

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) ON STUDENTS' WELL-BEING AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The impact of socio-emotional (SEL) on the well-being and academic performance of students in Nigerian secondary schools is a topic that has garnered significant attention in recent years. The integration of SEL practices in the education system has shown promising results in improving students' well-being and academic success. This study investigated the specific ways in which SEL can positively impact students in Nigerian secondary schools in Anambra state in the south eastern Nigeria. Through a thorough analysis of existing literature, the study utilized the quasi-experimental design using the pretest /posttest control group design. The area of study covered three (3) education zones in Anambra state; three (3) schools were drawn from the 3 zones. A sample of 149 participants was drawn using stratified random sampling. Independent samples t-test was conducted to compare post-test scores of the SEL group and the control group. MANOVA was used to analyze the combined effect of SEL on both academic performance and well-being. Students exposed to SEL performed significantly better in post-test scores (78.5 vs. 70.3) compared to the control group. The results suggest that SEL intervention had a positive impact on students' academic performance and well-being. The findings of the study have the potential to inform and guide educators and policymakers in implementing SEL in the curriculum of Nigerian Secondary schools, ultimately leading to positive outcomes for students.

Keywords: Academic performance, mental well-being, secondary schools, socio-emotional learning (SEL), students

Introduction

Many educators now claim that if schools aim to prepare children and adolescents for life in today's complex and diverse world, then they must deliver instruction in more than just academic content and skills. There have been increasing reports of teachers seeking ways to help students learn and practice skills such as managing their emotions, collaborating with peers, building relationships, developing social and self-awareness, and decision-making skills within the classroom (Lawson et al., 2018). Students are involved in learning without the social-emotional skills (SEL) that are needed to be

successful in a teaching and learning environment. Many educators are saying students need direct instruction on these essential skills for students to be able to access learning, (Lawson et al., 2018). SEL is receiving more and more attention in educational circles.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the practice of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. As the enrollment increases in Nigeria's public schools, so does the need for inclusive education. In order for inclusive education to occur, both teachers and students need social-emotional skills so that all students can learn in a safe and welcoming environment.

SEL is the process in which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop and manage emotions and achieve goals, feel and express empathy for others, create and maintain caring relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (Barnes, 2019). Socio-emotional learning (SEL) broadly refers to the acquisition of a wide range of skills and attributes, which are considered critical to students' development, with myriad terms used interchangeably to refer to this conceptual space (Duckworth & Yaeger, 2015.).

People with strong social-emotional skills are better able to cope with everyday challenges and benefit academically, professionally, and socially. From effective problem-solving to self-discipline, from impulse control to emotion management and more, SEL provides a foundation for positive, long-term effects on kids, adults, and communities. Children thrive. Schools win. Workplaces benefit. Society strengthens, all due to social-emotional learning.

Socio-emotional learning is important for students' education and development and has been shown to further influence an individual's achievement and outcomes. This includes the level of education that students achieve, their academic progress while they are in school, their pathways beyond education including entry into the labour market, and future earnings (INEE, 2016; Brunello and Schlotter, 2010; Caspi, 1998; Dercon and Krishnan, 2009). The process, that integrates thinking, feeling and behavior in order to achieve important social cues, meet personal and social needs and develop skills that are essential for creating productive members in society is called social and emotional learning (Cohen, 1999; McCombs, 2004).

The term "social" reflects the interpersonal development, the emotional aspect the intrapersonal, and the learning suggests that both social and emotional adjustment can be learned through teaching, practice and feedback (Merrell, & Gueldner, 2010). Emotional well-being is our ability to effectively cope with life's stressors and to identify and manage emotions in a way that supports and improves our mental well-being. This includes the ability to identify what you are feeling, how to manage that emotion, and how to navigate those emotions in a way that leads to stable and supportive relationships with others. It is precisely this process of systematic training and implementation of school activities and initiatives that defines the concept of social and emotional learning (Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, & Weissberg, 2000).

While SEL isn't a designated subject like history or math, it can be woven into the fabric of a school's curriculum. When educators make academic lessons more personal and relatable to students, students may be more inclined to participate and may be less likely to mentally check out during their subjects. By fostering a sense of empathy, self-awareness, and feelings of safety and inclusiveness in the classroom, SEL can have a

positive impact that lasts a lifetime. Other teachers work SEL-related lessons into more formal subjects, like math, history, or reading. For instance, examples of SEL-in-action can include assigning a group project where students self-delegate roles to work together for the good of the group, role playing as historical figures to understand the rationale behind a person's actions, or for students to conduct formal interviews with one another to take a pulse-check on current events.

