

# Primary School Teachers' Conceptions of Social and Emotional Learning for Students in Vietnam

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**Citation:** Dung, D. T., Lan, L. T., & Pereira, A. E. (2024). E Primary School Teachers' Conceptions of Social and Emotional Learning for Students in Vietnam. *International Journal of Childhood Education*, 5(1), 48-62. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijce.v5i1.607>

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores primary school teachers' conceptions of social and emotional learning in Vietnam. The study is the first part of a grounded theory research on teachers' perspectives and understanding of social and emotional learning. Thirteen primary school teachers in public schools representing three different school settings are recruited as participants during purposeful and theoretical sampling. The primary data collection method is intensive semi-structured interviews. With 17 meeting times during more than 20 hours of interviewing, the study reaches saturation, and a substantive theory is generated as the finding of the grounded theory research. The present study reports the first out of four parts of the research. The findings indicate that social and emotional learning is a part of life skill education in Vietnam and includes five elements: Self-awareness, Empathy, Emotional management, Cooperation, and Problem-solving skills. The study facilitates a foundation to investigate teachers' perspectives on the significance and implementation of social and emotional learning in Vietnam.

*keywords:* primary teacher's conception, social and emotional learning (SEL), grounded theory, Vietnam

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## 1. Introduction

Social and emotional elements in education have been a concern for educators across the annals of education. In the West, a famous adage, 'educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all', is often attributed to Aristotle, who lived as far as 2400 years ago. In the 17th and 18th centuries, education reformers such as Rousseau and Pestalozzi advocated including emotional and social development in the curriculum (Lilley & Heafford, 1967; Smith, 2010). The early 20th century observed the establishment of Waldorf pedagogy by Rudolf Steiner, who was convinced that education should focus on developing the whole person, including their social and emotional capacities. Maria Montessori underscored the importance of developing independence, self-discipline, self-esteem, social responsibility and empathy for others in students (Duckworth, 2006). Eastern philosophers, particularly in ancient India and China, also strongly value social and emotional skills. The ancient philosophy of Buddhism, which dates back to the sixth century BC, accentuates the formation of moral character and emphasises self-awareness, self-control, and compassion (Sarvepalli, 1956). In the fifth century BC, Confucianism gave prominence to education goals to values like compassion, filial piety, and respect for others alongside interpersonal connections, which include skills like empathy, communication, and conflict resolution (Berling, 1982). In the modern age, from the late twentieth century, researchers like Howard Gardner and Daniel

Goleman further popularised the concept of emotional intelligence and its significance for success in life (Gardner, 1983; Goleman, 1998).

The significance of social and emotional elements in education, therefore, is proven throughout the long history of society and education. Social and emotional competence (SEC), however, as a scientific term with its independent research field, has been an interest for just a few decades and is a new concept adopted in Vietnam in recent years (Dung & Zsolnai, 2021). This field of study develops as the acknowledgement of its significance recognised in effective learning and development, which traditionally concerned merely the domains of knowledge and academic skills (Zysberg & Hy, 2019). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process to promote SEC, which is the foundation competence for every child to be successful in a complex and competitive world (Hoang, 2016). For primary school students who experience a significant transfer from early childhood education to general compulsory one, SEL helps them understand themselves and regulate their emotions. SEL particularly fosters primary students' ability to deal with learning and social challenges that they the first time meet in life, set life goals and find ways to achieve them, respect and sympathise with others, build and sustain meaningful relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2012; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg et al., 2007).

Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia and is known for its rich cultural and historical heritage. The country is heavily influenced by collectivist values, traditionally impacted by Eastern philosophies, notably Buddhism and Confucianism. The collectivist culture emphasises the value of the group over the individual. This is demonstrated in many aspects of day-to-day life, such as the importance of family, community, and the belief that everything is interconnected. These schools of thought promote living in harmony with nature and the development of values like compassion, respect, and humility.

