage their emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. These competencies are deemed essential in a complex and ever-changing world. Educational literature has consistently shown that fostering these skills enhances academic performance and contributes to creating safer, more equitable school environments, while supporting students' well-being and preparedness for life.

Educational systems across the Gulf region have shown growing interest in this paradigm, driven by several factors: the pressing need to bridge the gap between school-based education and the requirements of sustainable development; increased awareness of the relationship between mental health and learning; and global trends advocating for the integration of 21st-century skills into national curricula. However, this interest remains at an early stage and continues to face critical challenges, including teacher preparation, curriculum development, and the cultural adaptation of SEL programs.

Against this backdrop, the current section of the second issue of the *Specialized Scientific Reports* series offers a systematic review of recent Gulf-based studies that seek to assess the impact of SEL on various aspects of students' educational experiences. This review includes studies exploring the relationship between SEL and academic achievement, psychological well-being, life skills, motivation, and creative thinking. This thematic exploration is

particularly valuable because it is not limited to examining the direct outcomes of SEL competencies. Rather, it delves into contextual variables such as educational settings, age groups, gender, and socio-economic status, that shape how these competencies manifest and impact learning. The goal is to enrich our understanding of SEL as a phenomenon and to inform the design of more effective and context-sensitive educational interventions.

Improving Academic Performance

Despite the growing global recognition of SEL as a comprehensive educational approach for enhancing students' cognitive and social abilities, the literature reveals a notable gap in experimental studies evaluating the effectiveness of SEL programs within Gulf contexts. Addressing this research gap, Khasawneh (2023) conducted an empirical study aiming to assess ***the impact of a structured SEL curriculum on academic achievement among middle school students in the United Arab Emirates.***

The study employed a quantitative methodology using an experimental design with two groups: an experimental group that received a dedicated SEL intervention, and a control group that continued with conventional academic instruction, absent any SEL-focused content. The sample included 300 students aged 12 to 15, randomly selected from several schools across the UAE. A standardized academic achievement test was administered to both groups before and after the 12-week intervention. The SEL program was based on the widely recognized CASEL framework and included structured activities aimed at developing five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Findings demonstrated statistically significant differences favoring the experimental group, whose mean academic achievement score increased from 74.5 to 81.3, compared to a marginal increase in the control group. ANCOVA analysis confirmed that the observed

gains were attributable to the SEL intervention rather than pre-existing differences. Correlational and regression analyses further supported these findings, revealing that all five CASEL competencies contributed to improved academic outcomes, with self-awareness and responsible decision-making yielding the strongest effects. These results align with prior international research, lending additional credibility to the study in a Gulf educational context.

Based on these outcomes, the study recommends the formal integration of SEL into middle school curricula, supported by regulatory and cultural frameworks that accommodate local values. It also highlights the importance of equipping educators with specialized training programs that enable effective SEL implementation and promote emotionally and cognitively balanced classroom environments. Furthermore, it advocates for the establishment of continuous monitoring and evaluation systems to assess program effectiveness over time and encourages longitudinal research to explore the sustained impact of SEL on learning outcomes across Gulf countries (Khasawneh, 2023).

This study holds significant educational implications, representing one of the few rigorous experimental efforts in the region to document the tangible impact of SEL on academic achievement. It underscores the notion that fostering social and emotional competencies is not a peripheral goal but a strategic necessity for improving educational quality. Accordingly, adopting educational policies that integrate SEL into formal curricula, alongside investing in teacher capacity-building, constitutes a pivotal step toward cultivating holistic learning environments that foster both academic excellence and emotional development, an objective increasingly prioritized in contemporary Gulf education reforms.

In further support of the evidence linking SEL with academic improvement, Khasawneh (2024) conducted a second study, this time in the Saudi Arabian context, to examine *the relationship*

between social and emotional competencies and standardized test scores among elementary school students. The study sought to determine the strength of these associations and investigate the mediating role of socio-economic variables. It was grounded in the hypothesis that SEL competencies are key determinants of academic success and should therefore be embedded in education policy to promote more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Using a year-long quantitative design, the study examined a purposive sample of third- to sixth-grade students across multiple Saudi schools. It employed the SELAS instrument to assess students' social (e.g., positive interaction, social awareness) and emotional (e.g., self-regulation, empathy) competencies through structured classroom activities under the supervision of teachers and research staff. Standardized test scores from the Ministry of Education were used as indicators of academic achievement. The instrument's validity and reliability were verified, and statistical analyses were conducted using Pearson correlation, ANCOVA, and linear regression, accounting for differences by gender, grade level, and socio-economic status.

Results indicated strong and positive correlations between SEL competencies and academic achievement, with correlation coefficients of 0.65 for social and 0.60 for emotional competencies. Regression analyses revealed that both sets of competencies were significant predictors of academic outcomes, with beta coefficients of 0.42 and 0.36, respectively ($p < 0.001$). ANCOVA findings suggested that socio-economic disparities also influenced achievement outcomes. Moreover, the study found significant achievement differences by gender (favoring males) and grade level, emphasizing the need for targeted educational interventions that address subgroup variation.

Based on these results, the study offered several practical recommendations, notably the systematic integration of SEL into

primary school curricula, with sensitivity to individual differences and socio-economic disparities. It also called for targeted support for students from underprivileged backgrounds and advocated for instructional strategies responsive to gender and developmental variations. Regular mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating SEL implementation were also proposed (Khasawneh, 2024).

This study provides important policy-relevant insights for educational reform in the Gulf, offering empirical evidence that SEL directly contributes to improved academic achievement, especially at the foundational education level. It reiterates that fostering supportive learning environments requires more than an emphasis on cognitive development. It necessitates a holistic perspective that integrates academic, emotional, and social dimensions. Accordingly, the findings urge a reconsideration of traditional education policies and the construction of a more inclusive and equitable system that meets the full spectrum of learners' developmental needs.

Given that emotional intelligence (EI) constitutes the conceptual foundation of SEL, Al-Kiyumi and Al-Beloushi (2021) conducted a study aimed at examining ***the relationship between emotional intelligence, intrinsic motivation, and mathematical problem-solving ability among fourth-grade students in Oman***. Specifically, the study investigated whether emotional intelligence served as a mediating variable in predicting intrinsic motivation, reflecting a growing interest in incorporating psychological traits into explanations of academic performance at early educational stages.

The study explored the extent to which intrinsic motivation could predict mathematical problem-solving skills among fourth-grade students and whether emotional intelligence functioned as a mediator in this relationship. Employing a quantitative predictive design, the researchers conducted the study on a cluster-randomized sample of 183 students from six public elementary schools in the Wilayat of Al-Musannah, South Al Batinah Governorate, Oman.

Three primary instruments were used: an emotional intelligence scale based on Goleman's model, an intrinsic motivation scale developed by Lepper et al., and a math problem-solving test designed by the researchers in alignment with Omani curricula and teacher guidelines. All instruments were subjected to validity and reliability testing, and the data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression.

The findings revealed statistically significant but weak and negative correlations between both emotional intelligence and intrinsic motivation on one hand, and mathematical problem-solving on the other. Specifically, the correlation between emotional intelligence and problem-solving was ($r = -0.17$), and between intrinsic motivation and problem-solving ($r = -0.23$). A weak positive correlation was observed between emotional intelligence and intrinsic motivation ($r = 0.25$). Predictive modeling showed that both emotional intelligence and intrinsic motivation were weak predictors of problem-solving ability, with no evidence of a mediating role for emotional intelligence. Together, the independent variables accounted for only 5% of the variance in problem-solving scores.

The researchers attributed the absence of a mediating effect to the developmental stage of the participants, suggesting that children at this age may not yet be capable of effectively leveraging psychological traits and personal characteristics to achieve academic success. Based on these findings, the study recommended re-evaluating the design of instructional activities targeting mathematical competencies in young learners, emphasizing teaching strategies that enhance intrinsic motivation and align with children's developmental needs. It also called for the refinement of assessment tools to better measure emotional intelligence in younger populations, and for further research using diverse samples and methodologies to deepen understanding of the complex interplay between psychological traits and academic performance (Al-Kiyumi & Al-Beloushi, 2021, pp. 171–172).

A comparison between the findings of Al-Kiyumi and Al-Beloushi (2021) and those of Khasawneh (2023, 2024) highlights clear discrepancies that underscore the influence of methodological and developmental differences in understanding the relationship between SEL competencies and academic achievement. While Khasawneh's studies demonstrated strong predictive associations between SEL competencies and student performance in both primary and middle school contexts, Al-Kiyumi and Al-Beloushi found weak and negative correlations among fourth-grade students, and no mediating role for emotional intelligence in the link between motivation and problem-solving.

This divergence may be explained by the age groups targeted in each study. Al-Kiyumi and Al-Beloushi focused on younger learners in the early years of basic education, who may not yet possess mature emotional patterns or the cognitive-emotional integration necessary to apply such traits in solving complex academic tasks. In contrast, Khasawneh's research involved older students whose self-awareness, emotional regulation, and decision-making skills are likely more developed and thus more influential on academic outcomes.

These findings underscore the critical importance of accounting for developmental characteristics when designing SEL interventions and support the need to adapt assessment tools to effectively measure emotional competencies in early childhood. The comparison also reveals a pressing need for further research in Gulf educational contexts to generate robust, context-sensitive evidence on the relationship between SEL competencies and academic performance across different age groups and educational stages.

Supporting Psychological Well-being and Enhancing Life Skills

Beyond its well-documented benefits for academic achievement, SEL has been consistently associated in the literature with

improvements in students' psychological well-being, social behaviors, and life skills. Among the Gulf-based studies examining these broader effects of SEL is a case study conducted by Al-Wattary (2022), which investigated ***the impact of an SEL program on the well-being of female students attending a public middle school in Qatar***. This study sought to address a significant gap in Arab and Gulf educational research, particularly given the scarcity of empirical studies assessing the effects of SEL programs in school settings and the absence of formally implemented SEL curricula in Qatari public schools. The study was also driven by a pressing need to support students' mental health, especially during the critical developmental stage of adolescence.

