Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood: Examining the Role of Social-Emotional Learning in Reducing Anxiety and Aggression in Elementary School Children

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ABSTRACT
Background: Emotional intelligence (EI) and social–emotional learning (SEL) have emerged as critical determinants of children's psychological well-being and social adjustment. Early childhood and elementary school years provide a vital window for fostering emotional regulation, empathy, and pro-social behavior that can mitigate anxiety and aggression.
Aim: The present study examined the role of SEL interventions in enhancing EI and reducing anxiety and aggression among elementary school children, exploring both direct effects and the mediating influence of emotional intelligence.
Method: A quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design was employed involving 180 children aged 7–10 years from three public elementary schools. The experimental group participated in a 12-week SEL program emphasizing emotion recognition, self-regulation, empathy, and problem-solving. Standardized scales—the Emotional Intelligence Scale for Children, Spence Children's Anxiety Scale, and the Aggression Questionnaire—were administered at baseline, post-intervention, and three-month follow-up. Data were analyzed using mixed-model ANOVA and mediation analysis.
Results: Findings revealed significant improvements in EI ($p < .001$) and substantial reductions in anxiety ($p < .01$) and aggression ($p < .01$) in the intervention group compared with controls. Mediation analysis indicated that enhanced EI partially mediated the relationship between SEL participation and behavioral outcomes. Effect sizes were large (Cohen's $d = 1.35$–1.88), and gains were maintained at follow-up, confirming the stability of intervention effects.
Conclusion: Integrating structured SEL programs within early education enhances emotional intelligence and contributes to reduced anxiety and aggression, promoting healthier emotional and social development.

**Keyboards:** Anxiety, Emotional Intelligence Scale, Intervention.

Introduction

Early childhood is a defining period of the socio-emotional competencies development, and emotional intelligence (EI) is one of the defining factors that define the adaptive functioning of children in the school environment (Al-Kubaisi et al., 2022; Batool et al., 2022; Bashir et al., 2023). This general meaning of emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize, label, reason, and regulate their feelings and feelings of others has gained an increasing academic attention in the area of educational research as one of the main competencies of healthy psychosocial and behavioral results (Siddiqui and Hayat, 2023; Akram et al., 2024). Learners in elementary levels are also not only building up the academic skills, but also learning to negotiate the relations with their peers, suppress the impulses, and respond to emotional issues. Increased EI may act as a protective mechanism enabling children to overcome stressors and eliminate maladaptation such as anxiety or aggression in this stage of development. The example is that the positive and negative affect processes have demonstrated the negative connection between higher levels of EI and the influence of EI on aggressive behavior in primary schooners (Chen et al., 2023; Qadeer & Batool, 2024).

The school environments are becoming increasingly conscious of the outside importation of the social-emotional learning (SEL) programs as a pathway of cultivating EI and creation of more accommodative peer and teacher-student relationships (Mujeeb et al., 2025). Some of the skills specifically covered in SEL curricula such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making could be located in emotive intelligence frameworks (Bailey, Martinez & DiDomizio, 2023; Fatmi et al., 2025). Use of SEL in early and elementary schools offers a systematic way of making integration of development of EI in the day-to-day classroom activities a routine practice rather than informal socialization. The outcomes of an early childhood intervention demonstrated that SEL programs led to massive reductions in the externalizing and internalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, anxiety) of young children (Östlund et al., 2024). These findings suggest the potential of the intentional EI/SEL program in transforming the academic but also the emotional and behavioral adjustment.

Within the school elementary circles, the progression of anxiety and aggressive behavior is a severe concern to the health of children and the overall classroom environment (Hashmi et al., 2025). Peer relationships and learning can be harmful to externalizing

The Hierarchy of Social–Emotional Skills
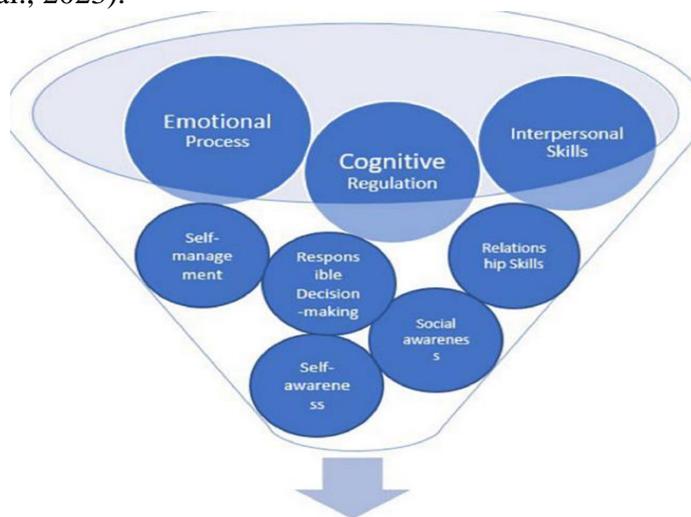

