

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL PRESCHOOL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS

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DOI:10.63305/742033

Article Info

Article history:

Received Aug 2, 2026

Revised Aug 8, 2026

Accepted Aug 15, 2026

Abstract

Despite increasing demand for diverse socio-emotional learning (SEL) research studies (Hayashi et al., 2022; Cipriano et al., 2023), no empirical research has been conducted on SEL practices in international preschools within Southeast Asia. Thus, this study was designed to explore the perceived effectiveness of SEL practices by preschool teachers in international schools in Batangas Province, Philippines, and created a culturally appropriate Teacher Toolkit based on these perceptions. Using explanatory sequential design, 14 preschool teachers from two international schools were surveyed using standardized questionnaire to evaluate their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of SEL practices. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's rho correlation coefficients. Four teachers, chosen purposively, also underwent semi-structured interviews with findings analyzed using thematic analysis. Results indicated that teachers considered their SEL practices very highly effective across all SEL competencies ($M=4.786-4.886$) although there was variability in Social Awareness ($SD= 0.410$). No significant correlations were found between the demographic variables and the teacher perception of SEL effectiveness implying institutional structures may have had a greater influence on the teachers than their personal characteristics. Themes that emerged from the interviews include dominance of storytelling, playing techniques, and use of visuals. Challenges reported were diversity of development level, time constraints, and inconsistencies between home and school environments. Variability in Social Awareness was linked to the necessity to teach empathy across different cultures regarding appropriate emotional expressions. The findings helped develop the Pilot Culturally Responsive SEL Teacher Toolkit containing emotion cards, storybook list, and orientation manual for teachers.

Keywords – *Early Childhood Education, International Schools, Multicultural Classrooms, Socio-Emotional Learning, Teacher Perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, Early Childhood Education (ECE) confronts challenges that limit the social and emotional development of young learners, particularly following the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Children increasingly exhibit social withdrawal, reduced emotional expression, and mental health difficulties (Larsen et al., 2022; Ng & Ng, 2022). In response, schools worldwide have recognized the critical role of Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) in supporting holistic development. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) defines SEL as the process through which individuals develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Globally, SEL has gained recognition as an essential component of quality education. Ahmed and Khan (2024) found that teachers across varied educational systems increasingly view SEL as central to students' well-being and academic outcomes, while Marinda

et al. (2025) synthesized evidence from multiple school-based SEL interventions and reported consistent gains in both academic performance and socio-emotional competencies. In the Philippine setting specifically, Llurag and Kilag (2024) identified resource constraints, large class sizes, and limited teacher training as persistent barriers to effective SEL implementation in early childhood classrooms. These challenges have prompted policy responses such as the Department of Education's (2023) initiatives to strengthen learner socio-emotional support and UNICEF Philippines' (2023) efforts to develop a localized socio-emotional skills assessment framework, underscoring the growing national priority placed on SEL.

Beyond the Philippine context, researchers have increasingly examined how cultural diversity shapes SEL implementation and outcomes. Goodman (2021) observed that culturally responsive framings of SEL are necessary in cross-cultural primary school settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, cautioning against uncritical adoption of Western-developed SEL

frameworks. Similarly, Shahat et al. (2022) found that teachers' perceptions of SEL effectiveness varied according to the cultural and disciplinary context in which it was implemented. Ang and Tsai (2023) further demonstrated that cultural background influences individuals' expressive flexibility and emotional regulation strategies, suggesting that competencies such as social awareness may manifest differently across cultural groups. In international school settings specifically, Yeh et al. (2021) emphasized that culturally responsive SEL practices are critical for supporting students who must navigate multiple cultural frames of reference, a dynamic echoed in the U.S. Department of State's Office of Overseas Schools (2024) SELCSP standards for international schools worldwide.

Integrating SEL in international schools serving multicultural student populations introduces unique complexities. While several studies have examined SEL in homogeneous or national school settings, no empirical research has explored SEL implementation in international school

preschool contexts within Southeast Asia (Hayashi et al., 2022; Cipriano et al., 2023). This gap is particularly pronounced in the Philippines, where international preschools in Batangas Province enroll children from diverse races and nationalities.

