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Social Emotional Learning and Technology Integration

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This paper examines how technology and social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies can enhance pedagogy and create meaningful learning experiences. Integrating SEL fosters supportive environments that spark students' interest and sustain focus. Historically, educators have improved learning through evidence-based learning theories that include **cognitive learning** (mental processes for comprehension and application), **behaviorism** (behavior change through reinforcement), **constructivism** (active learning based on prior knowledge), **social learning theory** (modeling and vicarious learning), and **critical theory** (developing awareness of systemic inequities). These frameworks provide a strong foundation for meaningful and productive pedagogical activities and experiences. We discuss how SEL is deeply connected to cognitive, social, interpersonal, and technological processes that shape how we learn, comprehend, and interpret information. SEL scholars emphasize the development of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship building, and mindset skills. Teachers can amplify SEL activities in the classroom using innovative technologies to offer immersive and experiential learning opportunities. Effective integration requires educators to use theory to inform technology integration to inspire engagement and creativity, considering the benefits and challenges of technologies—particularly generative artificial intelligence (Gen-AI) in supporting SEL and calls for further empirical research.

Introduction

This paper examines how integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks and activities into our teaching can motivate students to engage in learning processes, help them develop and regulate their study behaviors, and facilitate meaningful learning experiences. The authors argue that using SEL principles as a foundation for applying holistic pedagogy enhances learning engagement. Education scholar-practitioners have sought to improve learning by researching how to enhance our cognitive and mental processes (cognitive learning), reinforce and maintain productive observable learned behaviors (behaviorism), make deep connections to prior knowledge and promote active learner engagement (constructivism), and raise critical awareness of systemic educational inequities and impacts on historically marginalized learners (critical pedagogy). These learning theories inform our pedagogical values, epistemologies, and praxis.

The authors seek to understand how SEL paradigms align with established learning theories, using instructional technology as a connector or a bridge. Scholarly research indicates that applying SEL strategies helps students regulate their emotional intelligence, enabling the development of their self, social, and relational awareness. The social-emotional learning approach emphasizes that learners' inner, subjective feelings are vital for stimulating their desire to learn and motivation to participate actively in the educational process.

Thus, centering students' learning and well-being in the pedagogical process is vital. Educators can use technology and digital media to enhance their teaching and learning activities to facilitate community building and a sense of belonging, foster relational collaborative experiences, and implement authentic experiential learning opportunities. Educators can use technology to extend learning and exploration beyond the classroom.

Admittedly, the persistence of the digital divide adversely impacts students' learning experiences due to limited access to digital tools and high-speed internet. Understanding the affordances of educational technology is inequitable; the authors discuss how technology can enhance the application of SEL tenets.

Overview of Social Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is "the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others, competencies that are essential for all students" (Zins & Elias, 2006, p. 28). McKown (2017) believes that SEL is a process through which learners acquire the skills and competencies necessary for a successful life. The skills and competencies include the ability to understand thought processes, feelings (emotions), positive interaction, and the ability to engage in positive relationships, including the acceptance of cultural relativity. Emotional intelligence is central to the SEL paradigm (Nisa & Abdullah, 2023). It embodies our ability to understand, identify, regulate our emotions, and reflect critically on how our emotions impact others (Harvard Continuing Education Division). SEL scholars concede that cultivating productive social and emotional dispositions in students and educators positively influences their pedagogical experiences and academic success. Nisa & Abdullah (2023) explain that "students who develop strong social and emotional skills are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and perform better academically" (p. 2). Considering the connections between learning and social and emotional wellness, Eloff (2023) contends that developing positive emotions in students creates a generative learning environment that promotes personal and professional growth and self-expression, encouraging students to bond with peers. Learning environments that