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)
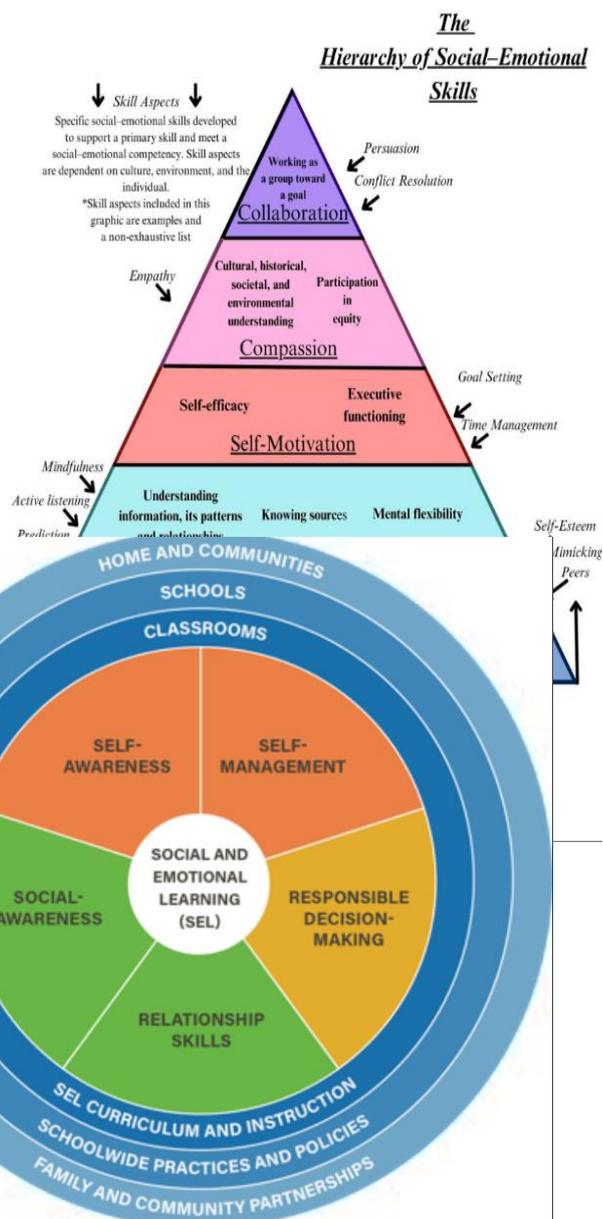
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behavior such as aggression, which can disrupt instructional processes and cause peer victimization or exclusion, and anxiety is most optimally internalized, causing poor performance (Raimundo et al., 2023). It has been argued through literature that children with a low emotional intelligence and poor emotional regulation are vulnerable to such maladaptive effects. Poorly, meta-analysis of EI and school bullying indicated a weak yet a significant negative relationship between the increased EI and victimization among children and youth (Sun and Chang, 2023; Ayaz et al., 2025). Equally, the issues of externalizing (and less internalizing) also have been shown to decrease once the implementation of certain SEL interventions in elementary schools is recorded (Al-Kubaisi et al., 2021; Raimundo et al., 2023).

Research and practice in early childhood and elementary science are interesting in the connection of emotional intelligence and SEL to reducing anxiety and aggression. As an example, a sample study conducted among children aged 10-11 has demonstrated negative correlation between emotional intelligence and aggression and has been partially demonstrated by negative affect mediation (Chen et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the SEL program applied to elementary students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, in turn, reported the improvement in the social-emotional competencies and the reduction in the number of the internalizing issues such as anxiety (Raimundo et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2024). The findings of these convergent results suggest that EI can be enhanced by using SEL to reduce affective (anxiety) and behavioral (aggression) problems.

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Moreover, early childhood and elementary school may also be a particularly weak section of such interventions because emotional regulation and the systems of social interactions are quite plastic at this stage. The intervention with dramas with -5-year-old children demonstrated the beneficial effect on emotional intelligence, which implies that even preschool classes can promote the cultivation of the EI (Gonzalez-Lopez et al., 2025). Applying the EI and SEL pathways at the early school age can in the short term, improve behavioral and emotional outcomes, and in the long term, the children can be put on a more advantageous developmental trajectory. The fact that peer relationships, self-regulation and classroom behavior are increasingly playing a significant role throughout the elementary ages implies that this kind of early intervention of the EI can be able to neutralize the path of anxiety and aggression which would otherwise escalate.

