



Social-Emotional Competence: Meaning and Its Relevance

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Abstract:

The increasing complexity of modern society, particularly in the wake of challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, has highlighted the importance of social-emotional competence among secondary school students. Adolescents today are navigating an environment filled with new pressures and sources of stress, impacting their psychological, emotional, and social well-being that can adversely affect their academic learning and professional growth. Social-emotional competence encompasses a range of skills essential for effective interpersonal interactions and personal growth. National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) India also supports the need for Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) to be incorporated into the school curriculum because these competencies are essential for personal and academic growth. Acquiring social-emotional competence is pivotal, which collectively leads to the formation of healthy perspectives. Despite the growing interest in Social Emotional Learning Programs, a comprehensive theoretical framework specifically tailored to integrate existing SEC models with neurological insights for adolescent curriculum development in contexts like India remains underexplored. This gap hinders the development of accessible and effective integrated SEC guidelines for educators. The absence of a robust theoretical model that can inform the development of integrated social-emotional learning guidelines for teachers, moving beyond standalone workshops, represents a significant gap that this paper seeks to address. The challenge seen is that most of the teachers being aware of social-emotional learning but not being able to integrate their learnings into their regular lessons or activities. This theoretical paper addresses this gap by proposing a novel, adapted framework for social-emotional competence that integrates established psychological models with recent neurological insights, thereby providing a robust theoretical foundation for curriculum development aimed at fostering SEC among secondary school students.

Keywords: social-emotional competence, emotional well-being, adolescents, student well-being, NEP2020

1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, people were forced to adapt to a new way of life in quarantine. This drastic change in routine compounded existing pressures and led to a host of psychological problems. Many individuals experienced heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as they grappled with the uncertainty of the situation and the isolation of quarantine. Moreover, the disruption of daily routines and lack of social interaction further contributed to the deterioration of mental health and overall well-being (Anupama et al., 2022). Studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has curtailed the conditions necessary for adolescents to fulfill their developmental requirements, leading to stress and other hidden mental and emotional health issues among many school children and adolescents (Waters et al., 2021; Ray et al., 2022 & Simoes-Perlant et al., 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO) 2022 report shows that mental disorders affect one in seven individuals aged 10-19 globally, causing 13% of the burden of disease in this age group which remains largely unrecognized and untreated. In India, a significant number of secondary school students, around 40.3%, are estimated to suffer from depression. A study

conducted by Lancet in 2017 revealed that almost 197 million people in India have mental health disorders, with depression being the most common disorder affecting 45.9 million people, followed by anxiety, which impacts 44.9 million people, amounting to 3.3% of India's population. The Lancet study in 2021 reported a 35% increase in anxiety disorders during the pandemic, with women and younger people being highly impacted as compared to men and senior citizens (Ferrari, 2021; Khanna et al., 2023). While the importance of social-emotional competence during adolescence is widely acknowledged, a unified theoretical framework that synthesizes established models with current neurological understanding to guide curriculum development for this critical developmental stage is still lacking. Despite the technological advancements that offer connectivity and learning opportunities, youth continue to experience a complicated environment with various stressors and pressures (Yasmin et al. 2020, Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Social and emotional competence is crucial to students' education, including those in secondary school. It encompasses skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Research has shown that possessing socio-emotional competencies can lead to enhanced academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011 & MacCann et al., 2020). In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in interest towards social-emotional competencies within the realm of education (Oberle et al., 2016). Moreover, Social Emotional Competence (SEC) enable students to develop vital skills that are essential for a modern and sustainable way of life. As such, it has become imperative to integrate social-emotional competence for well-being skills into school curriculums. This will not only foster growth through adversity but also provide invaluable assistance during times of crisis.