Employing an embedded evaluative case study design, Al-Wattary utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were gathered through the administration of a psychological well-being scale pre- and post-intervention, while qualitative data were collected via interviews with students, teachers, and school social workers, as well as through classroom observations during the implementation phase. The study sample included 81 students in the experimental group and 82 in the control group, all enrolled in a government middle school. Comparative analysis was conducted to assess program effectiveness.

The findings revealed a significant positive impact of the SEL program on the psychological well-being of students in the experimental group relative to those in the control group. Qualitative data supported these findings, indicating improvements in emotional regulation, relationship-building, motivation, self-awareness, and goal-setting among the participants. Teachers and social workers reported enhanced classroom environments, reduced negative behaviors, and improved peer relationships as outcomes of the intervention.

The study recommended the development of SEL programs that are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive, in order to meet students' diverse needs effectively. Additionally, it emphasized the importance of establishing ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems for SEL initiatives within Qatari schools, to build a robust evidence base for effective practices and identify areas requiring improvement. The study also called for further evaluative research to assess the impact of SEL programs on students' academic outcomes and mental health, thereby addressing the current empirical deficit in this domain (Al-Wattary, 2022, p. 244).

In the Kuwaiti context, Al-Ajmi and Al-Hamlan (2021) explored ***the predictive roles of emotional regulation and academic self-efficacy in determining psychological well-being among high school students in the Ahmadi Governorate***. The study was situated within the broader discussion of adolescent psychological and social transitions and their implications for academic and personal adaptation. Emotional regulation and self-efficacy were positioned as central constructs within the SEL framework, with a significant influence on psychological well-being and, by extension, academic success. The ability to manage emotional responses enables students to navigate stress and complex school-related challenges with resilience and composure, while self-efficacy contributes to a positive self-concept and intrinsic motivation. Together, they support perseverance and academic engagement.

Using a descriptive-analytical methodology, the study examined the relationships between key variables and differences by gender and academic track (scientific vs. literary). The sample comprised 350 students enrolled in government secondary schools, distributed across both academic tracks. The researchers utilized three validated and reliable instruments: an adolescent emotional regulation scale, an academic self-efficacy scale, and a psychological well-being scale.

The findings revealed statistically significant positive correlations between emotional regulation and academic self-efficacy on the one hand, and psychological well-being on the other. Students with higher emotional regulation skills and greater academic self-efficacy reported better psychological well-being. Notably, female students scored higher than males on all three variables. Moreover, students in the scientific track outperformed those in the literary track. One-way ANOVA analyses confirmed that gender, academic track, emotional regulation, and academic self-efficacy were all significant predictors of psychological well-being.

Based on these results, the study recommended the development of counseling and training programs in secondary schools that target the enhancement of emotional regulation and academic self-efficacy, as these competencies are essential for supporting students' mental health and overall well-being within educational settings. It also underscored the importance of empowering school counselors to identify students with deficiencies in these areas and provide appropriate support. Furthermore, it called for tailored interventions specifically targeting students in the literary track to strengthen their sense of competence and well-being (Al-Ajmi & Al-Hamlan, 2021, pp. 118–119). The study highlights the promise of SEL, particularly the competencies of emotional regulation and self-efficacy, as a strategic pathway to fostering psychological resilience and improving students' ability to adapt constructively to the demands of school life.

In discussing the psychological dimensions of education, it is important to highlight the adverse effects of traditional educational systems that prioritize high-stakes testing. Many students experience elevated levels of stress and psychological pressure under such performance-driven environments, which negatively impact their well-being and quality of life both within and beyond the school setting. These systems tend to institutionalize test anxiety as an inherent feature of the educational experience, especially among

middle-grade students and girls, thus posing a threat to learners' mental health and impeding their capacity for effective learning. In this context, SEL programs emerge as promising educational approaches to mitigate such pressures and strengthen students' psychological and social resilience, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and supporting their academic trajectories.

A notable example of this approach is the study conducted by Monroe et al. (2023), which investigates ***the relationship between test anxiety and well-being indicators among students in public schools in the United Arab Emirates***. The study provides empirical evidence on the urgent need for systematic interventions to promote students' social and emotional competencies. Through an analysis of contextual factors linked to SEL skills in public schools, the study explores how these factors relate to student behavior and academic performance.

This study responds to a clearly identified demand among educational policymakers in the UAE to enhance students' SEL skills, amid a shortage of empirical data on the current status and impact of these competencies within the Emirati context. Its significance lies in the scarcity of similar research in the region and its focus on the relationship between school-related stress caused by testing pressures, personal well-being, and academic achievement within a culturally and socially diverse educational environment.

The researchers employed a contextual factor questionnaire adapted from the OECD's framework on social and emotional skills, modified to reflect local cultural specificities. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 1,835 students in grades 5 to 12 across public schools in different Emirates, with a response rate of 70.73%. It included closed-ended questions measuring 25 contextual factors across six domains: academic achievement, active civic engagement, social connectedness, personal well-being, quality of life, and behavior.

Contextual stress-related factors were categorized as “test anxiety” and “educational expectations,” while general well-being was represented by “life satisfaction” and “personal well-being.” The findings revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between test anxiety and both life satisfaction and personal well-being—particularly among female students and those in middle school grades (7 to 10). However, no significant relationship was found between students’ educational expectations and well-being indicators. This suggests that higher levels of test anxiety are associated with lower general well-being, whereas educational aspirations do not appear to directly affect students’ emotional states or life satisfaction.

Regarding academic achievement, the results indicated that students with higher educational expectations (e.g., aspirations for university or post-graduate degrees) performed better academically. While a negative correlation was observed between test anxiety and academic achievement, this relationship was relatively weak and only present in the aggregate sample, not across specific grade levels. Furthermore, the study found no statistically significant relationship between students’ overall well-being and their academic performance, suggesting that factors such as life satisfaction do not directly influence academic outcomes.

Based on these findings, the study recommends the structured integration of SEL programs in UAE public schools, grounded in scientific evidence and tailored to the local context. It also calls for targeted teacher training to build educators’ capacity to understand and implement SEL in classroom practices, emphasizing their role in fostering stress-coping skills, self-efficacy, and cognitive curiosity among students. The authors stress that initial assessment of students’ current SEL competencies, based on recognized standards, is essential for identifying skill gaps and guiding the development of future educational programs (Monroe et al., 2023).

In summary, the study's results confirm that well-designed SEL programs can help alleviate school-related stress, improve students' psychological well-being, enhance their academic performance, and increase their overall life satisfaction. The findings suggest that such programs may have the greatest impact on middle school students, who appear most vulnerable to the psychological and contextual factors associated with education. This research constitutes an important step toward a deeper understanding of the psychological and academic determinants of student success in Gulf education systems.

Within the Emirati context, another study conducted by Jules et al. (2023) aimed to explore ***the role of Positive Education in supporting students' psychological well-being in the United Arab Emirates during the COVID-19 pandemic***. This study falls within a broader framework of examining how strategies derived from positive psychology can be applied in educational settings to enhance students' psychological resilience and adaptability in times of crisis. Its significance lies in its focus on how Emirati schools, particularly private institutions, responded to the educational challenges posed by the pandemic, offering initial insights into the potential of Positive Education programs in fostering supportive learning environments.

It is important to note that Positive Education constitutes a broader pedagogical framework, within which Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) represents a core component. In practice, SEL may be viewed as an operational tool for implementing Positive Education strategies. Schools adopting a Positive Education approach often integrate SEL programs to promote personal competencies such as empathy, psychological resilience, a sense of belonging, self-awareness, constructive relationships, responsible decision-making, and other essential life skills.

The study employed a qualitative methodology utilizing multiple data collection tools, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. It was conducted in the fall of 2021 in two private schools—one located in Ras Al Khaimah and the other in Abu Dhabi. Additionally, the researchers interviewed educational leaders in Dubai, a key hub for Positive Education implementation. Thematic analysis was used to identify factors influencing student well-being during the pandemic, the role of Positive Education, and the challenges associated with its implementation under remote learning conditions.

Findings revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted students' mental and social well-being. Participants reported heightened concerns about social isolation, excessive screen time, and a disconnection from natural social interactions. Both teachers and students observed declines in communication skills and academic engagement. Students also expressed a sense of heightened pressure to succeed in an emotionally unstable learning environment, reinforcing the need for interventions that support mental well-being.

Conversely, the study highlighted that Positive Education contributed to enhancing some students' capacity to cope with psychological and academic challenges during the pandemic. Teachers emphasized the value of principles such as mindfulness, resilience, and positive relationships as essential elements in supporting students' mental health. The data also indicated that the benefits of Positive Education were most pronounced when implemented as a whole-school approach involving teachers, administrators, and families, rather than as a standalone subject or supplementary activity.

However, the study acknowledged several challenges in implementing Positive Education, particularly due to the abrupt transition to online learning. This shift impeded effective

communication and limited opportunities for interactive activities. Some participants expressed concern that prolonged school closures might reverse the gains made through Positive Education initiatives, especially at early educational stages that rely heavily on direct social-emotional interaction.

The study concluded with several recommendations, including the need for a holistic Positive Education strategy that integrates families, educators, and school leadership, and is responsive to the local cultural context in program design. It also called for the development of a supportive organizational infrastructure to facilitate implementation through adequate resource allocation, ongoing teacher training, and quality assurance mechanisms, especially in public schools with limited resources. Finally, the authors stressed the importance of fostering students' psychological resilience as a key component of preparedness for future crises, reinforcing the role of schools as sources of psychological and social support (Jules et al., 2023, pp. 187–189).