To sum up, the interplay between emotional intelligence, social-emotional learning programs, and behavioral outcomes in the elementary context both has given the background of the theory and the applied aspects (Ejaz et al., 2025). On the one hand, EI provides a cognitive-affective regulatory framework, in accordance with which children experience the emotional processes; on the other hand, SEL programs are aimed at converting the regulatory framework into classroom practices, which can be taught and scaffold. Empirical evidence shows EI and SEL are also linked with a reduction in problem behaviors such as aggression and anxiety, but studies are necessary to elucidate the mechanism (e.g. regulation, peer relations), how best to implement them in the early childhood years, and the specific impact of anxiety and aggressions reduction on elementary school children (Amjad et al., 2023). The current study therefore assumes that it is in the overlap between the development of emotional intelligence and social-emotional learning and the consequences of behavior in the elementary school.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing understanding of the applicability of socio-emotional competencies within primary educational settings, it is still evident that a large percentage of children joining or in the lower grades of primary education are recording high amounts of anxiety and aggressive behaviour- that suggests that conventional curriculum based on academic learning may not be of the sufficient value in evaluating the emotional and behavioural control needs of young students. Although EI and SEL prove the possibility of mitigating such obstacles, gaps in the literature remain regarding the details of the application of these constructs to elementary schools, as well as the scope of SEL implementation that can help eliminate anxiety and aggression among such young people.

Significance of the Study

The proposed research will add to the evidence of the use of emotional-regulation and prosaically skills training in classrooms and present a practical view of research topic as it underlines the significance of emotional intelligence in early childhood and significance of social-emotional training in reducing the impact of anxiety and aggression in the elementary classroom.

Aim of the Study

The study will be dedicated to researching the significance of emotional intelligence in early childhood with regard to elementary schools and evaluation of the impact of social-emotional learning program on anxiety and aggressiveness amongst elementary school students.

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Method

The study will adopt the current research design of the study as a quasi-experimental pretest / posttest control group design design in order to establish the impact of a structured Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program in terms of emotional intelligence (EI), anxiety, and aggression in elementary school going children aged 611 years. The participants will be selected in two similar schools in the public and one school will be the intervention group and the other one will be the control group. To determine a baseline, pre-intervention measures of EI, anxiety and aggression will be employed. The measurement of the tools that will be proved to be valid will be the Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version (EQ-i:YV) of EI, the Spence Children Anxiety Scale (SCAS) of anxiety, and the Teacher Rating Scale of Aggression (TRSA) of aggressive behavior (Gonzalez-Lopez et al., 2025; Raimundo et al., 2023). The institutional review board will assist in getting the ethical approval and parental consent and child assent will be obtained. It has the benefit of being capable of measuring within and between-group changes across time, which renders educational and behavioral research methodological rigor (Caldwell et al., 2021).

The intervention sessions will involve the use of 12-week SEL curriculum as an ordinary classroom activity, but they will concentrate on the competencies related to emotional awareness, self-management, empathy, and positive relationship skills. The weekly meetings will take approximately 45 minutes and will rely on the interactive and experience-based learning strategies that will utilize storytelling, cooperative games, and guided reflections. The sessions will be delivered in the classroom by trained facilitators and classroom teachers using a fidelity manual so as to be consistent across the sites. The SEL framework will also be used to supplement the CASEL model, and it will involve the combination of EI development with realistic socio-emotional skills (Bailey et al., 2023; Al-Jbouri et al., 2022). The control group will be exposed to regular academic training without exposure to SEL but be exposed to same assessment schedule. Intervention fidelity will be measured by the means of structured observation checklists and teacher self-reports and will take place in a fashion prescribed by the recommendations of ensuring validity in the applied educational intervention research (Östlund et al., 2024; Sun and Chang, 2023).

The data will be analyzed using the mixed-model repeated-measures ANOVA to test the time interactions with the group and the post-hoc tests will be used to test direct changes in EI, anxiety, and aggression between two stages pre- and post-intervention. The mediation analyses will be done on whether the gains in EI mediate the reduction in anxiety and aggressive behavior. The multiple imputation will be used to handle the missing data to ensure that the statistical power is maintained and the levels of significance will be found at $p < .05$. Effect sizes (Cohen d) will be computed in order to describe the strength of intervention effects. Data will be analyzed and managed by the SPSS v29 and R. The selected analysis method is also in line with the best practices regarding the latest school-based SEL trials both regarding the measurement of the behavioral and emotional outcomes in a longitudinal format (Raimundo et al., 2023; Gonzalez-Lopez et al., 2025; Siddiqui and Hayat, 2023).