While the traditional Eastern philosophical teachings have helped to cultivate solid values and morals in Vietnamese culture, there is a growing concern that the current education system does not adequately address the holistic needs of students. Schools and students invest much time and resources in acquiring intellectual knowledge and preparing for academic exams (Dung, 2022). Schools typically spare little time for developing social and emotional skills, giving less expectation to achieve attainment standards (Van Poortvliet et al., 2013). Notably, social and emotional education was designed as a core area in the curriculum of Early Childhood Education in Vietnam more than a decade ago (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009), while it has not been a compulsory requirement in the primary or higher educational phases. Therefore, it is not uncommon when the teaching in practice is often skipped out. Moreover, not many teachers are aided in improving social and emotional skills in their classroom practice. At any level, students develop and practice their social and emotional skills by involving themselves in challenging circumstances in which they may or may not be able to handle and solve problems efficiently (Hoang, 2016).

Recently, educational stakeholders and the general public in Vietnam have become aware of and support a developing educational agenda that emphasises students' life skills by integrating social and emotional skill domains. Vietnamese teachers' perspectives and understanding of SEL, therefore, have drawn some research attention; however, both the number and focus of studies are limited. Currently, to the best of our knowledge, there is only one such quantitative study (Huynh et al., 2018) testing primary school teachers' perceptions of SEL. Although the study was successfully conducted with a good size of research sampling (250 teachers) and well-designed survey questionnaires, it was limited by a lack of deep understanding of teachers' views on and daily practice in integrating SEL in their teaching. The research status necessitates much more attention to teachers' views on SEL in primary schools.

SEL has not been officially implemented in Vietnamese public primary schools. However, the numerous proven benefits of SEL make its implementation a highly anticipated development in the country. As a part of a prolonged project, this study is timely in raising awareness of SEL among teachers, researchers, educational policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders. This study particularly aims to understand primary school teachers' conceptions of SEL, which are fundamental in promoting primary students' SEC in Vietnam.

## **2. Research Methodology**

This study is one part of a prolonged project investigating primary teachers' perspectives and understanding of social and emotional learning for their primary students. The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' conceptions of social and emotional learning. The following question guides this study. In the primary education context and teachers' perspectives and understanding, what is social and emotional learning for primary students?

Constructivist grounded theory is employed as the methodology and the primary method of this study. The study procedure involves participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and generation of conceptual categories.

### **2.1. Participants**

The participant selection related to individual teachers, their schools and teaching experience. Similar and different characteristics among the participants were to be related, compared and recognised during the emergence of theory as the study outcomes. The study employed ten homeroom teachers in charge of general teaching and educational activities and three classroom teachers teaching subjects such as English language, music, art, and physical education.

### **2.2. Sampling**

#### **2.2.1. Purposeful Sampling**

Nine homeroom teachers representing three different school settings (village, district and city centre) who participated in the last three summer professional development programs for new general education curriculum implementation (2019, 2020, 2021) were selected as a purposeful sample. Firstly, schools were selected according to the diversity of demographics. Six schools were selected to deliver pre-screening questions. Four pre-screening questions determined whether social and emotional elements had been infused and whether their teachers were aware of them in their schools. The following pre-screening questions were sent to teachers: 1) *Have you participated in Teacher training for the new general education program?* 2) *Have you ever heard/known/learned about SEL?* 3) *Do you think SEL implementation is necessary for primary schools?* 4) *Have you promoted these skills for primary students in your daily teaching practice?* Three schools where all surveyed teachers answered 'Yes' to all four questions, and were located in different areas were selected. Teachers at these selected schools were invited to participate in the study. All participants selected their pseudonyms to protect their identity throughout the study.

#### **2.2.2. Theoretical Sampling**

Data were first collected, focusing on teachers' general views on SEL. The initial data analysis was conducted to establish preliminary categories in which new or amended questions might be added (K. Y. Jones, 2016). These new evolving questions and additional data collection relating to theoretical sampling allowed the researcher to better investigate the new aspects of

the topic emerging from the initial data collection (Charmaz, 2011). As a result, one homeroom teacher and three classroom teachers were recruited as theoretical sampling.