Another essential competency that enables learners to adapt to a rapidly changing world is creativity—a skill that has become a fundamental determinant of success in both academic and professional spheres. Within this context, SEL emerges as a comprehensive pedagogical approach that contributes to the development of a well-rounded personality, encompassing traits such as self-confidence, responsibility, and resilience in the face of challenges. Contemporary educational literature highlights a strong association between social and emotional competencies and creative thinking abilities, suggesting that these skills empower learners to express ideas freely, make novel decisions, and generate innovative solutions.

Building on this premise, the study by Al-Yamani (2024) aimed to explore ***the relationship between SEL competencies and creative self-efficacy among secondary school female students in Riyadh,***

Saudi Arabia. The study sought to provide deeper insight into how SEL skills may influence learners' creative capacities. Its significance lies in its focus on the intersection between the emotional-social dimensions of student identity and their ability to express creativity and implement innovative ideas, an area with direct implications for improving educational practices and fostering creativity-enhancing school environments.

The researcher employed a descriptive correlational and comparative design, applying the study to a sample of 181 female students from secondary schools in Riyadh. Two validated and Arabic-adapted instruments were used to measure the primary variables: SEL competencies and creative self-efficacy. Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics, correlation coefficients, and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the reliability and validity of the instruments thoroughly verified.

The findings revealed that both SEL competencies and creative self-efficacy were high among the study participants. Moreover, a statistically significant and positive correlation was found between the dimensions of SEL competencies and creative self-efficacy. The researcher interpreted this relationship by noting that SEL skills such as responsibility, respect for others, communication, relationship-building, flexibility, decision-making, and goal-setting enhance students' confidence in their ability to think creatively and respond to challenges with flexibility and innovation. These competencies positively influence students' beliefs in their capacity to generate novel and effective solutions.

The study concluded with several pedagogical recommendations. Most importantly, encouraging teachers to adopt SEL-based instructional strategies within classrooms and raise their awareness of the role these competencies play in fostering students' creative thinking. It also called for the organization of teacher training programs focused on SEL-oriented instructional approaches and

advocated for the integration of SEL competencies into curricula and learning materials. Such integration, the study argued, would support the development of well-rounded learners and strengthen their creative potential across various age groups (Al-Yamani, 2024, p. 778).

In light of the foregoing review, recent studies from the Gulf region have revealed a wide range of benefits associated with SEL, extending beyond academic achievement to encompass enhancements in students' psychological and social well-being, as well as their life skills. For example, the study by Al-Wattary (2022) in Qatar demonstrated the positive impact of a targeted SEL program on adolescent girls. The intervention contributed to improved emotional regulation, increased self-awareness, enhanced motivation, and stronger positive relationships. The program also fostered a more supportive classroom environment and reduced negative behaviors, thereby underscoring the critical role such programs play in promoting mental health and social interaction within educational settings.

Similarly, the study by Al-Ajmi and Al-Hamlan (2021) in Kuwait emphasized the significance of emotional regulation and academic self-efficacy, two key components of SEL, in predicting students' psychological well-being. The findings indicated that students with stronger emotional regulation and greater confidence in their academic abilities reported higher levels of well-being, particularly among female students and those in scientific academic tracks. This association reinforces the importance of embedding SEL elements into curricula and counseling programs as effective tools for fostering students' psychological and social adaptation.

Additional studies conducted in the UAE further support this perspective. Monroe et al. (2023) highlighted the influence of contextual factors related to SEL skills on students' behavior and well-being, revealing a significant negative correlation between test

anxiety and well-being indicators. Similarly, Jules et al. (2023) found that the implementation of Positive Education, which integrates SEL principles, helped students adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, enhancing their psychological resilience and fostering positive relationships. Likewise, the study by Al-Yamani (2024) demonstrated a positive correlation between the development of SEL competencies and creative self-efficacy, indicating that SEL supports mental health and contributes to holistic personal development and the cultivation of student creativity.

Taken together, the findings of these recent Gulf-based studies suggest that SEL represents a comprehensive educational approach that enhances students' emotional, social, and life competencies while also improving their academic outcomes. The evidence shows that fostering skills such as emotional regulation, self-awareness, relationship-building, and self-efficacy has a direct and positive impact on students' well-being and their capacity to navigate academic and life challenges, particularly during critical developmental stages such as middle and high school. These studies also highlight a strong link between SEL competencies and creative thinking skills, emphasizing the integral role these competencies play in shaping confident, well-adjusted, and innovative learners.

These results affirm the urgent need to integrate SEL programs into educational policies and practices across Gulf countries, while considering local cultural and educational contexts. Moreover, they call for adequate training and support for teachers to ensure the creation of school environments that holistically foster students' cognitive, emotional, and social growth.

The Current State of SEL in the Gulf States

The field of education is undergoing a rapid transformation in its focus on the concepts and practices of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), driven by a growing body of international research demonstrating its positive impact on students' holistic development, personal and academic. This global momentum has gradually extended to the Gulf States, prompted by increasing awareness of the importance of cultivating non-cognitive skills among students. Skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, positive relationships, and responsible decision-making are widely recognized as essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary life. However, translating this general awareness into systematic and sustained implementation remains a challenge within Gulf education systems, largely due to structural and cultural barriers that necessitate deeper understanding of field-level realities and careful examination of implementation experiences.

This section of the report presents a comprehensive analytical overview of the current state of SEL in the Gulf region, drawing upon a selection of recent studies conducted within local educational contexts. Some of these studies examine the extent to which students possess SEL competencies especially in the aftermath of the psychological and educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and reveal significant variation in SEL development among learners, highlighting the need for more structured educational interventions. Other studies focus on teachers' own SEL capacities, exploring how these competencies are reflected in their classroom practices, as well as their perceptions of SEL and their awareness of its role in fostering positive school climates and improving learning outcomes.

By offering a critical review of relevant Gulf-based literature, this section provides an initial knowledge base for understanding the position of SEL within regional educational discourse. At the same

time, it aims to stimulate further research and practice-oriented efforts to strengthen this field through additional empirical studies, policy initiatives, and programmatic innovations. Ultimately, such efforts can contribute to the development of more inclusive and humane education systems in the Gulf that are capable of nurturing generations of learners who are self-aware, empathetic, and equipped to make responsible decisions in an increasingly complex and dynamic world.

Students' Social and Emotional Competencies

An essential dimension in assessing the current state of SEL in Gulf countries lies in evaluating the extent to which students possess core SEL competencies—particularly in the post-pandemic recovery phase. The significance of this focus stems from the well-documented link between SEL competencies and students' psychological well-being and academic achievement. Accurately measuring and analyzing these competencies is thus a critical step toward designing targeted educational interventions and psychosocial support programs that address learners' needs within the specific cultural and educational contexts of the Gulf.

However, a review of Gulf-based research reveals a notable scarcity of empirical studies addressing this domain, despite its clear relevance. This highlights an urgent need to expand research efforts to better understand students' SEL competency levels across the region. Such studies can generate valuable data that inform policy development and contribute to building more supportive school environments that foster students' holistic development.

One of the few studies to address this issue is that of Al-Matari et al. (2023), which investigated ***Students' Possession of SEL Competencies in the Second Cycle Schools of Basic Education in the Sultanate of Oman*** following the psychological and educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of this study lies in its aim to assess the availability of these essential skills among students, particularly in the wake of the crisis, and to

inform the design of interventions that support mental health and academic outcomes.

The study adopted the OECD's theoretical framework, which classifies SEL competencies into five core domains: task performance, emotional regulation, engaging with others, collaboration, and open-mindedness. A validated OECD questionnaire containing 28 items distributed across these domains was used, based on a five-point Likert scale, with reliability and validity confirmed through standard psychometric procedures.

The researchers employed a descriptive methodology, surveying a sample of 936 ninth-grade students from three Omani governorates (North Sharqiyah, North Al Batinah, and South Al Batinah), selected using simple random sampling. Data were analyzed using means, standard deviations, and t-tests to assess statistical differences by gender and age.

Results indicated that students exhibited a relatively high level of SEL competencies, with an overall mean score of 3.70 out of 5, reflecting a 74% competency rate. The highest-rated domains were task performance and open-mindedness (82%), followed by emotional regulation (73.2%), collaboration (72.4%), and finally, engaging with others (60.3%). Statistically significant gender differences were found ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), with girls outperforming boys in overall scores and in open-mindedness, attributed to their greater interest in reading and inquiry, while boys outperformed girls in emotional regulation, possibly due to their more efficient use of regulation strategies. No significant differences were observed in task performance or collaboration, likely due to uniform curricular expectations, and no differences emerged based on age.

Overall, the findings suggest that Omani students possess a solid foundation in SEL competencies, indicative of a supportive school environment. The study recommended formally integrating SEL into curricula and classroom activities, encouraging teachers to adopt instructional methods that promote SEL, and organizing workshops

and awareness programs for all educational stakeholders, including media and community organizations. The study also called for further research comparing SEL interventions to determine their relative effectiveness in improving student competencies (Al-Matari et al., 2023, p. 260).

In the Qatari context, a more recent study by Elnashar (2024) sought to explore ***Teachers' Assessment and Perceptions of the Social and Emotional Competencies of Qatar Primary School Students***. The study was based on the premise that SEL competencies directly influence students' academic and social performance, and that systematically integrating SEL into school systems can equip learners with the adaptive skills needed to meet everyday challenges.

This study addressed a clear gap in the Qatari literature, as the public school system does not formally incorporate SEL into its curriculum, whereas some International Baccalaureate (IB) schools, such as Qatar Academies (QA), implement SEL components like the Second Step program on an informal and inconsistent basis. The study aimed to assess student competencies across public and IB schools and to determine whether such programs yield measurable differences in SEL outcomes, as well as to capture teachers' conceptual understanding of SEL.

A mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected using the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment-Mini (DESSA-Mini), completed by teachers for a sample of 281 students. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers to provide qualitative insights into the findings. Schools were selected based on type (public vs. QA) to allow for comparative analysis of SEL program implementation.