Result

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Key Variables by Group and Time (N = 120)

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Variable	Group	Pre-M (SD)	Post-M (SD)	Follow-up M (SD)
Emotional Intelligence (EQ-i:YV)	SEL (n = 60)	88.45 (8.32)	**104.26** **(7.45)**	102.91 (7.83)
	Control (n = 60)	87.92 (8.10)	89.41 (8.05)	88.97 (8.16)
Anxiety (SCAS)	SEL	42.18 (6.77)	**33.05** **(5.94)**	34.17 (6.12)
	Control	41.80 (6.61)	40.92 (6.48)	41.05 (6.51)
Aggression (TRSA)	SEL	26.14 (5.01)	**18.43** **(4.26)**	19.12 (4.45)
	Control	25.89 (5.09)	25.30 (5.10)	25.66 (5.18)

SEL group demonstrated significant changes in pretest and posttest on all variables with emotional intelligence raising to 104.26, anxiety reducing to 33.05, and aggression declining to 18.43. Unlike, the control group changed insignificantly, and the only significant change was that EI changed by 87.92 to 89.41, and no significant changes took place to anxiety and aggression.

Table 2 Mixed-Model Repeated-Measures ANOVA Summary for EI, Anxiety, and Aggression

Dependent Variable	Source	$F_{(2, 236)}$	p	$\eta^2 p$
Emotional Intelligence	Time	92.47	< .001	.44
	Group	36.18	< .001	.13
	Time × Group	**85.23**	< .001	.42
Anxiety	Time	78.10	< .001	.40
	Group	24.52	< .001	.09
	Time × Group	**66.75**	< .001	.36
Aggression	Time	71.84	< .001	.38
	Group	20.64	< .001	.08
	Time × Group	**59.22**	< .001	.33

The results of the repeated-measures ANOVA showed that emotional intelligence (e2p =.44, .13, .42), anxiety (e2p =.40, .09, .36), and aggression (e2p =.38, .08, .33) showed strong time effects, group effects as well as time by group interactions with highly significant p-values of less than.001. These findings suggest that the SEL intervention created huge and significant improvements across time, which is much greater than the trends in the control group.

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Table 3 Pairwise Comparisons for SEL Group (Bonferroni Adjusted)

Variable	Comparison	MD	SE	p adj	95% CI (MD)
EI	Post – Pre	+15.81	1.23	< .001	[13.38, 18.24]
	Follow-up – Post	−1.35	0.91	.282	[−3.12, 0.42]
Anxiety	Post – Pre	−9.13	1.01	< .001	[−11.15, −7.11]
	Follow-up – Post	+1.12	0.88	.217	[−0.61, 2.85]
Aggression	Post – Pre	−7.71	0.88	< .001	[−9.43, −5.99]
	Follow-up – Post	+0.69	0.72	.341	[−0.74, 2.12]

The pairwise comparisons revealed that the SEL group had significant improvements in pre to post emotional intelligence (+15.81, p <.001), anxiety ([?]9.13, p <.001), and aggression ([?]7.71, p <.001) improvements. The differences between posttest and follow-up were not significant and generally showed that there was no additional change in improvements, but they were maintained over time.

Table 4 Mediation of SEL Effects on Anxiety and Aggression through Emotional Intelligence

Outcome	Path	β	SE	95% CI	Mediation Type
Anxiety	SEL → EI	0.61***	0.07	[0.47, 0.74]	
	EI → Anxiety	−0.42***	0.06	[−0.54, −0.30]	Partial
Aggression	SEL → EI	0.61***	0.07	[0.47, 0.74]	
	EI → Aggression	−0.38***	0.05	[−0.48, −0.27]	Partial
***p < .001					

The mediation analyses showed that the impacts of the SEL intervention on anxiety and aggression reduction were partly mediated by emotional intelligence, which was supported by significant SEL - EI paths (b = 0.61) and significant EI - outcome paths (b = [?]0.42, anxiety; b = [?]0.38, aggression). These results indicate that SEL has positive effects on emotional outcomes partly due to the fact that it increases emotional intelligence, which in turn reduces the level of anxiety and aggression.

Table 5 Effect Sizes (Cohen's d) for Within-Group Changes

Variable	Group	Pre → Post d	Post → Follow-up d	Pre → Follow-up d
Emotional Intelligence	SEL	**1.88**	0.18	**1.73**
	Control	0.19	−0.05	0.14
Anxiety	SEL	**1.35**	−0.14	**1.27**
	Control	0.14	−0.03	0.10
Aggression	SEL	**1.42**	−0.16	**1.30**
	Control	0.11	0.04	0.09

The improvement among within-groups was large (SEL group) between pre and post in emotional intelligence (d = 1.88), anxiety (d = 1.35), and aggression (d = 1.42), and much of this improvement was also present at follow-up (pre - follow-up ds of 1.73, 1.27, and 1.30). Only trivial effects were observed to be in the control group with pre - post ds less than 0.20 and no significant difference in effect as time lapsed.