2. Social-Emotional Competence: Meaning

Social-Emotional Competence is the ability to comprehend, regulate and communicate in an appropriate manner (Elias et al., 1997; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). It is also a set of cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills (Mayer et al., 2008; Buckley & Saami, 2009) an interdependence of multiple age-appropriate skills, knowledge and experiences (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007) that helps in taking responsible decision making and applying socially and emotionally appropriate behaviours in one's day to day life. CASEL (2013) further describes social-emotional competence (SEC) as having five core abilities. The first is self-awareness, which involves recognizing and comprehending one's emotions, thoughts, strengths, weaknesses, and behaviours. The second is self-regulation (or self-management), which involves controlling one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. The third is social awareness, which involves considering and empathizing with others' perspectives and understanding and conforming to social norms. The fourth is relationship skills, which involve initiating and sustaining positive relationships by listening attentively, communicating clearly, and treating others respectfully. Finally, responsible decision-making entails making thoughtful and constructive choices about one's behaviour and social interactions in various settings and circumstances. While, Collie (2020) suggests that social and emotional competence (SEC) comprises three fundamental psychological needs: perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Perceived autonomy involves feeling in control of one's behaviour and aligning it with personal desires. Competence reflects the sense of being effective in executing personal abilities, while relatedness refers to feeling connected to important others. Rather than treating Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) as a single construct, it is to be viewed as a process that involves mechanisms and manifestations. These mechanisms are responsible for instigating behaviours that manifest Social-Emotional Competence (SEC). It's crucial to consider these mechanisms as they play a vital role in whether students apply socially and emotionally competent behaviours in their life. Social-emotional competence is an important human element that cultivates key intra-personal and interpersonal skills, which plays a vital role in various domains of life (Martinson et al., 2022). The concept of social-emotional competence emerged as a comprehensive framework that integrates emotional intelligence and social intelligence. It represents an individual's ability to effectively recognise, understand, manage and utilize emotions in both inter-personal and intra-personal contexts. The concept of social-emotional competence has evolved by integrating various psychological theories and research findings as given in the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: The key concepts that help in understanding the main components of the variable and build a foundational structure to provide a concept and perspective of the study.

Emotional Competence: Emotional Competence is rooted in Salovey and Mayer's (1990) framework, which delineates emotional intelligence as a form of social intelligence. Emotional Competence is often interchangeably used with emotional intelligence. It is described as the ability to understand and manage one's emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Here are some of the models:

1. Goleman (1995) categorized emotional competencies into self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management skills.
2. Salovey and Mayer (1990) framed a four branch model of emotional intelligence that included four key areas: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions and managing emotions.
3. Bar-On's Model of Emotional-Social Intelligence (ESI) (2006): This model emphasizes the interdependence of emotional skills and social skills like interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, adaptability, stress management and general mood.
4. The Ability Model by Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2008): This model views emotional intelligence as a standard type of intelligence with a unique set of mental abilities. It suggests that these abilities are distinct from general cognitive intelligence: perceiving emotions, understanding emotions, facilitating emotions, managing emotions.

Social Competence: Social competence involves the ability to navigate social interactions effectively, and display appropriate behaviours and responses in various social settings (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). It encompasses skills such as communication, cooperation and conflict resolution. Rubin, Bukowski, and Parker (1998) argue that social competence is multifaceted, incorporating both behavioural and emotional aspects. It is often evaluated regarding social adjustment and peer acceptance in children and adolescents. The interconnectedness of emotional and social competence, suggests that emotional skills underpin effective social interactions. Social competence models provide frameworks for understanding and assessing the skills and behaviours that contribute to effective social functioning. Here are some of the key models:

1. The Competence in Early Childhood Model by Denham (1986): This model includes components which are critical for successful peer interactions and relationships such as emotion recognition, understanding others' emotions, emotion regulation and empathetic responsiveness.
2. Gresham's Social Skills Model (1986): This model commonly proposed in education to identify and target areas for social skills training. The model categorizes social skills into four major domains such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility and self-control.
3. Rubin and Rose-Krasnor's Model of Social Competence (1992): This model conceptualizes the dynamic interplay between social skills, social knowledge, and social-cognitive processes, such as perspective-taking and emotion regulation. It suggests that social competence is not just a set of fixed traits but varies across different situations and relationships in context to the development in contents such as: Skills Layer comprising of empathy, communication, emotion regulation, social problem solving and social encoding. Indexical Layer comprising of social competence like friendships, prosocial behaviour and peer popularity.

Furthermore, the combination of emotional and social competence as a whole proposes that these competencies are interdependent, with emotional competence laying the foundation for social competence. In educational settings, this interdependence is vital for holistic student development, impacting academic success, mental health, and social adaptation (Zins et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2015). The role of environmental factors, including family, peers, and educational contexts, in shaping these competencies is also crucial (Denham et al., 2010; Elias & Arnold, 2006).

Neurological Understanding For Social-Emotional Competence

Comprehending the neurological dimension of social and emotional learning is paramount as brain growth is closely intertwined with relationships (social growth), experiences (emotional growth), and cognitive opportunities. The brain commences development from birth, advancing along with physical growth through different life stages. When people

encounter diverse relationships, situations, and issues, distinct concepts and tactics emerge, and these experiences impact brain functionality. Physiological needs and supportive learning settings are critical for the healthy development of children. Interventions at an early stage can also aid children in cultivating a positive outlook towards challenges. A collaborative classroom ambiance, rather than a competitive one, is optimal for achieving this (Immordino-Yang et al. 2018).