The results revealed no statistically significant differences in student SEL competencies between schools implementing classroom-based SEL programs (e.g., QA) and public schools lacking such programs. The study also found that teachers' assessments

of student competencies were shaped by factors such as cultural background, gender-based behavioral expectations, and family-school engagement. These findings suggest limitations in relying solely on teacher evaluations for assessing student SEL.

The study concluded that the mere introduction of classroom-based SEL programs is insufficient to produce measurable outcomes. It advocated for the adoption of a Transformative SEL (T-SEL) model, which involves all stakeholders, teachers, families, and communities, in creating a more inclusive and sustainable learning environment that addresses cultural and social disparities affecting student development in Qatar.

Elnashar recommended developing a comprehensive national policy for implementing T-SEL across the education system, including structured teacher training, stronger family engagement, and contextual adaptation of programs. The study also called for further research on the academic and social effects of comprehensive T-SEL implementation in Qatar and the broader Arab region (Elnashar, 2024).

Taken together, the findings of Al-Matari et al. (2023) and Elnashar (2024) offer complementary analytical perspectives on the current state of SEL competencies among students in the Gulf region. The Omani study showed relatively high SEL levels among students that reflected, in part, supportive educational policies and post-pandemic responsiveness to psychosocial needs. Nonetheless, the lower scores in “engaging with others” indicate a need for structured programs to strengthen social interaction. In contrast, Elnashar’s study presented a more cautious view of SEL in Qatar, where the absence of significant differences between schools with and without SEL programs suggested that implementation without systemic integration and family-community involvement may fail to yield tangible results. The study also highlighted the limitations of relying solely on teacher-based assessments, advocating for more robust, multi-source evaluation tools.

Together, these studies underscore the importance of viewing SEL competencies as part of a broader educational ecosystem that requires integrated action across policy, curriculum, assessment, teacher training, and family and community engagement. They also reinforce the urgent need for more comprehensive, methodologically sound research in Gulf contexts which are grounded in validated assessment models to inform responsive educational policies and support students' holistic development in the evolving post-pandemic landscape.

Teachers' Readiness to Foster Students' Social and Emotional Competencies

Another key dimension in assessing the state of SEL in Gulf countries is the extent to which teachers themselves possess SEL competencies and how these are reflected in their instructional practices. This aspect is considered a foundational entry point for understanding the educational environments that enable the development of students' social and emotional capacities. Teachers who exhibit strong SEL competencies are more capable of fostering these qualities in students through their teaching methods, classroom interactions, and the cultivation of supportive and positive learning climates. Accordingly, examining teachers' SEL readiness is a critical step in evaluating the capacity of Gulf education systems to effectively adopt SEL-informed policies and practices.

Among the studies focusing on this issue is a research project by Al-Matari et al. (2022), which aimed to assess ***the degree to which lower secondary school teachers in Oman possess SEL competencies***, considering the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic that underscored the need to support students' emotional and social well-being. The study was grounded in the CASEL framework, which identifies five core areas of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The study's significance lies in its focus on a crucial yet underexplored dimension of the educational process: the psychological and social well-being of teachers and their capacity to support students in developing emotional regulation, self-understanding, and interpersonal relationships in the aftermath of remote learning and the psychosocial shifts triggered by the pandemic. The study is particularly relevant given its focus on the middle school level, a sensitive educational stage with substantial influence on students' emotional and social development.

Employing a descriptive methodology, the researchers used a questionnaire based on CASEL-aligned indicators and standards provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The instrument consisted of 43 items distributed across the five SEL domains. Its validity was established through expert review, and its reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a high value of 0.961.

The study sample included 380 teachers selected randomly from the Omani governorates of North Sharqiyah, North and South Al Batinah, and Dhofar, with variation across gender and years of experience. Data collection was conducted manually and electronically, and the responses were analyzed using SPSS. Statistical analyses included means, standard deviations, percentages, rank ordering, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA.

Results revealed that teachers' overall SEL competency levels were high, with a mean score of 2.95 out of 4 (equivalent to 74%). The most highly developed domains were social awareness (75%), relationship skills (75%), and self-awareness (75%), followed by responsible decision-making (73%). The lowest-rated domain was self-management (71%). No statistically significant differences were found based on gender, except for social awareness, where female teachers scored higher. No significant differences were observed based on years of teaching experience.

Based on these findings, the study recommended that the Ministry of Education organize training programs and workshops to enhance teachers' understanding and application of SEL competencies in school settings. The researchers also suggested that future studies investigate the SEL competencies of parents and school administrators to promote a more comprehensive educational climate that supports both academic learning and students' socio-emotional development (Al-Matari et al., 2022, p. 114).

A parallel study conducted in Saudi Arabia by Al-Salem (2021) examined *the degree to which secondary social studies teachers possess SEL competencies* and how these are reflected in their classroom practices. The study was contextualized within contemporary educational approaches that emphasize integrating SEL into teaching to enhance instructional effectiveness and improve student learning outcomes. The aim was to generate quantitative data that could inform professional development strategies for teachers. To this end, a 20-item questionnaire was developed to measure classroom practices linked to the five core SEL competencies.

Using a descriptive survey design, the study targeted all social studies teachers (N = 45) in public secondary schools in Al-Kharj during the first semester of the 1442 AH academic year. Validity and reliability of the instrument were confirmed, and it was designed to reflect teaching practices aligned with established SEL frameworks. Statistical analysis focused on response means to determine competency levels across the five SEL dimensions.

Findings indicated that teachers' overall SEL competency levels were moderate, with a mean score of 42.3. The highest scores were observed in practices related to relationship skills and social awareness, while practices related to self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-management were rated as moderate. These results suggest a need for targeted support in these latter areas through teacher preparation and training programs.

The study recommended utilizing the SEL competency list developed within the research as a foundation for teacher training, particularly emphasizing competencies rated at moderate levels. Additionally, the study stressed the importance of embedding SEL dimensions in curriculum planning and professional development frameworks to improve classroom practices, foster positive emotional and social climates, and ultimately enhance secondary students' academic and personal adjustment (Al-Salem, 2021).

Another study in Saudi Arabia by Al-Askar (2024) aimed to ***assess the level of knowledge and practical skills in SEL among teachers of learning difficulty programs across all educational levels in public schools***. The importance of this study lies in its focus on a group of educators who work with students requiring specialized support, an area where SEL competencies are particularly critical in enhancing the quality of instruction and emotional care provided to learners with special needs.

The study employed a descriptive survey methodology and utilized a purpose-designed questionnaire that was statistically validated for reliability and construct validity. The instrument was administered to a randomly selected sample of 350 teachers from various regions across Saudi Arabia. It included subscales measuring theoretical knowledge of SEL, practical application skills for working with students with learning difficulties, and teachers' perceived needs for professional development in this area.

Findings revealed that teachers had a generally low level of theoretical knowledge in SEL and expressed a high demand for acquiring deeper understanding in the field. Their practical skills for implementing SEL in the classroom were also found to be limited, despite a strong sense of urgency to use these skills to support students with learning difficulties. This suggests that while teachers recognize the importance of SEL, they do not feel adequately prepared to apply it effectively in practice.

No statistically significant gender differences were observed in the results, suggesting that male and female teachers face similar challenges in this area. However, significant differences emerged in favor of teachers with bachelor's degrees, over 20 years of experience, and those teaching at the intermediate level—indicating that qualifications and experience play a role in facilitating SEL understanding and application.

The study also highlighted a notable lack of professional training opportunities in SEL for teachers, which likely contributes to the observed deficits in knowledge and skills. This scarcity of training programs is identified as a major barrier to the wider adoption of SEL practices in Saudi public education.

The study recommended the expansion of professional training programs related to SEL and the integration of SEL content into teacher preparation curricula for those working with students with learning difficulties. It also encouraged further research to explore SEL competencies across diverse educational settings within the Kingdom (Al-Askar, 2024).

An additional Saudi-based study by Al-Tamimi (2021) ***proposed a training program based on SEL principles, targeting the development of safe learning environments among female secondary school teachers***. The study was prompted by concerns over the lack of perceived safety among female students, highlighting the need to professionally equip teachers to offer psychological and emotional support through evidence-based practices.

The relevance of this study is underscored by the growing global and national focus on applying SEL within school environments, especially under the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes improving the learning environment and enhancing the professional competence of educators. The study also addresses a critical gap between teachers' practical needs and conventional training programs that often neglect the emotional and social dimensions of education.

Using a descriptive-analytical design, the study employed a questionnaire based on an extensive review of literature concerning safe learning environments and SEL principles. The instrument included five main domains subdivided into 22 specific competencies. Validity and reliability were confirmed through expert review and statistical testing. The study sample consisted of 460 secondary school female teachers in Riyadh, selected using a simple random sampling method. Data were collected during the second semester of the AH1439/1440 academic year and analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques.

Results indicated that teachers expressed a high level of need for training across all five domains: emotional and social motivation, cognitive and self-regulation, fostering a positive social climate, delivering constructive feedback, and classroom behavior management. These findings point to a clear gap between current instructional practices and the requirements for establishing emotionally safe classroom environments.

Based on the results, the study recommended the design and implementation of a comprehensive training program for secondary school teachers, tailored to systematically address these needs. It also called for the integration of SEL principles into teacher professional development initiatives and the provision of institutional support to ensure the broad application of SEL strategies aimed at enhancing the educational environment and student well-being (Al-Tamimi, 2021).

A synthesis of the findings from Gulf studies examining teachers' SEL competencies—namely those by Al-Salem (2021), Al-Tamimi (2021), Al-Askar (2024), and Al-Matari et al. (2022)—reveals several critical insights relevant to educational policy in the Gulf region.