incorporate and promote SEL strategies can help students to "become more open in expressing their feelings, which shows improvement in interpersonal communication skills" (Nisa & Abdullah, 2023, p. 22). Well-designed SEL programs sustain a resilient and compassionate environment that helps students develop a productive communal learning experience that catalyzes academic success. SEL is not a new pedagogical framework; its impact on teaching and learning has been thoroughly researched for decades. Wang et al.'s (1997) conducted a content analysis of 179 book chapters on education research, analysis of insights from education researchers, and findings from 91 meta-analysis research studies. The study aimed to develop a robust knowledge base of influencing factors on student learning by analyzing the impact of various educational, psychological, and social factors on student learning. Wang et al. concluded that "8 out of the 11 most influential categories involved social and emotional factors such as "student-teacher social interaction, classroom climate, and peer group" (p. 1).

Furthermore, the researcher found that the most influential factors on student learning were the quality of educational activities, home environment, and psychological considerations. Other less influential factors were educational policies, demographics, and institutional systems. The most impactful considerations were the frequent interactions among school community members (e.g., students, teachers, and parents). The implication of Wang et al.'s finding is that education improvement and policy should take social-emotional factors into account, with emphasis on cultivating meaningful relationships and interactions between the school and external student communities. The implication is to consider how schools are deeply connected to the community they serve.

Building on this discussion of the historical roots of SEL, there are notable parallels between SEL frameworks and Social cognitive theory (SCT) and Social Learning Theory (CLT). We argue that social emotional learning (SEL) is a component of social learning theories that bridges tenets of cognitive and behaviorist learning theories. Both theories maintain that learning is productive when practiced as a social activity where learners collaborate and learn from each other through observing positive behaviors (Bandura, 1977; Muro & Jeffrey, 2008). These learning opportunities can inform and facilitate proactive changes in students' behaviors and learning engagement (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). SCT acknowledges that students learn through observing, modeling, and imitating behaviors that could positively impact their attitude (Bandura, 1977). The underlying assumption is that students learn effectively when the instruction is interactive, supporting the co-development of knowledge and experience. These pedagogical experiences integrate cognitive and behaviorist praxis enabling students acquire knowledge and skills to reinforce learning (Bandura, 1977).

Deepening our examination of SEL, it is worth noting the important role various diverse environments or ecosystems play in SEL development in students. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory enables us to understand the aims, roles, and functions of different environmental systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) and their interconnectedness. Exploring SEL on a microsystem level, Bronfenbrenner recognized "how the quality and nature of interactions" (p. 1) between students, peers, teachers, family, and schools "significantly impact student learning and development" (McLeod, S., 2020, p. 1). Similarly, Kaufman et al.'s (2001) study supports the case for SEL. They

found the primary reason for school dropouts was connected to social-emotional factors, specifically students feeling excluded, unsafe, threatened, and navigating conflicts with teachers and classmates.

Moreover, Benton (2022) states that the National Commission on SEL and Academic Development commissioned 28 top scientists to review available research on SEL and found that there is conclusive evidence that SEL skills and competencies are essential to learning and are linked to academic success. In agreement, Zhao et al. (2021) posits that "the results of their study show that adolescent self-esteem positively predicts academic engagement and that high levels of self-esteem can increase academic engagement (p. 5). Caring relationships create positive attitudes, leading to hard work, perseverance, and educational engagement (Legault et al., 2006).

Scholarly discourse on SEL illustrates that attempting to resolve low academic performance without considering the social-emotional attributes is unlikely to lead to positive learning outcomes. Not addressing students' emotions inhibits teachers' and students' abilities to cultivate a sense of belonging that fosters a safe, holistic learning environment. Mahmoudi et al. (2012) explain that "holistic education" focuses "on the development of the entire person, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and intellectual aspects, rather than solely on academic achievement" (p. 179). SEL aims to empower well-rounded students, helping them to develop their identities, sense of purpose, and self and social awareness in their learning experiences (Mahmoudi et al., 2012, p.178).