This study explored how preschool teachers at Stonyhurst Southville International School (SSIS) Batangas and SSIS Malarayat perceive the effectiveness of SEL practices in their multicultural classrooms. It also aimed to develop a Culturally Responsive SEL Teacher Toolkit to support preschool educators in implementing the five CASEL competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to: (1) describe the demographic profile of respondents; (2) evaluate the perceived effectiveness of SEL practices across five CASEL competencies; (3) investigate the relationship between demographic profile and perceived SEL effectiveness; (4) explain teachers' experiences with

the highest and lowest-rated competencies; (5) describe teachers' lived experiences, strategies, and challenges in SEL implementation; and (6) develop a culturally responsive SEL Teacher Toolkit based on the findings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design. The first phase utilized a descriptive-correlational design to statistically describe teacher demographics and measure perceived SEL effectiveness. The second phase employed a phenomenological approach through semi-structured interviews to explain the quantitative results. Integration of both data sets informed toolkit development.

Participants and Sampling

Total population sampling was used for the quantitative phase, encompassing all 14 preschool teachers at SSIS Batangas and SSIS Malarayat. For the qualitative phase, four teachers were purposively selected from the 14 respondents to provide detailed experiential accounts of the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research Instrument

The Scale on Perceived Effectiveness of SEL Practices, a researcher-made instrument, was constructed based on the CASEL (2020) framework. It consists of 25 items across five subscales corresponding to the five CASEL competencies, using a 5-point Likert scale. Content validity was established by five expert validators. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.662 (Social Awareness) to 0.818 (Self-Awareness), with an overall alpha of 0.917, indicating very high internal consistency (Taber, 2018).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency counts, weighted means, and Spearman's Rho correlations. Spearman's rho was chosen due to the non-parametric nature and small sample size ($n = 14$). Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking and data triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile of Respondents

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Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 14 respondents. The majority (42.86%) taught Senior Kinder/Senior Prep, followed by Junior Kinder/Junior Prep (35.71%), and Nursery/Pre-Kindergarten (21.43%). Most respondents (42.86%) had five or more years of teaching experience, while equal proportions (28.57%) had 1–2 and 3–4 years of experience. In terms of educational background, 78.57% held a Bachelor's Degree in Education, 14.29% held non-education bachelor's degrees, and 7.14% had earned a Master's Degree.

Table 1. The Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Grade Level Taught	Nursery / Pre-K	3	21.43
	Junior Kinder / Junior Prep	5	35.71
	Senior Kinder / Senior Prep	6	42.86
Length of Teaching Experience	1-2 years	4	28.57
	3-4 years	4	28.57
	5 or more years	6	42.86
Educational Background	Bachelor's Degree (ECED/ BED)	11	78.57
	Non-Education Bachelor's Degree	2	14.29
	Master's Degree	1	7.14

Table 2. Teachers' Perceived Effectiveness Across CASEL Competencies

SEL Competency	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Self-Awareness	4.843	0.203	Very High
Self-Management	4.886	0.181	Very High
Social Awareness	4.786	0.410	Very High
Relationship Skills	4.857	0.176	Very High
Responsible Decision-Making	4.843	0.241	Very High

Note. Mean scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Highly Effective, 1 = Not Effective).

As shown in Table 2, all five CASEL competencies received very high mean scores ($M = 4.786\text{--}4.886$). Self-Management emerged as the highest-rated competency ($M = 4.886$, $SD = 0.181$), while Social Awareness received the lowest mean ($M = 4.786$) but the highest standard deviation ($SD = 0.410$). The consistently high scores across competencies suggest that SEL is well-embedded within the institutional structure of the two SSIS schools. However, the ceiling effect and social desirability bias inherent in self-reported instruments must be acknowledged (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The higher variability in Social Awareness reflects the inherent

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complexity of teaching empathy and cultural perspective-taking in multicultural contexts.