First, these studies indicate that teachers' SEL competencies vary widely in scope and depth. While Al-Matari et al. (2022) reported high levels of SEL competency among lower secondary teachers in Oman, Al-Salem (2021) found moderate levels among

Saudi secondary social studies teachers. In contrast, Al-Askar (2024) documented significant deficits in knowledge and skills among special education teachers in Saudi Arabia, despite a strong recognition of the importance of SEL. Al-Tamimi (2021) complemented these findings by identifying major training needs among secondary school female teachers, particularly in creating emotionally safe learning environments.

Second, a consistent theme across studies is that the most developed SEL competencies among teachers are social awareness and relationship skills, while competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making remain underdeveloped. This imbalance highlights the need for additional holistic and balanced professional development programs that address all five SEL domains (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making).

Third, Al-Tamimi's (2021) study specifically underscores the critical link between SEL and safe learning environments that are essential for student well-being and learning quality. Developing such environments requires cognitive understanding and practical and behavioral competencies on the part of educators.

Fourth, these studies collectively point to a systemic gap in teacher preparation and in-service training programs. Many teachers report not having received any formal training in SEL, despite understanding its relevance to student support and instructional quality. This gap was echoed in the findings of Al-Salem (2021), Al-Askar (2024), and Al-Tamimi (2021), reinforcing the need for structured, specialized, and context-sensitive training initiatives aligned with teacher needs by level, specialization, and school context.

In sum, enhancing teachers' SEL competencies is foundational for the success of any SEL strategy adopted by Gulf countries. This requires long-term investment in professional development, integration of SEL into national teacher competency frameworks,

the development of reliable assessment tools, and the provision of institutional and policy support to ensure sustainable implementation. Such efforts are crucial for cultivating more inclusive and emotionally supportive school environments for both students and educators.

Teachers' Awareness and Attitudes Toward SEL

One of the key dimensions explored in Gulf-based studies on the state of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) involves investigating teachers' perceptions and levels of awareness regarding the importance of SEL and their pedagogical roles in implementing it within the classroom. This aspect is particularly significant, as the literature consistently emphasizes that teachers' understanding of SEL concepts, and their belief in SEL's potential to foster students' holistic development constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for adopting instructional practices that nurture these competencies. Teachers who recognize the educational value of SEL are more likely to integrate its components into their teaching, even in disciplines traditionally viewed as less emotionally oriented, such as the natural sciences.

Among the studies that addressed this topic is the research by Shahat et al. (2022), which examined ***science teachers' perceptions of SEL in Oman*** and investigated whether these perceptions varied according to gender, years of teaching experience, or the educational level taught. The significance of the study lies in its focus on an under-researched area and the need to gain deeper insights into how teachers conceptualize their role in fostering students' SEL competencies, especially in scientific subjects that are often seen as unrelated to social and emotional dimensions.

The study employed a quantitative descriptive design and developed a perception scale consisting of 35 items across four domains, measured on a five-point Likert scale. Following expert review from Sultan Qaboos University and the Omani Ministry of Education, the instrument was revised and restructured into five key

domains that the researchers deemed more suitable for capturing teachers' perceptions of SEL within the Omani context: the concept of SEL; SEL skills; values and behaviors associated with SEL; SEL's role in enhancing the learning process; and the positioning of SEL within the school environment.

The study sample included 1,034 male and female teachers who taught integrated science or specific science subjects (biology, chemistry, physics) in grades 1 through 12. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, experience, and teaching level, from schools in five educational districts in Oman. Data were collected electronically under the supervision of science supervisors in the selected schools.

The findings revealed that Omani science teachers generally held negative perceptions of SEL across most dimensions, particularly regarding the role of SEL in enhancing learning and the overall conceptual understanding of SEL. Some variations were observed based on gender and teaching level: male teachers exhibited more positive perceptions than female teachers, while years of experience did not significantly influence perceptions. Teachers of middle and secondary school students (grades 5–12) demonstrated greater SEL awareness than their primary-level counterparts—possibly reflecting the developmental needs of older students and the alignment of higher-level science curricula with inquiry and problem-solving skills.

The study attributed the generally negative perceptions to several factors: teachers' predominant focus on content knowledge at the expense of emotional considerations; the lack of specialized training in SEL; and the absence of clearly articulated SEL components in science curricula. Moreover, teachers often lacked confidence in SEL's ability to improve student outcomes or provide long-term support and tended to view the responsibility for fostering SEL as belonging to families or humanities teachers rather than science educators.

Based on these findings, the researchers recommended the explicit integration of SEL skills into science curricula, the provision of targeted professional development on how to embed SEL into science instruction, and the creation of school-wide activities that promote supportive SEL environments. They also called for future studies employing qualitative tools and in-depth analysis of teaching practices and implementation challenges. Additionally, the authors proposed the broader application of their instrument in studies across other Arab countries to gain comparative insights into SEL perceptions in diverse educational settings (Shahat et al., 2022, p. 531).

In a related study, Kaifi (2023) explored ***Saudi Arabian preschool teachers' perspectives of the need for social emotional learning curriculum***. This study emerged from the absence of an official SEL curriculum in Saudi Arabia, despite the recognized importance of early SEL development for shaping children's personalities and fostering their emotional and social competencies, an aim that aligns closely with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

Kaifi emphasized the study's relevance by noting that deficits in SEL skills among young children could lead to long-term behavioral and educational challenges, such as poor school adjustment, difficulties in forming social relationships, and low academic achievement. She argued that the lack of clearly defined SEL competencies in the Saudi Early Learning Standards (SAELS) has marginalized this domain in favor of academic skills such as reading and writing.

The study adopted a phenomenological qualitative approach, using individual interviews and focus groups as data collection methods. It was theoretically grounded in Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Bandura's social learning theory, both of which explain how behavior and competencies emerge from the interaction between psychological, social, and environmental factors. The sample consisted of 12 preschool teachers from public schools in Saudi Arabia, selected purposively based on criteria related to teaching experience and geographical distribution. Data

were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and concerns across participant responses.

The findings identified several key themes, including: teachers' recognition of the importance of teaching SEL in early childhood; the urgent need for a formal curriculum to guide SEL instruction; the necessity of ongoing teacher training to improve SEL understanding and implementation; and the perception among many teachers that SEL is not a standalone discipline, but an informal, incidental part of daily classroom activities. Teachers also identified a set of core SEL competencies, including social awareness, self-regulation, responsible decision-making, and building positive relationships.

Kaifi recommended the development of a clear and structured SEL curriculum for early childhood education in Saudi Arabia, aligned with the national educational goals for this stage. She also advocated for targeted teacher training to support the effective implementation of such a curriculum and emphasized the need to engage families and schools in supporting SEL initiatives. Finally, the study called for the provision of appropriate resources and tools to monitor children's development in SEL competencies, thereby contributing to broader improvements in the quality of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia (Kaifi, 2023).

In a qualitative study titled ***“Teachers’ Perceptions and Experiences of Social and Emotional Learning in a Secondary School in Qatar”*** (Al-Wattary, 2021), the researcher explored teachers' understanding of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and their perspectives on the impact of an intervention program implemented in a Qatari secondary school. The significance of this study lies in the scarcity of empirical research addressing SEL in Qatar, despite the growing governmental interest in fostering students' personal and social skills as part of the country's broader vision for human development.

The study adopted a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with ten teachers from a public girls'

secondary school in Qatar. Participants came from diverse national and disciplinary backgrounds, and interviews were conducted in Arabic in a neutral and quiet setting. The participating teachers were not involved in implementing the SEL program themselves; rather, they were selected to assess its perceived impact on students, comparing the outcomes for students who participated in the intervention group with those who did not (control group).

Findings were analyzed across three major themes: teachers' knowledge of SEL, their perceptions of its importance, and their views on the program's impact. Results indicated that most teachers had limited prior experience with SEL programs and only a superficial understanding of the concept. Nonetheless, they expressed strong support for such initiatives, particularly for adolescent students. Teachers highlighted the relevance of SEL in addressing the psychological and behavioral challenges stemming from rapid social and technological change and emphasized the need for culturally and religiously appropriate programs within the Qatari context.

Teachers observed improvements in three core areas: (1) enhanced respect and positive interactions between students and teachers; (2) improved peer relationships and reduced incidents of aggressive or bullying behaviors; and (3) increased classroom engagement, particularly among previously shy or disengaged students. Some teachers also reported indirect positive effects on non-participating students, suggesting a spillover impact of the program.

Despite these observed benefits, some teachers felt that the program's short duration limited its potential to yield deeper or more sustainable behavioral change. They also noted the importance of involving teachers directly in the implementation process to improve effectiveness and align the program with broader school systems. Accordingly, the study recommended expanding SEL programs across Qatari schools while ensuring sensitivity to cultural and religious norms. It also called for future research with larger samples and longer interventions, as well as teacher involvement in

program design and implementation to enhance the sustainability and accuracy of results (Al-Wattary, 2021).

Building on the findings from the aforementioned studies by Al-Wattary (2021), Kaifi (2023), and Shahat et al. (2022), a number of critical insights can be drawn regarding teachers' perceptions of and attitudes toward SEL across the Gulf region. These insights reveal a complex and evolving landscape that requires coordinated interventions at both the policy and practice levels.

First, the study by Shahat et al. (2022) in Oman revealed that science teachers generally held negative perceptions of SEL, especially in terms of their understanding of the concept and its role in supporting the learning process. The authors attributed this limited perspective to the absence of SEL training, inadequate integration of emotional skills into science curricula, and the persistence of a traditional view that places responsibility for SEL outside the domain of scientific instruction. These findings underscore the need to enhance pre-service teacher education and in-service training, particularly for STEM educators, to foster awareness of SEL as an integral part of effective pedagogy.