Fundamentals of Social Emotional Learning

The framework includes the following fundamental principles:

- **Self-awareness** refers to understanding one's emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and how they impact others. It is also an awareness of one's strengths and limitations, reflecting and recognizing strategies that support learning and development. A pedagogical application of this core tenet could involve encouraging students and educators to grapple with pedagogical materials and activities that challenge and shift their critical awareness of self, perceptions, values, epistemologies, and pedagogical praxis.
- **Social awareness** refers to showing sympathy for others, recognizing cultural relativity, and celebrating our similarities and differences across communities. An education application could incorporate teaching and learning activities and experiences that raise students' critical consciousness by examining critical theories and the interplay of intersectional and cultural identities and structural inequities.
- **Self-management** is regulating and managing responsibilities and coping with life demands and obligations. An education application entails designing pedagogical experiences that support students to be independent learners and thinkers who regulate and monitor their learning progress—empowering learners to be curious and question long-standing assumptions.
- **Responsible decision-making** involves developing knowledge and skills to make ethical and informed decisions. Consider how one's decision-making impacts oneself and others. An education application could involve designing learning opportunities that support teachers and students to explore, examine, and discuss ethically informed teaching, learning, and assessment decisions.
- **Relationship skills** refer to building and maintaining healthy relationships with others, navigating personal and professional conflict, and maintaining one's social-emotional health and well-being. An education application focuses on including pedagogical activities that build community and relationships, facilitate collaborative and service learning, support peer learning, and develop productive conflict management strategies.
- **Mindset** refers to an individual's beliefs and attitudes about events, people, situations, and circumstances in life. An educational application supports creating conditions and environments that encourage students to reflect on their ability to accomplish their learning goals and solve problems. The following mindset questions and the corresponding responses demonstrate an example of how teachers help students use mindset strategies to engage students to reflect on their learning resilience and perseverance.

Table 1 illustrates an example of addressing mindset in an educational setting.

Table1:Example of Mindset Application

#	Questions	Examples Responses
1	What do you do to persevere when you experience difficulties in your academic/learning experiences?	I learn from my mistakes and keep on trying until I succeed.
2	What do you do to solve a persistent problem?	Try different ways to resolve the problem.
3	What do you do to stay resilient during challenging times/experiences?	Continue trying to achieve your goal in life and never quit.

SEL As Foundation for Teaching and Learning

The social aspects of teaching and learning are not always cultivated or reinforced in the classroom, irrespective of the type of instructional modality or learning context. Traditional teaching methods focus on imparting knowledge to students, with limited attention to the SEL tenets described earlier. The SEL paradigm considers students' social-emotional wellness and readiness as foundations of teaching and learning. McCormick et al. (2020) argue that "lower levels of social-emotional competencies, such as the ability to manage and regulate one's behaviors and emotions and to resolve conflicts, are associated with poor academic skills when children begin formal schooling" (p. 1). Similarly, Raver's (2002) study indicated that a lack of the ability to manage conflict or regulate behaviors is associated with low academic performance. The author claims that the findings have helped promote expanding SEL programs in schools. Empirical evidence shows that SEL programs can positively impact children's social emotions and academic achievement (Corcoran et al., 2018; Brackett et al., 2012; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis study of SEL involving 213 schools with 270,034 students from kindergarten, primary, middle, and high school. The researchers concluded that SEL principles and activities are effective when incorporated into the curriculum rather than as an add-on activity or isolated intervention. The study shows that the inclusion of SEL programs into the learning contents "is successful at all educational levels (kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school) and in urban, suburban, and rural schools..." (p. 417). The lesson from Durlak et al. (2011) showed that SEL encourages students to develop attitudes that help them manage emotional intelligence positively, regardless of educational level. Establishing a positive

and collaborative learning relationship with peers and teachers improves learning engagement and outcomes.