These results are consistent with CASEL (2020), which describes the five competencies as foundational skills for children's social and emotional development. Martinez and Gomez (2024) further affirm that integrating SEL practices enhances academic engagement, social competence, and overall well-being. Similarly, Cipriano et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis found that children in SEL programs reported heightened feelings of belonging and positive peer relationships, reinforcing the high effectiveness ratings observed in this study.

The uniformly high ratings across competencies also align with global findings; Ahmed and Khan (2024) similarly reported that teachers across diverse educational systems rate SEL practices favorably when institutional support structures are in place. However, the elevated variability observed in Social Awareness in the present study parallels findings by Ang and Tsai (2023), who noted that cultural background significantly influences

individuals' capacity for cultural perspective-taking and expressive flexibility. This suggests that Social Awareness, more than other CASEL competencies, may be uniquely sensitive to the cultural composition of a classroom—a pattern also observed by Goodman (2021) in cross-cultural New Zealand primary schools, where teachers reported greater difficulty gauging children's social-emotional cues across differing cultural norms of emotional expression.

Relationship Between Demographic Profile and SEL Effectiveness

Table 3. Spearman's Rho Correlations: Demographic Profile and Perceived SEL Effectiveness

SEL Competency	Grade Level Taught	Length of Teaching Experience	Educational Background
Self-Awareness	-0.214 0.462	0.089 0.763	0.097 0.740
Self-Management	-0.135 0.645	0.335 0.241	0.377 0.184
Social Awareness	-0.046 0.875	0.322 0.261	0.271 0.349
Relationship Skills	-0.365 0.199	0.074 0.802	0.076 0.797

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Responsible			
Decision-	-0.086	0.308	0.377
Making	0.771	0.284	0.184

Note. The first value in each cell represents the Spearman's rho (p), while the second value is the corresponding p-value. All correlations are not significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3 reveals that none of the 15 correlation coefficients between teachers' demographic variables and their perceived SEL effectiveness reached statistical significance (all $p > .05$). All three null hypotheses (H_{01} – H_{03}) are retained. Effect sizes ranged from negligible to small ($|r| = 0.046$ – 0.377), suggesting that in this institutional setting, demographic characteristics such as grade level, years of experience, and educational background do not significantly predict teachers' self-rated SEL effectiveness. These findings align with Eisenberg and Raghavan (2023) and Duraiappah (2019), who argue that institutional support and professional development are stronger predictors of SEL competence than personal characteristics.

This finding is consistent with Pental's (2025) mixed-methods study of teacher attitudes toward CASEL-based frameworks, which similarly found that

institutional culture and administrative support—rather than teacher demographic characteristics—were the primary drivers of perceived SEL effectiveness. It also mirrors Shahat et al.'s (2022) observation that perceptions of SEL effectiveness were shaped more by contextual and systemic factors than by individual teacher attributes such as experience or educational background.

Qualitative Findings: Teachers' Explanations and Lived Experiences

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with four teachers (P1–P4) yielded six overarching themes, two of which directly addressed Research Questions 4 and 5.

Theme 1: Perceived Effectiveness of SEL in Supporting Social-Emotional Development. Teachers attributed the high Self-Management scores to well-established classroom routines such as emotion cue cards, calming corners, and transition strategies. As P2 noted: students used emotional vocabulary more independently and even reminded peers to "take a deep breath." Sub-themes included growth in emotional

awareness, positive peer interactions, and enhanced learning readiness.

Theme 2: Cultural Diversity and Responsiveness. The relatively lower rating and higher variability in Social Awareness were explained by teachers' experiences with children from different cultural backgrounds who vary in their comfort with emotional disclosure and peer interaction. P1 noted that cultural values influence how children express emotions and communicate with adults. Teachers employed flexible strategies including drawing, role-play, and storytelling to make SEL inclusive across cultures.