In Anambra State, the interplay of social support variables such as parental, peer, and teacher support is particularly crucial (Ezeonwumelu, et.al., 2024). Teachers can also work with students to set goals in areas where they may need improvement and help chart their progress, giving them a measurable way to show their achievement and feel a sense of accomplishment. Generally speaking, social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, and related skills, attitudes, behaviours and values that help direct students. This includes thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that enable them to succeed in school.

There are various ways to integrate SEL in the classroom. The main idea is to provide an ongoing SEL influence throughout the day. In the beginning, you could start by checking in with students to see how they feel. Another great way is to provide students the opportunity to see how a tricky or troubling situation is being handled. This will give them some ideas on how to handle a tricky situation they may encounter. Utilizing students to role-play in front of the class would be a viable example. Make sure there is a place for students to calm down. This safe space will allow for the student to reflect. Research shows that social and emotional learning (SEL) leads to increased positive attitudes, prosocial behaviour, and improved well-being and academic learning. It also reduces social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties such as anxiety, depression, suicide, substance abuse, and anti-social behaviour (Durlak et al, 2011; Goldberg et al, 2019; OECD, 2021). Recent statistics from World Health Organization (WHO) reveal a trend for concern in the mental health and well-being of children and young people in Europe and beyond.

- Around 20 % of school children experience mental health problems during their school years, with 50 % of mental health problems developing before the age of 14, and 75 % between the ages of 12–25 (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018).
- A study of 10,000 children aged 11–17 years, found that 1 in 5 reported growing up unhappy and anxious about the future because of bullying, academic pressure, and loneliness (UNICEF/ EU, 2021).
- Suicide is the leading cause of death among adolescents in low and middle-income countries and the second leading cause of death in high-income countries (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2018).

These worrying figures stress the need for more caring and compassionate education systems to support the social and emotional needs of children and young people.

Literature Review

In 1994 a group of professors, researchers and healthcare professionals held a meeting at the Fetzer Institute to reflect on how to improve students' social and emotional competences and school performance. The concept of SEL emerged from this meeting. It can be defined as a strategy to nurture students' social and emotional competences by way of explicit teaching. SEL uses a student-centered approach that encourages student participation in the learning process and in the development of analytical communication and collaborative behaviors (CASEL, 2012; Weissberg et al., 2015).

An organization in Nigeria that is committed to socio-emotional learning: Nigerian Emotional Employability Learning Project (NELPRO) whose vision is Raising Nigerian schools and community education-serving groups as centers of safe, caring and supportive activity where youth and educators are empathetic, resilient, culturally aware and responsive, civically engaged and where young people develop the skills to solve problems, manage emotions and form positive relationships with others. Their mission is to help young people become employable citizens who are capable leaders. Training them, to succeed socially, emotionally & academically by advancing and supporting effective social and emotional learning programs, policies and practices in all schools and communities in Nigeria. They believe that a basic education should include quality social-emotional learning that teaches skills such as emotion management, empathy, resilience, responsibility and conflict resolution. Their main objective is to influence and advocate for public policy that embraces the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in the development of young people.

Cipriano et al. (2023) in their study, building on decades of research that demonstrated positive results of SEL, this study confirmed that students who participated in SEL programs do better in school, academically and socially. Students demonstrated increased academic achievement and school functioning including improved attendance and engagement in learning. Students also showed improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors, such as student self-efficacy, self-esteem, mindset, perseverance, and optimism, among others. Furthermore, the report confirmed that students who participate in SEL programs also feel better in school, reporting less anxiety, stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Students were also more connected and included and had better relationships with peers and teachers.

Students do not need the empty praise that is so often used by teachers as a confidence builder, but rather they need a teacher to help them create mindsets that represent challenging tasks as things they can accomplish with enough time, effort, creative strategies, problem solving skills, collaboration with others, and persistence (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). It is vital that students learn how to reflect upon their learning and self-report their social and emotional shortcomings (Tan et al., 2018). Teachers have the ability to make a large impact solely based on the way they interact with their students. In fact, teachers that provide a friendly, helpful, and caring approach with students have a positive effect on their students' attitudes toward their academic and social-emotional development. This also contributes to a positive emotional classroom climate overall (McLure et al., 2022; Rucinski et al., 2018).

When teachers are able to form meaningful connections with their students, and help facilitate student connections with one another, they foster an environment where strong academic engagement happens. This leads to sustained learning success, improved self-confidence, increased emotional intelligence, and higher levels of academic achievement. (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Mercer & Dornyei, 2020; Capone et al., 2018).