Second, Kaifi's (2023) study in Saudi Arabia indicated that while preschool teachers recognized the importance of SEL in shaping children's character and behavior, they did not view it as part of an official curriculum. Instead, SEL was approached informally through unstructured classroom activities. The lack of a guiding framework, alongside insufficient training and institutional support reflects a disjunction between teachers' beliefs in the value of SEL and their capacity to implement it effectively. This highlights the urgent need to embed SEL into national curriculum standards for early childhood education.

Third, the case study by Al-Wattary (2021) in Qatar illustrated the positive effects of a targeted SEL intervention program on student behavior and engagement. Although the program was short in duration, teachers observed meaningful improvements

in student interactions and classroom participation. The study emphasized the importance of involving teachers in the planning and implementation phases of SEL programs to ensure institutional alignment and long-term sustainability. It also highlighted the potential impact of culturally responsive, well-designed short-term interventions while advocating for their expansion in both scope and duration.

Taken together, these studies reveal three recurring themes: (1) a general awareness of the value of SEL, though not consistently translated into classroom practices; (2) weak institutional infrastructure (ie. curricula, training, and policy frameworks) needed to support SEL implementation; and (3) a pressing need for national policies that recognize SEL as a core component of students' holistic development, particularly in light of the psychological and social transformations impacting learners today. Bridging the gap between teacher perceptions and effective practice requires a comprehensive strategy that begins with policy reform and extends through curriculum development and classroom implementation.

Enhancing Learners' Social and Emotional Competencies: Insights from the Gulf Region

Amidst the growing global emphasis on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), there is an increasing need to move beyond theoretical awareness toward the implementation of practical, evidence-based interventions that cultivate social and emotional competencies among students. This need is particularly pressing in the context of the Gulf states, where societies are undergoing rapid cultural and social transformations, necessitating the preparation of younger generations to self-regulate, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions in an increasingly complex and dynamic world. In this context, the present section aims to highlight a set of educational interventions and field-based experiences implemented across several Gulf countries, focusing on their impact in fostering SEL skills among diverse learner populations.

Although limited in number, the reviewed studies demonstrate a range of SEL initiatives that vary in terms of target groups and methodological approaches. The interventions encompass populations such as secondary school girls, students who are deaf, learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and preschool children. Methodologically, these programs draw upon diverse strategies tailored to students' developmental, psychological, and cultural characteristics, and frequently leverage modern technologies as part of their delivery. The findings across these studies suggest that such interventions are effective in nurturing various dimensions of SEL, including self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, psychological well-being, and decision-making. These outcomes highlight the potential of well-structured educational interventions to support learners' holistic development.

It is also noteworthy that some of the studies reviewed in this section adopt a critical and analytical stance, aiming to go beyond the superficial implementation of SEL practices by contextualizing programs within the lived experiences and cultural realities of learners. These applied models illustrate that embedding SEL into teaching practices does not merely result in the development of isolated individual skills, they contribute to the creation of inclusive and supportive school environments. Such environments are sensitive to learners' cultural and emotional needs and help strike a meaningful balance between academic achievement and emotional growth. This constitutes a foundational pillar for any sustainable educational reform in the Gulf region.

Leveraging Technology to Enhance SEL

In light of the growing role of modern technologies in education, Al-Otaibi (2023) conducted a study aimed at ***exploring the relationship between electronic psychological counseling and emotional intelligence among female secondary school students in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia***. The study was situated within the broader context of increasing attention to SEL and the integration of technology into educational environments. Specifically, it sought to measure various dimensions of electronic counseling and emotional intelligence, and to examine the nature of the relationship between them by contributing to the enhancement of pedagogical practices that support students' psychological and emotional development.

The significance of this study lies in its status as one of the first to examine the intersection of electronic counseling and emotional intelligence within the Saudi educational context, particularly among female students in secondary education. Its applied relevance is underscored by the potential of its findings to inform the development of counseling programs and training initiatives targeting SEL skills. The results underscore the need for educational institutions to activate electronic counseling services and to train female teachers and counselors in their use to support students' social and emotional growth.

The researcher employed a descriptive, correlational-comparative design, deemed appropriate for the study's objectives and data nature. Two instruments were developed: one to measure electronic psychological counseling and another to assess emotional intelligence, the latter adapted from the Al-Ghraibeh (2011) scale tailored to the Saudi context. The first scale encompassed three domains: the perceived importance of electronic counseling, attitudes toward e-counselors, and attitudes toward electronic counseling services. The second instrument addressed five dimensions of emotional intelligence: emotion management, empathy, emotional regulation, emotional awareness, and social communication. Both tools were subjected to tests of validity and reliability. The sample consisted of 362 randomly selected female students across various secondary grade levels in Jeddah.

The findings revealed that the participants exhibited high levels of emotional intelligence and engagement with electronic counseling. Statistically significant differences were observed in favor of the actual mean scores over the hypothetical means across all dimensions. Furthermore, the study identified a statistically significant positive correlation between the use of electronic psychological counseling and students' emotional intelligence. Notably, the highest interaction scores were associated with favorable attitudes toward e-counselors, while "emotional regulation" emerged as the most prominent dimension of emotional intelligence. The researcher interpreted these outcomes as reflective of students' growing awareness of the importance of self-regulation and intentional social interaction in increasingly digital learning environments.

The study concluded that electronic psychological counseling constitutes an effective tool for fostering emotional intelligence among female students. The positive correlation between the two variables suggests that participation in e-counseling programs may lead to the development of more mature interpersonal skills, greater psychological resilience, and improved academic performance, factors that are critical to success within and beyond the school environment.

The study recommended establishing electronic counseling centers in every school, implementing training programs to enhance the use of electronic counseling, increasing students' awareness of available services, and integrating e-counseling into SEL-related activities. It further emphasized the importance of developing emotional intelligence skills through advanced instructional strategies that promote students' psychological and social well-being and support high-quality, holistic learning experiences in secondary education (Al-Otaibi, 2023).

Developing Social and Emotional Competencies among Students with Disabilities

In Saudi Arabia, Bahrawi and Al-Raqqah (2025) conducted a study to examine ***the effectiveness of an instructional program based on the "Total Communication approach" in enhancing self-regulation skills among deaf students***, an essential dimension of SEL. The study emphasized the use of multiple communication strategies, including lip-reading, sign language, finger spelling, and verbal interaction, to empower students in developing abilities such as planning, self-evaluation, and behavioral control. These skills are closely linked to the emotional and social competencies necessary for academic and social adaptation.

The significance of this study lies in the strong association between self-regulation and various aspects of deaf students' development, including autonomy, emotional regulation, and social engagement. Additionally, the study addresses a notable gap in the educational literature, where most prior research has been either narrowly focused or limited to specific age or educational groups. The present study fills this gap by evaluating a comprehensive, tailored intervention targeting deaf students at the elementary level, a population often facing compounded challenges in communication and inclusion.

Employing a quasi-experimental design, the study used a pretest-posttest model with two groups: an experimental group ($n = 15$) that

received the program and a control group ($n = 15$) that did not. All participants were male elementary students from Al-Amal Institute and Imam Al-Tabari School in Al-Ahsa. The researchers developed a measurement tool with two subscales (identification/discrimination and self-regulation) and confirmed its validity and reliability for field application.

ANCOVA results indicated statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups in both subscales and the overall scale, favoring the experimental group. These findings support the effectiveness of the Total Communication instructional program in improving self-regulation skills among deaf students. Furthermore, variables such as chronological age and prior participation in communication programs positively influenced the intervention's impact.

The study concludes that the Total Communication approach effectively supports key aspects of SEL in deaf students by enhancing self-confidence, independence, and behavioral self-management. The use of diverse, interactive strategies support vocabulary acquisition and academic task comprehension, thereby narrowing the gap in social and behavioral engagement between deaf students and their peers.

Accordingly, the study recommends the broader implementation of the Total Communication approach in educational programs for deaf students, given its efficacy in supporting their learning and skills development. It also calls for in-depth research on variables affecting this population and for integrating Total Communication strategies into curricula and individualized educational plans that accommodate their specific needs. The authors further emphasize the importance of involving individuals with hearing impairments in the design and implementation of communication activities and advocate expanding the use of this approach to additional developmental domains beyond self-regulation (Bahrawi & Al-Raqqah, 2025, pp. 232–233).

In another study targeting students with disabilities, Balbeed and Ghareeb (2021) ***investigated the effectiveness of a training program aimed at fostering self-determination skills among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)***. These skills, closely aligned with SEL, are essential for enhancing individuals' autonomy, self-awareness, decision-making, and planning abilities. The significance of this study is its focus on a learner group that requires highly specialized educational interventions and its contribution to equipping them with tools for active participation in their social and educational environments.

The study utilized a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design involving an experimental group and a control group. The training program was grounded in established theoretical frameworks for self-determination and included structured activities to develop competencies such as goal setting, decision-making, problem-solving, and self-planning.

The sample comprised 22 students with ASD, aged 6 to 10, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. They were equally divided into two groups: the experimental group received the training, while the control group did not undergo any intervention during the study period. A researcher-developed self-determination scale, validated for reliability, was used to assess outcomes.

Results revealed statistically significant post-intervention differences (at the 0.05 level) in favor of the experimental group, indicating the program's effectiveness in enhancing self-determination skills among participating students. Additionally, parental feedback indicated noticeable improvements in their children's initiative-taking, decision-making, and sense of responsibility.

The study recommended periodic evaluation of services provided to students with ASD to ensure their quality and effectiveness. It also underscored the need to raise special education teachers' awareness of their role in cultivating self-determination, through

specialized professional development programs. Furthermore, the study advocated incorporating self-determination training into the university curricula for pre-service special education teachers in Saudi Arabia, to ensure the preparation of qualified professionals capable of supporting students' independence and enabling them to make informed life and learning choices (Balbeed & Ghareeb, 2021, p. 239).