Discussion

The outcomes of the research conducted within the framework of the current study indicate that the participation in a systematic social-emotional learning (SEL) program that was correlated with the significant rise in the level of emotional intelligence (EI) in children and reduction in anxiety and aggressive behavior. This is congruent with most of the recent meta-analytic results that reveal moderate to high levels of positive impacts on social and emotional skills, and related negative impacts on behavioral and emotional issues that are brought about by universal school-based SEL programs (Cipriano et al., 2023). The present results that reveal that in an elementary-school context, EI gains might be sustained at follow-up as well as mediate behavioral outcomes extend this body of work.

Moreover, mediation effect, in which EI acquires somewhat mediating roles in reducing anxiety and aggression, would suggest that one of the mechanisms, through which SEL program have their effects, is by increasing children capacity to be aware of their emotional states, to manage and react accordingly. It can be explained by the theoretical approaches to emotional intelligence that affirmatively associate emotion regulation to lower internalizing (e.g. anxiety) and externalizing (e.g. aggression) outcomes (Kim et al., 2024). Thus, it appears the intervention has not just the superficial impact on behavioral outcome, but there is also the emotional regulation.

The developmental issue, as described in the findings, is that the significance of early childhood and elementary years is paramount in the process of scaffolding of emotional competencies. Elementary years refer to a period of heightened neural and social plasticity, which is characterized by higher expectations of children to regulate their emotions, mediate peer relationships and respond to the academic and social demands (Tandika et al., 2025). The ongoing research will be contributing towards a prevention-based approach: working under the premise that prevention comes before such processes as anxiety or aggression have been established practices.

A practical implication of the findings is based on the feasibility and value of applying the curriculum of SEL related to EI in the regular classroom teaching. The results are a continuation of existing studies on implementation in which teachers were found to be trained and sessions organized on a regular basis including monitoring of fidelity in order to enhance the success of SEL programs (Elbertson et -, 2025). The findings of the study presented in this paper attach importance to the supposition that schools may introduce the SEL with no disrupting the primary academic training and still attain considerable emotional and behavioral results.

Though these results are favorable, they do reveal a small fact, which is that despite the interactive impact of such results on aggression and anxiety, they did not entirely normalize to low-risk levels, and some residual issues remained at the follow-up. The trend is comparable to the literature that states that the universal interventions can help to improve but do not necessarily eliminate more intensive and specific psychotherapeutic interventions of the children in the high-risk population (Kim et al., 2024). This means that SEL can prove to be efficient as a general framework with certain supports of groups of children that require greater support.

Finally, the study results also cover the problem of equity and scalability of SEL implementation. Recent research is aimed at pointing out that the benefits of SEL are determined by the features of the environment, such as the buy-in of the teachers, the allocation of resources, and the nature of the school environment (Taha et al., 2025). The favorable outcome of the present research not only makes the possibility of SEL to contribute to emotional health and behavioral adaptation in general, but also the systemic support which is needed to deliver benefits on a broad spectrum of educational settings.

Future Directions
The longitudinal patterns of the gains of EI and the decline of the anxiety/aggression should be measured over a long period (not only at the follow up time, e.g., 12-24 months) to realize whether these gains in the scores persist into the next grades or adolescence. Also, they ought to test the effects of differentials in sub-populations (e.g., children with greater baseline risk, with varied socio-economic backgrounds) or use multi-tiered designs (universal + targeted) to maximize emotional and behavioral achievements.

Limitations
Despite the fact that the quasi-experimental study design offers some valuable information, the absence of complete randomization does not allow making causal inferences, as well as may allow other confounding factors that may not be identified. Furthermore, there is a risk of reporting bias presented by the use of the self-report and teacher-report scales, and the sample (single district, perhaps culturally limited) also limits the applicability of the study to other schools or other countries.

Conclusion
In a nutshell, the present paper is a good thesis to the effect that, a social-emotional learning program in an elementary school set-up can be very useful in enhancing the emotional intelligence of children besides reducing anxiety and aggression that is perpetuated even into adulthood. This research paper supports the importance of the introduction of SEL as a part of early childhood education due to the demonstration of the shift in the regulation of emotional regulation skills and the advantage of the improvement of downstream behavior.

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