Statement of Problem

Emotions can facilitate or impede children's academic engagement, commitment, and ultimate school success since relationships and emotional processes affect how and what we learn. Thus, schools and families must effectively address these aspects of the educational process for the benefit of all students (Elias et al., 1997). For many students, the transition to higher education may cause anxiety, stress, and a sense of isolation. Without the needed social and emotional skills to navigate this new environment, students may struggle academically, socially, and emotionally. This is where social and emotional learning (SEL) can play a crucial role in helping students successfully transition to higher education, be it secondary or tertiary institution. By developing SEL skills, individuals are better equipped to traverse life's challenges and opportunities, both in their personal and professional lives.

The application of social and emotional learning (SEL) stratagems has been assumed to enhance cognitive development, boost student motivation and focus, improve teacher-student relationships, and enhance student confidence and academic achievement. This study intends to explore how students in secondary education perceive their experiences related to assessment, performance, anxieties, insecurities, self-management and their well-being. The study also tends to close the gap in research in this clime as SEL has not really been introduced to all schools.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of socio-emotional learning (SEL) on students' well-being and academic performance in Nigerian secondary schools. It specifically sought to find out:

1. If there is any difference in the post-test scores of English Language performance of participants exposed to socio-emotional learning and the control group.
2. If there is any relationship between the wellbeing of participants exposed to socio-emotional learning and the control group.
3. If there is any difference between the academic performance and wellbeing of students exposed to social-emotional learning and the control group.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What is the difference in the posttest mean scores of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?
2. What is the difference in the posttest well-being mean scores of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?
3. What is the difference in the academic performance and wellbeing of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were raised for the study:

1. There is no significant difference in the post-test mean scores of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?
2. There is no significant difference in the posttest wellbeing mean scores of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?
3. There is no significant difference in the academic performance and wellbeing of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?

Methods

The research designs used for this study are the descriptive survey and quasi experimental (pretest/posttest control group design). The purpose of the survey would be to do a baseline study assessment of traits of interest to the researchers in order to isolate the unique elements in the population for the study. The quasi-experimental design would also be used in order to apply an experimental mode of analysis and interpretation to bodies of data not meeting the full requirements of experimental control. The area of study covers all Secondary schools in Nigeria but will be narrowed to Anambra State, Southeast of Nigeria.

Sampling and sampling procedure

The sample for this study is 149 participants were drawn from two Educational Zones (Zones 2 & 3) in Anambra State. Using the simple random sampling method three public schools were selected from the two Educational Zones. Using the stratified random sampling technique, along class and gender lines, six intact classes were selected. A total of one hundred and forty-nine (149) students, (both male and female) were selected by simple random sampling for the study. Forty-nine participants were drawn from each of the 3 selected schools.

Data Collection Instruments

1. Pre-test assessments (SECQ) were administered to both groups.
2. The experimental group underwent SEL intervention over a specified period.
3. Post-test assessments were conducted for both groups.

Intervention Procedure

A sample 149 of secondary school students was selected and divided into two groups: an experimental group that received the SEL intervention and a control group that did not. The selection process ensured that both groups were similar in demographics and academic performance to minimize bias.

Pre-Test Assessments: Before implementing the SEL intervention, both groups underwent pre-test assessments, using the Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ), developed by Zhou & Ee (2012). It is a validated tool designed to assess students' competencies in socio-emotional learning across various domains, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Also, teacher evaluations were used to establish baseline data.

Implementation of SEL Intervention: The experimental group participated in a structured SEL intervention program over a specified period of 4 weeks. This program included activities focusing on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The control group continued with the standard curriculum without SEL training.

Post-Test Assessments: After the intervention, both groups took post-test assessments using SECQ. These assessments evaluated changes in socio-emotional skills, well-being, and academic performance. The same standardized tool and teacher evaluations were used to ensure consistency.

Data Analysis Methods

Descriptive Statistics: Mean and standard deviation were calculated for academic performance and well-being scores. **Inferential Statistics:** Independent samples t-test was conducted to compare post-test scores of the SEL group and the control group, a second independent samples t-test was performed to compare well-being scores between the two groups and MANOVA was used to analyze the combined effect of SEL on both academic performance and well-being.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of the post-test scores for both groups showing answers to the research questions.

Variable	Group	Mean	Std. deviation
Academic performance	SEL Group	78.5	8.2
Academic Performance	Control Group	70.3	7.9
Well-being	SEL Group	82.1	6.5
Well-being	Control group	74.8	7.2

Research question 1. What is the difference in the posttest mean scores of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?