Studies have revealed that our brains possess specific networks that are designed to receive and process social information. These networks help us in recognizing others, understanding their perspectives, and evaluating both ourselves and others. Neuroimaging studies have shown that there are three key networks that are involved in processing social information. Plus, the brain plays a crucial role in interpreting social and emotional stimuli, indicating a close relationship between the brain and these domains (Nelson et al., 2005; Jetha & Segalowitz, 2012).

A growing body of literature, however, has begun to examine the experiences of urban middle-class parents who forgo private school options and remain in central-city public schools (Cucchiara, 2013a, 2013b; Posey-Maddox, 2016; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Posey-Maddox et al., 2016). These studies have mostly focused on white middle class parents of children who are at the elementary school level. These parents enroll their children in city public schools for various but inter-related reasons. First, enjoying the unique lifestyle city living provides, they have decided to settle in central cities rather than suburban areas (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). Some are also drawn to the diversity in urban public schools, settings that reflect the “real world” (Cucchiara, 2013b). Additional parents are open to “trying out” the public schools in their urban neighborhoods (Stillman, 2012), whereas others have left-leaning political values and support urban public education as a social justice concern (Cucchiara, 2013b; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Posey, 2012; Reay et al., 2011; Roda, 2018; Stillman, 2012). Other parents are turned off by the perceived, obsessive parenting styles they contend are more prevalent in wealthier, suburban schools (Cucchiara, 2013b; Stillman, 2012).

3. Importance of Social-Emotional Competence among Adolescents

Social and emotional competence is linked to positive outcomes in academics, mental health, and social/ behavioural domains throughout one's life. Through childhood and adolescence, young people learn how to express and regulate their emotions and understand the feelings of themselves and others.

1. **Overall Well-Being:** During adolescence, many become preoccupied with their self-image, self-worth, and physical appearance, which can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and stress (Snowman et al., 2009; Hertel & Johnson, 2013). If not handled effectively, these emotions can result in serious mental health issues, such as addiction, eating disorders, and depression. Combining self-focus and the emotional rollercoaster of adolescence can be challenging for some young people's social and emotional well-being (Beal et al., 2019; Cruz et al., 2022). The secondary school space is full of transitions and changes. The transition from primary school to secondary school can be a challenging experience for many students. They encounter physical changes as they move from the child to young adult phase, and they also face a shift in their academic environment and career decision-making, from dependence to independence, from being carefree to responsible. This alteration can often result in some students feeling lost and struggling to find their footing amongst the many new faces and unfamiliar surroundings (Main & Whatman, 2016). During childhood and adolescence, developing social and academic skills supports the successful completion of developmental milestones (Roy & Haripriya, 2018; Denham, 2019; Fan et al., 2026).
2. **Academic Learning:** The role of social-emotional competence in academic learning has increased in education, and much emphasis is being put on it (Denham et al., 2013; Panadero and Alonso-Tapia, 2013; Merry, 2015; Panadero et al., 2017). Improved social-emotional skills in early childhood are related to more successful development of cognitive and social skills. Higher social-emotional competence is known to be associated with decreased behavioural and emotional problems. Preschool children with strong behaviour management and self-regulation skills are likelier to participate in preschool activities. On the other hand, there is evidence that inadequate social and emotional competence can lead to problematic behaviours, emotional difficulties, and relationship issues. (Camilli et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Kautz et al., 2014). Developing social-emotional competence in children is crucially important and requires interaction between adults and

children. Teachers significantly enhance children's development across various domains, including social, emotional, cognitive, academic, and behavioural skills. A positive relationship between teachers and young students can improve academic achievement and behavioural skills (Alzahrani et al., 2019). Additionally, academic performance is directly influenced by social cognition. Cognitive competence has a positive association with academic emotions, while academic performance has a negative association with them. The findings indicate that learning is a highly social process, and we must prioritise investing in developing social-emotional skills and creating positive and supportive learning environments (Oberle, E., 2014; Hachem et al., 2022). Studies have demonstrated that social and emotional competence plays a significant role in shaping learning outcomes and their ability to exhibit positive behaviour. Prior research has suggested that students' capacity to adjust, regulate their emotions, and cultivate healthy relationships with others are vital factors in fostering academic motivation, increasing their ability to engage in the educational process, and developing favourable attitudes towards school and life (Elias et al., 1997; Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2013, Collie, 2022; Martisone et al., 2022).