The results of the two previous studies underscore the critical role of targeted educational interventions in developing SEL competencies among students with disabilities, particularly those who are deaf or have ASD. Bahrawi and Al-Raqqah (2025) demonstrated that the Total Communication approach effectively enhanced self-regulation skills among deaf students, a core component of SEL. Similarly, Balbeed and Ghareeb (2021) highlighted the effectiveness of a structured training program in developing self-determination skills (self-awareness, autonomy, responsibility, decision-making) among students with ASD which are foundational to robust social and emotional competencies.

Together, these studies emphasize the necessity of designing systematic educational interventions that account for the developmental and individual characteristics of students with disabilities. They highlight the importance of empowering these learners to engage positively with their educational and social environments and reinforce the need to embed these skills within curricula and educational plans. This should be done within a comprehensive educational framework that fosters inclusion and supports the holistic development of students with disabilities.

Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies in Early Grades

Fostering social and emotional competencies in preschool and early elementary children is considered a foundational pillar for any educational system aiming to cultivate balanced individuals capable of adapting to their social environments. This developmental stage

is critical due to its high malleability and susceptibility to external influences, during which the foundations for behavior, interpersonal interaction, and human relationships begin to take shape. Children in kindergarten and early grades, alongside other vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities, are viewed as requiring special educational attention and systematic interventions to support their holistic development.

Against this backdrop, the design and implementation of early intervention programs focused on SEL become increasingly vital. These programs aim to instill values such as cooperation, tolerance, emotional regulation, and empathy from the earliest years. Such initiatives are protective factors against behavioral and emotional challenges that may arise in home or school environments, and they represent long-term educational investments that positively influence children's future quality of life, learning capacity, integration, and active participation in society.

In this context, the study conducted by Al-Mushaqiri et al. (2021) sought to examine ***the effectiveness of a Peace Education Program in enhancing the social and emotional behavior of preschool children in Oman*** in response to the growing interest in embedding SEL in early childhood education. The study emerged from a perceived need to integrate values of peace, such as tolerance, cooperation, and respect into educational curricula, in line with Oman Vision 2040, which emphasizes fostering a peaceful society, and in response to social challenges such as rising incidents of violence against children.

The study employed a quasi-experimental design to assess the program's impact on a sample of children aged 4 to 6 years. The sample included 80 children, equally divided into experimental ($n = 40$) and control ($n = 40$) groups. The experimental group participated in a structured training program consisting of 28 sessions delivered over 15 weeks, at a rate of one hour per week. The control group received no such intervention.

The training program included interactive educational games and activities designed to enhance social skills such as self-care and communication, as well as emotional skills such as self-awareness and empathy. The program was grounded in two theoretical frameworks: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which highlights the importance of meeting fundamental needs for achieving inner and societal peace, and Goleman's Emotional Intelligence model, which links emotional behavior to individuals' ability to manage their own emotions and understand those of others.

The findings revealed statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups in both social and emotional skills following program completion. The most pronounced improvements were observed in communication and empathy, suggesting that structured and early interventions can enhance children's social interaction and emotional regulation abilities. The researchers attributed this improvement to a combination of factors, including the quality of the training program, collaboration from school staff, support from parents, and the children's enthusiasm. Analysis also showed no significant gender differences in program outcomes, indicating that the intervention was equally effective for boys and girls.

The study concluded that early intervention through targeted programs such as *Peace Education* can play a crucial role in shaping the social and emotional behaviors of preschool-aged children. The researchers emphasized that such programs create enriched educational environments that enable children to develop the life and emotional skills essential for living in communities built on peace and mutual respect.

Based on these findings, the study recommended integrating the *Peace Education* program into preschool curricula in Oman and training educators to ensure its effective implementation. It also called for further research focused on assessing children's SEL competencies and monitoring the long-term effects of such programs, particularly the rapid social and cultural changes

that influence children's behavior and interactions with their surroundings (Al-Mushaqiri et al., 2021).

Addressing the Social, Cultural, and Psychological Contexts of Learners

Amid growing interest in advancing SEL within Gulf contexts, the need to design educational interventions grounded in a nuanced understanding of learners' psychological, social, and cultural realities becomes increasingly evident. This need is particularly urgent given the significant challenges some students face due to trauma, rapid social change, or limited familial and institutional support. As a result, recent studies have shifted toward exploring the effectiveness of educational programs that are culturally and religiously responsive, and that are attuned to the lived experiences and emotional and behavioral needs of students.

The importance of this orientation lies in its departure from standardized educational interventions by integrating community values and students' real-life experiences into pedagogical programs and activities. This approach has the potential to enhance the long-term impact of such interventions. In this context, two studies conducted in Qatar provide compelling models of SEL interventions adapted to local realities. These studies offer practical and critical insights that can inform the design of similar programs across the Gulf region.

The first study by Al-Wattary and Wyness (2023) evaluated ***the impact of a universal social emotional intervention on students' mental wellbeing in a secondary public school in Qatar***. The study was premised on the hypothesis that a culturally and religiously adapted educational intervention could produce significant improvements in students' psychological well-being. Utilizing a controlled experimental design, the researchers compared an intervention group with a control group.

The intervention, titled the “Positive Steps” program, consisted of eight weekly one-hour sessions and was grounded in values aligned with Qatari cultural and religious norms. Topics included emotion regulation, self-management, personal responsibility, relationship building, spiritual well-being, and life purpose. The intervention was implemented with a randomly selected sample of 82 seventh-grade students in Doha, while the control group consisted of 81 students who received no intervention during the same period. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) was employed to measure pre- and post-intervention well-being, ensuring demographic, religious, and cultural parity between the groups.

Statistical analysis revealed a significant post-intervention increase in well-being scores among the experimental group, with the average rising from 55.8 to 60.1, while the control group’s average remained relatively unchanged at 55.1. The adjusted effect size ($EF = 0.767$) indicated a relatively strong impact by educational research standards. These results were attributed to the program’s cultural and religious resonance, which used familiar language and symbols to convey concepts related to psychological well-being in a meaningful and relatable manner.

The study recommended the implementation of SEL programs tailored to the cultural and religious identities of Arab societies and highlighted the importance of extending such interventions to both genders. It further advocated for longitudinal research to assess the sustainability of intervention outcomes and evaluate implementation mechanisms and instructional components. The authors also underscored the importance of integrating broader well-being indicators into SEL evaluations to promote a holistic understanding of program impacts within Gulf settings (Al-Wattary & Wyness, 2023).

This study constitutes a significant contribution to SEL literature in Gulf contexts by presenting a fully implemented, culturally adapted

school-based SEL program. It affirms the value of embedding Islamic values and national identity into life skills education and psychological well-being enhancement. The findings support a growing policy orientation toward inclusive and safe school environments that promote academic and emotional balance, reinforcing the notion of SEL as a strategic priority in educational reform across the Gulf.

Similarly, Odwan's (2023) study examined ***the contextualization of SEL in Qatar's education system*** by focusing on how it can be aligned with local context, childhood adversity, and trauma. The study was based on the idea that SEL practices can only be effective when rooted in a deep understanding of students' adverse childhood experiences and trauma, especially in an educational landscape undergoing ongoing reform yet failing to address students' core emotional needs.

The study's significance lies in its focus on an often-overlooked dimension in curriculum development: the linkage between SEL competencies and the real-life contexts of learners. Through an analysis of Qatar's educational policies, the study revealed that value-based curricula often remain superficial and are implemented as routine exercises lacking the depth necessary to produce meaningful behavioral change. This diminishes their pedagogical potential and limits their impact on students' psychological needs.

Employing a critical feminist qualitative methodology, the study was theoretically informed by the work of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Vida Adli. The researcher used direct observation and reflective practice as a teacher in a Qatari girls' public school to analyze educational policies and their interplay with students' social and psychological realities.

Rather than using a traditional statistical sample, the study relied on comprehensive policy analysis and ethnographic observation to present rich descriptions of student behaviors and case narratives. These were contextualized through a review of relevant literature on SEL, trauma, and adverse childhood experiences. Thus, the

study served as a theoretical and empirical foundation for future intervention design and research.

The study concluded that SEL implementation through generalized values matrices in Qatari schools is often ineffective due to its disconnect from students' lived experiences. Students exposed to trauma or unstable home environments lack adequate in-school support, particularly given the limited trauma-informed training provided to teachers. Bureaucratic constraints further impede mechanisms for reporting or addressing abuse, leaving many students vulnerable. Institutional and administrative pressures also curtail teachers' ability to engage meaningfully with students, thereby marginalizing the humanistic dimension of education.

The study called for institutional reforms beginning at the Ministry of Education level to establish supportive educational environments grounded in "pedagogies of care." It recommended training teachers to understand trauma and its effects and aligning SEL values with students' cultural and social contexts. The author also advocated for future research to assess the impact of such reforms on behavioral and educational outcomes and to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed interventions (Odwan, 2023).

Collectively, the reviewed studies in this section underscore that advancing SEL competencies in Gulf education systems is no longer a progressive option, it is an urgent necessity. Effective implementation depends on evidence-based, specialized interventions tailored to learners' psychological and social backgrounds, especially among students with disabilities or those who have experienced trauma or familial instability.

These studies highlight diverse methodological and demographic scopes, addressing students from secondary schools, deaf students, children with autism spectrum disorders, and preschoolers. They feature innovative interventions, including digital counseling, total communication methods, self-determination training, and peace education programs. This diversity reflects a growing pedagogical

maturity in Gulf education systems toward inclusive, needs-responsive SEL practices.

The studies offer valuable insights for enhancing the effectiveness of SEL in Gulf educational environments. Al-Otaibi (2023) emphasized the role of digital technologies in developing emotional intelligence among female students. Bahrawi and Al-Raqqah (2025), along with Balbeed and Ghareeb (2021), highlighted the importance of equipping deaf and autistic students with self-regulation and self-determination skills to ensure equitable access to SEL. Al-Mushaqiri et al. (2021) demonstrated the benefits of early SEL interventions in building socio-emotional foundations, while Al-Wattary and Wyness (2023) confirmed the importance of cultural alignment in program effectiveness. Odwan (2023), meanwhile, provided a critical perspective on the risks of reducing SEL to superficial instruction disconnected from students' lived experiences.