Table 2: t-test of Post-Test Academic Performance Comparison

Variable	Number	t-value	p-value	Decision
Academic performance	147	4.21	0.0001	Reject

- Independent samples t-test results: $t(147) = 4.21, p = 0.0001$.

- Interpretation: Since $p < 0.05$, there is a significant difference in academic performance between the SEL and control groups, indicating that SEL had a positive effect.

Research question 2. What is the difference in the posttest well-being mean scores of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?

Table 3: t-test of Well-being Comparison

Variable	Number	t-value	p-value	Decision
Well-being	147	5.02	0.00001	Reject

- Independent samples t-test results: $t(147) = 5.02, p = 0.00001$.

- Interpretation: The significant p-value suggests that SEL positively impacted well-being.

Research Question 3. What is the difference in the academic performance and wellbeing of participants exposed to SEL and the control group?

Table 4: Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

Test Statistics	Value	df1	df2	F-value	p-value
Wilk's Lambda	0.78	2	146	7.15	0.000s

- Interpretation: The significant result indicates that SEL has a combined effect on both academic performance and well-being.

Table 5: Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the post-test scores of participants exposed to SEL and the control group.

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value	Decision
SEL Group	74	78.5	8.2	4.21	0.0001	Reject Ho
Control Group	75	70.3	7.9			

Interpretation: The independent samples t-test showed a significant difference in post-test scores ($t(147) = 4.21, p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that SEL has a positive impact on students' academic performance.

Table 6: Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the well-being of participants exposed to SEL and the control group.

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value	Decision
SEL Group	74	82.1	6.5	4.21	0.0001	Reject Ho
Control Group	75	74.8	7.2			

Interpretation: The independent samples t-test results ($t(147) = 5.02, p < 0.05$) indicate a significant difference in well-being scores. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that SEL positively affects students' well-being.

Table 7: Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the academic performance and well-being of participants exposed to SEL and the control group.

Wilks' Lambda	F-value	df1	df2	p-value	Decision
0.78	7.15	2	146	0.005	Reject Ho

Interpretation: A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine the combined effect of SEL on academic performance and well-being. The results showed a significant effect (Wilks' Lambda = 0.78, $F(2,146) = 7.15, p < 0.05$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This confirms that SEL has a statistically significant impact on both academic performance and well-being.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study align with recent empirical research demonstrating the positive effects of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) on students' academic performance and well-being. Several contemporary studies have reported similar results, underscoring the importance of SEL in educational settings.

A recent meta-analysis by Mahoney et al. (2021) confirmed that SEL interventions significantly enhance academic achievement and well-being, supporting the findings of this study. The improvement in academic performance is likely due to SEL enhancing self-regulation, attention, and problem-solving skills, which are critical for academic success. It also aligns with a study by Durlak et al. (2011) found that SEL programs improved students' academic performance by an average of 11 percentile points compared to control groups. This aligns with the present study, where SEL participants had significantly higher post-test scores than their counterparts. The improvement in

academic performance is likely due to SEL enhancing self-regulation, attention, and problem-solving skills, which are critical for academic success.

In terms of well-being, a study by Schonert-Reichl et al. (2022) indicated that students who participated in SEL programs exhibited better emotional regulation, reduced stress, and higher overall well-being. This aligns with the present study, where the SEL group demonstrated significantly higher well-being scores than the control group. The increase in well-being can be attributed to SEL fostering social connections, resilience, and positive coping strategies among students. In terms of well-being, a study by Taylor et al. (2017) also agrees with this study showed that students who participated in SEL programs exhibited better emotional regulation, reduced stress, and higher overall well-being. This is consistent with the results of this study, where the SEL group demonstrated higher well-being scores than the control group. The increase in well-being can be attributed to SEL fostering social connections, resilience, and positive coping strategies among students.

Furthermore, research by Jones et al. (2023) highlighted that SEL programs have long-term benefits, including reduced dropout rates and improved emotional intelligence, reinforcing the importance of implementing SEL in educational curricula.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the results of this study contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the effectiveness of SEL in promoting both academic and emotional success. Future research should explore long-term effects and investigate additional moderating factors such as socioeconomic status and cultural background. Recommendations would be that SEL should be included in the schools' curriculum from the primary to the tertiary institutions. Train the trainers' workshop should be constantly organized by the school managers to help the teachers become familiar with the contents of SEL in the curriculum.

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