The SEL pedagogical strategy empowers the development of critical self-awareness in educators and students, allowing them to be open and curious when collaborating with culturally diverse people with intersectional identities. It entails building communities that cultivate productive, relational, and generative learning experiences with people and communities that deepen the comprehension and application of knowledge skills. Sociocultural learning theorists describe learning as a social activity in which learners and educators with unique needs and experiences work collectively and closely to exchange knowledge and experiences. This collective learning centers on social-emotional learning, necessary for cultivating productive relationships and building a positive mindset that recognizes students' and educators' knowledge and experiences as assets in the learning environment. SEL requires educators and paraprofessionals to design and implement holistic and critical pedagogical principles that empower essential inquiry, collaboration, and creative problem-solving.

Application of SEL Principles in Education

SEL is a tool that can benefit the school community, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. The characteristics of SEL, such as self and social awareness, conflict management, collaborative engagement, and relationship building, could create a dynamic, favorable school climate that is supportive and inclusive. The idea is to promote trust so students can develop a sense of belonging.

School administrators can use SEL to emphasize the importance of social awareness and create school policy rooted in equity frameworks and respect for the school and

the community. SEL frameworks are not limited to helping teachers, administrators can use SEL strategies to work with teachers, curriculum specialists, and other personnel within the institution. Administrators could facilitate dialogue about self and social awareness across the school community members about their school's guiding values and strategies for developing proactive emotional relationships with and beyond the school community. School administrators can benefit from infusing SEL strategies into faculty and staff professional development programs to support their self-awareness and self-regulation skills and develop their conflict management skills. Teachers could use SEL knowledge to implement humanizing classroom management practices and policies that build on students' strengths rather than honing in on their challenges or perceived deficiencies. Teachers can authentically apply strategies that recognize each student's knowledge and experiences as strengths in the learning environment.

Understanding and building productive emotional relationships could lead to open discourse around challenging topics that impact students' learning experiences and academic successes—cultivating spaces where community members can share vulnerabilities in an environment rooted in equity and just treatment of its members. School administrators can benefit from infusing SEL strategies into faculty and staff professional development programs to encourage social awareness, conflict management, and building inclusive relationships and a sense of belonging. Zins and Elias (2006) state, "Instruction in SEL is provided in the context of a caring, safe, well-managed, and participatory classroom, school, and other learning environments. According to Norman & Jamieson (2015) "children with strong social and emotional learning competencies have the capability to

calm themselves when they are angry, establish and sustain friendships, resolve conflicts in a respectful and constructive manner and can make safe and ethical decisions (p. 1296).

SEL strategies have broader applications beyond teaching and learning. They can be applied to facilitate how administrators, teachers, and staff manage their behaviors and attitudes in different professional settings and contexts. Additionally, school counselors could incorporate SEL techniques when providing care and mental health guidance to students who experience different challenges. McKown (2017) delineates the competencies embodied in SEL, which include "the ability to infer others' thoughts and feelings (thinking skills), the ability to initiate a positive interaction (behavioral skills), and the ability to stay calm when upset (self-control skills)" (p. 2). Administrators, educators, staff, and other community members use and reinforce the competencies outlined by McKown to cultivate positive, and collegial work environments.

Application of social-emotional learning theory in education could serve an important role in times of uncertainty and frustration, such as was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency transition to online learning. Students, families, and communities experience loss of belonging to self and others due to limited opportunities to nurture and maintain supportive relationships in internal and external ecological systems. One of the fundamental principles of SEL is to engender empathetic dispositions in educators and students who ask questions to understand without malice or judgment. Educators must understand how their attitudes and dispositions positively or negatively influence students' well-being, learning experiences, and successes. SEL encourages reflecting critically on how

teacher-student interactions and relationships impact students' self-regulation of emotions and behaviors.

Technological Integration and SEL Application in the Classroom

Technology is a powerful tool that can enhance the application of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) principles in different learning environments, particularly when theory informs technology integration. For this paper, we use the term *technology* broadly to encompass a range of tools—from low-tech resources such as paper, pens, and pencils to medium-tech web-based tools like Canva, H5P, and Padlet, as well as high-tech solutions including learning and content management systems and artificial intelligence. Educators can use technology to cultivate applications of SEL tenets in education. Sociocultural learning theorists like Vygotsky describe cognitive tools (e.g., language, tools, numeracy, and literacy systems) as cultural artifacts passed down through generations. Cognitive tools help students negotiate their thinking, comprehension, creativity, and problem-solving. Drawing on Vygotsky's wisdom, technology is a cognitive tool that educators use and model for students to construct, investigate, reflect, and think critically in different learning environments.