Theme 3: Dominant SEL Strategies. Teachers consistently identified storytelling, play-based learning, and visual supports as their most frequently used strategies for reinforcing SEL competencies. P3 shared that read-aloud sessions using diverse storybooks allowed children to “see themselves and their friends” in the narratives, supporting both self-awareness and social awareness. Play-based activities, including cooperative games and dramatic play corners, were described as natural opportunities for children to

practice turn-taking, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Visual supports—such as emotion charts, picture schedules, and cue cards—were noted as particularly effective for non-verbal or emerging English language learners, a preference that later informed the toolkit's inclusion of visual emotion cards.

Theme 4: Implementation Challenges. Teachers described three recurring challenges to SEL implementation. First, developmental diversity within mixed-age or mixed-ability groupings required differentiated instruction, with P4 explaining that strategies effective for older preschoolers did not always translate to younger children in the same room. Second, time constraints within an already dense curriculum limited the depth of SEL instruction, as teachers reported that SEL activities were often fitted in between academic subjects rather than given dedicated instructional time. Third, inconsistencies between home and school environments—particularly when families held differing cultural beliefs about emotional expression or discipline—were seen by teachers as

undermining the reinforcement of SEL skills outside the classroom.

Theme 5: Professional Support Needs. Teachers expressed a need for additional training, particularly in culturally responsive SEL strategies, noting that their pre-service preparation had not fully equipped them to address the emotional needs of a multicultural student population. Peer collaboration and mentoring were also highlighted as valuable, with teachers describing the informal sharing of successful strategies during common planning periods. Finally, teachers called for structured, ready-to-use resources, such as lesson guides and activity templates, that could reduce planning time while ensuring consistency in SEL delivery across classrooms.

These qualitative findings resonate with the broader international literature. The reliance on storytelling and play-based strategies mirrors practices documented by Yeh et al. (2021) among educators of international students, who found that narrative-based and experiential approaches were especially effective for building social-emotional competence across cultural boundaries. The

challenges of balancing developmental diversity and time constraints echo Llurag and Kilag's (2024) account of resource-limited Philippine early childhood contexts, while the reported home-school inconsistencies support Marinda et al.'s (2025) conclusion that the sustainability of SEL gains depends heavily on continuity between school and family environments.

Development of the Culturally Responsive SEL Teacher Toolkit

Theme 6 and the integration of both data phases identified three essential toolkit components: (1) Culturally Inclusive Resources – diverse storybooks, multicultural visual materials, and opportunities for children to share cultural traditions; (2) Interactive and Developmentally Appropriate Activities – play-based strategies, emotional regulation tools (e.g., Kindness Jar, Calm-Down Corners), and puppet shows; and (3) Teacher-Friendly Instructional Supports – visual emotion cards, lesson guides, activity templates, and progress monitoring tools. The resulting Pilot Culturally Responsive SEL Teacher Toolkit incorporates all three elements,

grounded in both quantitative gaps (Social Awareness variability) and qualitative strategy preferences, consistent with World Bank (2018) and UNESCO MGIEP (2022) recommendations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrated that preschool teachers at SSIS Batangas and SSIS Malarayat perceive their SEL practices as very highly effective across all five CASEL competencies, with Self-Management rated highest and Social Awareness lowest but most variable. No significant correlations were found between demographic variables and perceived effectiveness, suggesting that institutional structures and professional development systems exert greater influence on teacher SEL confidence than individual characteristics. Qualitative findings revealed that storytelling, play-based learning, and visual supports are the dominant instructional strategies, while challenges include meeting diverse developmental needs, limited instructional time, and inconsistency

between home and school SEL environments.

The study recommends that preschool teachers continue employing interactive, play-based, and culturally responsive SEL strategies. Parents and caregivers are encouraged to reinforce SEL skills in the home environment. School administrators should invest in professional development and teacher-parent collaboration programs. Educational institutions are advised to develop culturally sensitive SEL instructional materials, and the proposed Pilot Culturally Responsive SEL Teacher Toolkit should be piloted, evaluated, and refined for broader implementation. Future research should extend to larger and more diverse samples across different institutional contexts. A conclusion may summarize the key points of the paper; however, it should not simply restate the abstract. Instead, it can provide insights into the significance of the work and propose potential applications or future extensions.

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