Together, these findings call for a shift from generic programming to contextually grounded, evidence-based SEL practices that are inclusive of diverse learner profiles. They also stress the need for teacher and counselor training in trauma-responsive practices and the integration of emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and empathy into curricula and classroom activities. The Gulf-based experiences highlighted herein serve as valuable models, affirming that SEL is not merely a pedagogical aim but a prerequisite for achieving inclusive, sustainable, and holistic education in a region committed to investing in the human potential of future generations.

Promoting SEL Policies in the Gulf States: Recommendations for Decision-Makers

Based on the analytical findings and research insights presented in this report, and drawing from contemporary studies in the Gulf region on social and emotional learning (SEL), there is an urgent need to adopt strategic orientations that promote the integration of SEL into national education systems across the Gulf States. The following recommendations are grounded in the report's conclusions and are intended to guide educational policymakers in developing comprehensive national frameworks, enhancing institutional readiness, and equipping educators for the effective and sustainable implementation of SEL.

1. Integrate SEL into National Education Policies and Curricula

Ministries of Education in the Gulf region should adopt comprehensive national frameworks for SEL that are embedded in educational policies and curricula, ensuring that SEL competencies become integral to official educational objectives. This requires the development of clear standards for incorporating self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making across all subjects and grade levels, while respecting the cultural and religious values of Gulf societies.

2. Redefine Learning Outcomes to Include Social and Emotional Development

Educational policies must reflect a holistic conception of learning, one that goes beyond academic achievement to encompass emotional, social, and moral growth. This entails revising curricular and instructional outcomes to include explicit indicators for competencies such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, relationship building, and responsible decision-making.

Additionally, this vision calls for the adoption of alternative assessment approaches that move beyond traditional testing, by incorporating methods such as self-assessment, performance-based evaluation, and learning portfolios to capture students' non-cognitive development. These outcomes should be reflected in school reports and national assessment frameworks to incentivize educators and institutions to take SEL seriously as a foundational goal of education and a pillar of prosperous and safe societies.

3. Develop Teacher Preparation and Training Programs to Build SEL Competencies

Effective SEL implementation requires building teachers' capacities through initial teacher education and ongoing professional development that equips them to apply SEL principles in classrooms. These programs should train teachers in strategies for creating emotionally supportive environments, fostering positive interactions with students, and managing psychological and behavioral challenges. Teacher education programs should include dedicated coursework in SEL, by integrating its core competencies into the academic and professional training framework for pre-service teachers.

4. Support National and Field-Based Research on SEL

Given the limited number of Gulf-based studies on SEL, it is essential to encourage researchers and educational research centers to conduct quantitative and qualitative studies evaluating SEL programs and their impact on students' psychological, cognitive, and behavioral development. Such research can help bridge the current knowledge gap, enrich regional academic literature, and provide an evidence base for data-informed educational policy decisions.

5. Design Targeted and Flexible Evidence-Based Educational Programs

There is a need to develop evidence-based SEL programs and practices that are flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of learners, particularly vulnerable groups such as early-grade students and those with learning difficulties or behavioral challenges. These programs should include mechanisms for formative assessment and continuous improvement based on feedback and outcome monitoring.

6. Adapt SEL Programs to the Needs of Students with Disabilities

SEL programs should be adapted to meet the diverse needs of students with physical, intellectual, or emotional disabilities. This includes developing specialized content, creating appropriate assessment tools, and training teachers and special education professionals in effective delivery. Such efforts will enhance the inclusivity of SEL programs and ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students.

7. Create Psychosocially Supportive and Safe School Environments

Promoting SEL requires the development of school climates that foster empathy, respect, and self-discipline while reducing negative behaviors such as violence and bullying. This can be achieved through the implementation of supportive school-wide policies and clear administrative guidelines that promote a nurturing, growth-oriented, and safe learning environment for all.

8. Establish National Assessment Systems for SEL Competencies

There is a need to develop national tools and performance indicators that measure students' acquisition of SEL competencies and evaluate teachers' effectiveness in promoting these skills. Such systems can serve as a basis for tracking progress, enhancing program quality, and directing technical and administrative support to schools facing challenges in SEL implementation.

9. Leverage Digital Technologies to Support SEL

The digital revolution offers promising opportunities to create engaging, interactive SEL content through mobile applications and online learning platforms. These tools can enable students to practice SEL skills in safe, accessible environments and offer remote counseling and wider access to SEL programming, particularly for students in remote or underserved areas.

10. Strengthen School–Family–Community Partnerships in Supporting SEL

Maximizing the impact of SEL requires active engagement of families and local communities. This includes raising parents' awareness of SEL's importance and empowering them to support their children's emotional and social development. Civil society organizations, religious institutions, and cultural centers can also play a role in designing and delivering out-of-school initiatives that reinforce SEL values and practices.

These recommendations offer a strategic framework for mainstreaming SEL in Gulf education systems in ways that align with global trends while responding to local cultural and societal specificities. Their effective implementation will require coordinated action across legislative, executive, institutional, and research stakeholders. The ultimate goal is to move beyond fragmented initiatives and toward comprehensive national strategies that create inclusive and safe educational environments, fostering the holistic well-being and development of learners for generations to come.

Proposed Directions for Future Research

In light of the knowledge and methodological gaps revealed through the analysis of literature and Gulf-based studies presented in this report, this section proposes a set of initial research directions that may guide future academic inquiries and institutional agendas in the Gulf region. These proposals focus on upcoming research efforts of the most pressing and contextually relevant issues, contributing to the establishment of a robust knowledge base to inform the design of effective and sustainable educational policies and programs.

The literature review confirms that the field of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Gulf countries remains emergent, in terms of the volume of published research and the diversity of its geographic, thematic, contextual, and methodological scope. Several critical gaps were identified, which future research in the region should prioritize to advance policy and practice in this area. The following proposed directions are derived directly from the identified gaps:

1. Addressing Geographic Disparities in SEL Research

The review highlights a notable concentration of research output in a limited number of Gulf countries, with a significant dearth in others, especially Bahrain and Kuwait, indicating a clear geographic imbalance. Expanding SEL research to include educational contexts across all Gulf nations is essential to achieve a more representative and inclusive understanding of the region.

2. Examining SEL Integration in National Curricula and Classroom Practices

There is a clear lack of comprehensive studies investigating the extent to which SEL competencies are integrated into

national curricula whether at the level of educational objectives, curriculum frameworks, or the content of instructional materials. While some studies have focused on the outcomes of specific SEL programs, few have systematically analyzed curriculum content to assess the explicit or implicit inclusion of competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Future studies should undertake in-depth curriculum analyses across educational stages to assess how these concepts are presented and operationalized.

3. Assessing Teachers' SEL Competencies and Readiness

Despite some attempts to examine teachers' SEL competencies and their role in program implementation, research remains limited and findings inconsistent. There is a need for comprehensive evaluation studies that explore educators' awareness of SEL principles, their professional readiness to deliver SEL instruction, and their specific training needs. Such studies should also assess the extent to which teacher education programs incorporate SEL into their curricula, contributing to the development of a solid professional foundation in the field.

4. Investigating Classroom Environments as SEL Ecosystems

Beyond the focus on teachers, further research is needed to explore classroom environments as the immediate context where SEL practices are enacted. Few Gulf-based studies have examined the quality of in-class relationships or the role of classroom culture in fostering or hindering SEL development. Understanding the characteristics of safe, supportive, and emotionally engaging classroom climates should be a research priority for effective SEL implementation.

5. Exploring the Relationship Between SEL and Academic Achievement

The report also notes the limited number of studies addressing the connection between SEL and academic outcomes, especially in subjects such as mathematics and science. Most existing research emphasizes the psychological and behavioral benefits of SEL, with less focus on its educational impact on cognitive domains like critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. These areas warrant greater attention in future research agendas.

6. Responding to the Needs of Vulnerable Student Populations

Vulnerable groups such as students with disabilities or those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are underrepresented in Gulf SEL research. Future studies should investigate how SEL programs can be adapted to meet the unique needs of these populations, potentially utilizing digital tools and interactive platforms that enhance accessibility and engagement.

7. Expanding the Use of Mixed Methods Approaches

There is a noticeable absence of studies employing mixed methods approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative tools, despite their potential to generate a holistic understanding of SEL experiences among students, teachers, and school leaders. Most studies rely on quantitative instruments such as surveys and tests, without complementary qualitative data to contextualize findings. Integrating qualitative perspectives could enrich understanding of cultural and institutional dynamics affecting SEL implementation.

8. Developing Culturally Grounded Assessment Tools

The review reveals a pressing need for the development of locally designed and culturally validated instruments to assess

SEL competencies. Many existing studies rely on imported or translated tools that lack adequate cultural adaptation, raising concerns about their validity and applicability in Gulf educational settings. Designing standardized assessments based on internationally recognized frameworks (such as the CASEL model) but tailored to Gulf cultural and religious contexts is a critical research priority.

9. Conducting Longitudinal Research on Systemic SEL Implementation

Future research should investigate the long-term impact of systematically embedding SEL across educational policies, curricula, and practices. Longitudinal studies tracking student outcomes across emotional, social, behavioral, and academic domains are vital to understanding the sustained effects of SEL programming. Such research can provide a robust evidence base for decision-making by supporting a broader vision of education that includes academic achievement and the development of well-rounded individuals capable of positive engagement with their communities and the broader world.

In sum, these proposed directions offer a roadmap for future research that is contextually grounded, methodologically sound, and policy-relevant. Addressing these gaps will enhance scholarly understanding of SEL in the Gulf region and support the creation of inclusive, evidence-based educational policies and practices that foster the holistic development of all learners.

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