Integrating technology can help educators and students to create immersive interactive media-rich pedagogical experiences for educators and students. Similarly, teachers can use technology and digital media to promote SEL principles to help students grow academically and interpersonally. The advantage of using technology is that educators and students can co-design learning environments that provide opportunities to daydream, explore, interrogate, and grow. Students can use technology creatively to investigate the unknown,

inspiring joy, wonder, curiosity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

A fundamental principle of SEL is relationship building. Educators can design collaborative learning experiences using technology that enables students to demonstrate their understanding of course materials while developing productive relationships with their peers and teachers. Examples of technology-mediated SEL activities could include, but are not limited to, creating video reflections of their learning experiences and sharing them with peers. They can grow their interpersonal and communication skills through interactive collaborative presentations and infographic software. They can use gamified assessment tools (e.g., Kahoot, Quizlet, and H5P) to monitor, assess, and improve their learning progress. Students can develop self and social awareness skills to deepen their understanding of their behaviors and how they affect themselves and others. For example, teachers and students can examine how social media cultivates participatory culture, allowing students to develop their digital identities, considering how they shift and evolve in digital and physical/analog spaces. Such activities support responsible decision-making, relationship-building, and mindset development discussions. Technology integration for learning offers opportunities to implement SEL activities expansively and creatively to motivate students to learn.

Another important consideration is the role artificial intelligence (AI), specifically, generative AI (Gen-AI), plays in fostering SEL practice and activities. Gen-AI is becoming increasingly integral in education processes and in other sociopolitical systems. Educators can use Gen-AI to enhance the application of SEL in the classroom. For instance, we can use Gen-AI software to brainstorm and generate SEL-infused pedagogical activities

to develop SEL knowledge and skills in students. Sciuchetti (2017) argues that SEL can foster learning environments that nurture cultural diversity and emotional intelligence, and Gen-AI can generate educational materials that align with those pedagogical goals. A note of caution is that the overreliance on Gen-AI tools to produce ideas may erode our human connection. SEL literature suggests that applications of SEL are meaningful and successful when we (humans) care for, interact, collaborate, and engage with each other. When integrating Gen-AI, we must remain mindful of what makes us uniquely human. Institutions and individuals are responsible for defining and upholding ethical and responsible use of Gen-AI to safeguard student well-being and ensure their welfare.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can assist teachers by generating instructional materials tailored to students' pace and style, supporting personalized learning experiences. Educators can use gen-AI to quickly create pedagogical resources like visuals, problem-based scenarios, and other resources to model desired behaviors, helping students practice empathy and collaboration through visual cues. Teachers can leverage Gen-AI to design culturally responsive content and learning activities that promote inclusivity and awareness of diverse perspectives. Similarly, virtual and augmented reality provide immersive experiences that expose students to different cultures, broadening their understanding and empathy. Fiorentin et al. (2021) acknowledge that "digital learning environments offer tools to help educators empower students to express their interpersonal stories, experiences, and differences within extended applications of LMS" (p.18). Research highlights that digital learning environments can empower students to express interpersonal differences and narratives, making learning management

systems (LMSs) a versatile platform for SEL strategies. While rapid technological innovations such as generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), adaptive learning, and virtual and augmented learning provide opportunities to create immersive learning experiences, it is not without limitations.