3. **Social Behaviour:** Developing and maintaining healthy peer relationships is essential to social-emotional learning. The earlier this skill is learned, the better, as it is a crucial predictor of later mental health and well-being. This skill should be developed during preschool years and continued throughout the grade school years when peer reputations solidify, and beyond (Denham, 2007). Several studies have shown that school-based social-emotional learning programs can significantly improve student social and behavioural outcomes. A meta-analysis of such programs found that participants had increased pro-social behaviours and exhibited fewer conduct problems than non-participants. Adolescence is characterized by significant brain plasticity and growth, particularly in regions responsible for executive function and social cognition. This unique opportunity allows for enhanced learning of new skills and the formation of adult identity. Blakemore and Mills (2014) suggests that curriculum design and teaching practices should be strategically aligned with the understanding of the adolescence developmental processes to maximize learning potential. Educators can create classroom activities that effectively exploit periods of heightened neural plasticity when they learn “what” needs to be taught “when”. Ultimately, tailoring educational methods to the adolescent brain's receptiveness can lead to more effective learning experiences and better prepare young people for the challenges of adulthood. Furthermore, research has consistently demonstrated that programs aimed at enhancing social-emotional competencies have effectively improved social skills, pro-social behaviour, and reduced antisocial behaviour (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad, et al., 2012).

4. Recommendations

Educators can access and apply various methods to cultivate robust and positive connections with their students depending on the topics or subject they teach. However, the classroom environment in many Indian schools presents some unique challenges such as a large class size (Datta & Kingdon, 2021) with shared desks of two, leave limited space for hands-on activities or group activities or role plays. Additionally, the prolonged habit of students' rote learning and exam performance, rather than deeper understanding is rather a deeply ingrained practice in the system. Also, the teaching approach is often focused on imparting information and achieving grades, rather than creating a conducive environment for social and emotional well-being. Therefore, the attitudes and mindsets of both students and teachers towards learning pose another barrier to effectively integrate social-emotional learning practices into the regular classroom environment in India. Shifting these deep-rooted perspectives will be key if educators and teachers hope to cultivate the robust, positive student-teacher connections that facilitate impactful social-emotional learning in Indian classrooms. However still, below are some suggestions that teachers and educators can use to integrate into their teaching practices.

1. **Integrate Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) into Existing Curriculum:** It is highly recommended to adopt an integrated approach while teaching Social-Emotional Competence (SEC). Rather than considering it as a separate and distinct subject, teachers should incorporate it into the existing curriculum across all academic subjects. This approach offers several benefits, including continuous and contextualized learning. By integrating Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) into the curriculum, students can gain a better understanding of how it relates to other subjects and how it can be applied in real-life scenarios. This approach promotes a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of Social-Emotional Competence (SEC), which is essential for students to develop the skills necessary to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly (Elias et al., 1997 & Durlak et al., 2011). Some of the activities that teachers and educators can use in order to

2. **Age-Appropriate Activities:** Tailoring Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) related activities to students' developmental stages is crucial. For younger adolescents (ages 11-14), activities might focus on identifying and managing strong emotions, while older teens (15-18) could engage in more complex perspective-taking exercises. Steinberg (2005) emphasizes the importance of considering adolescent brain development in educational strategies. Additionally, Blakemore and Mills (2014) suggests the importance of understanding the adolescence period of transition and studying their brain development, structural changes and functional reorganization.
3. **Peer-to-Peer Learning:** Polak et al. (2024) provide evidence for the effectiveness of peer learning and shares that there was a significant correlation between social-emotional skills and peer to peer learning. Peer to Peer learning is collaborating with other peers in the group. Such collaborative learning environments foster active student engagement and dynamic interaction. When students work together, they create a rich, participatory atmosphere where ideas flow freely. This approach encourages students to vocalize their thoughts, share diverse perspectives and engage in meaningful exchanges. As they interact, students not only present their own ideas but also listen to and consider the viewpoints of their peers. This process of give-and-take allows for the development of critical thinking skills and self-reflection as students learn to offer constructive criticism and thoughtful suggestions. The reciprocal nature of these interactions ensures that each students has the opportunity to both contribute and receive feedback, creating a balanced learning experience, thus learning to take responsible decisions. Students can also deepen their understanding of the subject matter, refine their communication skills, be confident, independent and yet develop the ability to work effectively in team settings. Ultimately, this approach to learning mirrors real-world scenarios where cooperation and effective communication are essential, preparing students for future academic and professional challenges (Huang & Lajoie, 2023; Wen & Castek, 2024).
4. **Culturally Responsive Practices:** It is crucial to adapt Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) programs in a way that is culturally sensitive and adaptable to the diverse backgrounds and learning needs that exist in secondary schools. This would ensure that students from all walks of life would receive the necessary support to excel and succeed in their educational endeavors. There is a need to work on culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the importance of integrating students' cultural experiences into education. Hence, it is vital to take into account the unique cultural and learning differences of each student to create a conducive learning environment that caters to their specific needs. Incorporating culturally responsive teaching methods and content in Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) programs is crucial for ensuring relevance and inclusivity. This approach values diverse backgrounds and experiences, which is especially important in multicultural school settings. It emphasizes the need for culturally responsive teaching to address the unique needs of students (Zins et al., 2007 ; Gay, 2010).
5. **Bibliotherapy:** The practice of Bibliotherapy involves using literature to help people with their mental health and emotional well-being. It can be an excellent tool in secondary education to encourage discussions and reflections on various social and emotional topics. It has been emphasized that the advantages of bibliotherapy in enhancing empathy and emotional understanding among students (Shechtman, 2009; Denham et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022).
6. **Mindfulness Education:** Mindfulness practices have been successful in improving students' emotional regulation, reducing stress, and enhancing attention in schools. Studies have shown that mindfulness interventions can have positive impacts on elementary and adolescents' social and emotional competencies including their meta-cognitive skills. (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz and Walach, 2014; Gupta & Kaur; 2020).
7. **Art-Based Interventions:** Art, music, and drama therapies are effective modalities for adolescents to explore and express emotions. Notably, art therapy has demonstrated empirical evidence in improving emotional expression and comprehension among students (Malchiodi, 2013).
8. **Professional Development for Educators:** It is essential for educators to undergo Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) training to successfully execute programs. Providing workshops on the neuroscience of emotions or coaching sessions on implementing Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) in the classroom can enhance teacher effectiveness. This training encompasses a broad range of skills, including but not limited to, understanding one's own emotions, empathizing with the other, identifying and thereby developing effective teaching strategies and modeling skills accordingly in the classroom. By gaining a thorough understanding of Social-Emotional Competence (SEC), educators can greatly benefit their students by creating a positive and supportive learning environment that fosters growth and development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009 & Schonert-Reichl et al., 2014).
9. **Incorporate Technology-Based Tools:** Incorporating digital tools and platforms into social and emotional learning can be highly beneficial for adolescents. Given to the familiarity with the use of technology by students, such an approach can help increase student engagement and effectiveness in the learning process. By leveraging

digital tools and platforms, educators can create a more interactive and dynamic learning experience that promotes active participation and a deeper understanding of the material (Kowalski & Limber, 2013).

10. **Parental and Community Involvement:** Engaging parents and the wider community in Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) education can be highly beneficial for students. Conducting workshops and using communication strategies to involve parents in their children's social and emotional development can be highly beneficial. When parents and the community are involved in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs, it creates a supportive environment for students to practice and reinforce these skills outside the classroom. This can lead to greater success in academic and personal life, as students are better equipped to manage their emotions, handle stress, build positive relationships and make responsible decisions. By working together, parents, teachers, and the community can help ensure that students receive the necessary support to develop their social and emotional skills, leading to happier, healthier and more successful lives (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; Roy & Giraldo-Garcia, 2018; Yarza et al. 2024).
11. **Policy and Funding Support:** It is crucial for educational policymakers to recognize the significance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and prioritize the allocation of adequate funding and resources for the development and implementation of Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) programs. These programs aim to cultivate essential life skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making, which are critical for success in both personal and professional lives. By investing in Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) programs, policymakers can create a safer, more empathetic, and supportive environment for students, promoting their overall well-being and academic success (Durlak et al., 2011).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the adapted Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) framework presented by this investigation provides a comprehensive and integrated model for school curriculum development, serving as a critical reference point for fostering emotional and social intelligence, responsible decision-making, and reflective thinking within educational settings. It offers a comprehensive approach to fostering emotional and social intelligence, responsible decision-making, and reflective thinking, which is universal in nature. By integrating this framework into educational curricula, schools can provide students with the essential skills needed for personal growth, academic success, and future-readiness in a complex and dynamic world. The suggestions and recommendations provided can further aid in addressing the goals of Sustainable Development in terms of mental health and quality education.

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