Despite these merits of technology integration, it also creates challenges for educational institutions that teachers, students, and families must navigate and address. Excessive reliance on digital tools can diminish authentic social interactions, as students may become isolated or overly focused on screens, weakening classroom relationships. Technology isolation among students can interfere with collaborative learning, inhibiting a shared learning experience (Alhumaid, 2019). Additionally, access to devices and connectivity disparities exacerbate social and digital inequalities among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The digital divide is a structural inequity that prevents under-resourced communities from accessing computers and the fast-paced internet. Solomon et al. (2003), cited in Kingston (2013), argued that equitable distribution of instructional technology should form the foundation for implementing technology integration. Penuel and DiGiacomo (2018) share similar views expressed by Chang (2012), indicating that digital equity is essential for students to have opportunities to gain experience with technology as they implement SEL strategies regardless of instructional delivery method. The authors (Solomon et al.) remark that:

Equity in education means ensuring that every student, regardless of socioeconomic status, language, race, geography, physical restrictions, cultural background, gender, or other attributes historically associated with inequities, has equitable access to

advanced technologies, communication and information resources, and the learning experiences they provide (p.15).

The digital divide continues to limit access to education technologies, adversely impacting students' ability to develop their technological knowledge and skills. Information overload is another concern; the constant flow of digital content can overwhelm learners and slow progress. Distractions from digital platforms may impair attention, learning engagement, and SEL skills, specifically relationship building. Finally, while AI can simulate emotional responses, these may lack authenticity and fail to sustain meaningful connections, underscoring the irreplaceable role of human interaction in SEL.

Another significant limitation to consider is embedded inequities within technological and automated systems designed to perpetuate harmful biases and discriminatory treatment toward underrepresented and marginalized communities (Benjamin, 2019). Educational institutions must recognize how AI affects all community members and critically assesses whether integrating automated systems and technologies aligns—or conflicts—with values grounded in equity and justice.

Conclusion

Education professionals and researchers often focus on the positive aspects of digital tools (Bayne, 2014; Erstad & Arnseth, 2013). However, we must not neglect the need to ask critical questions about the design, production, and application of emerging technology in education. We recommend the thoughtful and intentional application of technology to support and facilitate SEL frameworks that authentically cultivate productive and equity-centered learning. The review of empirical research studies revealed

that intentional applications of SEL principles can help students develop self-awareness, self-management, relationship-building, and decision-making skills, influencing their impetus to learning and development. Educational institutions can also leverage technology and digital media for learning to promote and sustain students' social-emotional learning tenets. Educators can use technology to immerse students in embodied learning experiences that encourage, cultivate, and empower the application of SEL principles (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, relationship-building, and decision-making skills).

However, we acknowledge that the digital divide creates gaps in technology knowledge and skills in under-resourced schools and communities. While empirical education research shows that SEL positively influences student learning experiences and behaviors, future studies could examine how technology integration could support applications of SEL principles in the school curriculum. Research suggests that SEL tools are instrumental for inducing behaviors that help children, adults, students, and teachers to develop amicable relationships and social behaviors that invoke empathy and emotional stability, which are necessary for school success and career advancement. Effective use of technology can improve SEL instruction for academic success. We also urge caution when integrating generative AI tools into education for cultivating students' social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, to prevent overreliance on digital solutions at the expense of authentic human connections.

Discussion and Application Activities

1. How do instructional and learning designers, as well as educators, authentically apply the principles of social-emotional learning (SEL) in diverse learning environments with

varied student populations?

2. In what ways do technological innovations (such as generative artificial intelligence, automated adaptive learning, and virtual or augmented reality) influence or reshape your pedagogical practices? How does technology aid and support your SEL activities in the classroom? Additionally, how do you manage, navigate or address the digital divide in your educational context?
3. Design and create a learning to students' social-emotional skills using technology (e.g. Gen-AI). Share creations or artifacts with peers and colleagues. Discuss how implications of using automated technology like Gen-AI in education and to cultivate SEL principles.
4. Create an engaging and interactive pedagogical activity that empowers students to develop their self-awareness, self-management, relationship building, and responsible decision-making skills. Consider how you assess that your activity aligned with your students' learning outcomes.

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