### **2.3. Data Collection**

Semi-structured interview was the primary method employed to construct the emergent theories of the research. The data collection was conducted in two phases. The phases were not based on chronological order but on the data collection sample. Phase one was the purposeful sampling of participants and delivering the first designed question list. Phase two was for theoretical sampling participants, who were asked additional questions arising from Phase one data analysis. Consequently, nine homeroom teachers were interviewed in both phases either to collect new data or to clarify the existing data collected from previous interviews. One homeroom teacher and three classroom teachers were interviewed in phase two only. The researchers collected data from purposeful sampling, compared constantly the core defined categories with emergent incidents, and collected data further from theoretical sampling to refine, develop and check the theoretical properties. This procedure allowed the data collection to occur until the stagnation (Charmaz, 2001).

### **2.4. Memo Writing**

The researchers wrote memos throughout the interview period (during or after each interview) which reflected on what they learned from that interview. Moreover, conceptual memos were also taken to record the researchers' thinking during and after specific data analysis about the appropriateness, connection between, possible change, and consequence of group codes or categories.

### **2.5. Data Analysis**

The researchers applied the visual display developed by Harry et al. (2005) to present phases of data analysis. These phases followed Charmaz's steps (Charmaz, 2006); however, several testing techniques were added. The phases included initial coding, categories (focused coding), themes (theoretical coding), testing themes, interrelating explanations, and generating theory.

#### **2.5.1. Initial Coding**

The data was divided into segments and then scrutinised for similar and different points (Charmaz, 2011). Every idea generated from the initial interview data was recorded inductively (Sbaraini et al., 2011). In this phase, line by line, not every line was read and coded since the researchers actively sought relevant comments, remarks, and explanations relating to SEL. Though many sentences and lines were not relevant initially, they were coded. Traditionally, in the initial coding phase, researchers try to code everything; however, to save time and get more needed, sufficient data, we did filter from this phase. However, since the study went through testing processes of codes and themes, there were a number of opportunities for us to re-examine the text and to create any new codes where needed. Data was analysed using handwritten, colour-coded techniques and following every standard step often seen in grounded theory research. Particularly, initial coding was processed directly in the Vietnamese version of transcripts. Since the data collection and analysis processes happened iteratively and through many stages, the original language data sets were maintained until the results were found to avoid language interpretation differences and to ensure the best comprehension and consistency.

### **2.5.2. Focused Coding**

It required the researchers' interpretation and was the beginning of meaning abstraction, contributing significantly to the analysis. The commonalities identified among the focused codes were reflected in categories or themes. The analysis was mainly guided using a cross-case analysis and constant comparisons (Creswell & Cheryl, 2018). During the analysis, if a new and meaningful incident emerged; theoretical sampling would be employed to identify any other possible similar or relevant viewpoints. Therefore, during theoretical sampling and constant comparisons, the researchers needed to move back and forth between the data collection and analysis stages (Charmaz, 2011; Creswell & Cheryl, 2018). Finally, constant comparisons resulted in theoretical codes that adequately capture each incident to create a theory as the answer to the research question. The subject of discourse writing would then be theoretical codes. Besides, throughout the analysis, personal memos and field notes were used relevantly and appropriately to get more insights into the researched phenomenon. In the process of looking for the connection between the codes, to put them into categories, we asked ourselves, 'Is this code similar/ opposite to some others?', 'What is the common point of these codes?'. Even after having named a group of coding, we kept asking 'Is there any other possible naming for this group?', 'Is it possible for this code to be categorised in another group with a different group name?'. Normally, at the early stage of initial coding, we could put a code in two or three different categories. Moreover, codes and categories were then checked by other researchers. We also wrote up plenty of memos to remind us of theoretical ideas we came up with while working on the text with their actual meaning, and relating it to the context. Besides, to avoid the further possibly inaccurate interpretation or arrangements of codes into different categories, we set aside several files of transcripts with their codes of several coding (early transcripts, for instance) for a month or so while we were working with incoming transcripts or other core codes/categories to figure out any earlier possible interlinks between the core codes/categories, expecting to generate theoretical sensitivity for further stage. After that month or so, we would read again some sample sets of the transcript, and resume coding again. This process allowed constant comparison to be applied to a data sample. The previous set of codes and the new one would then be compared to clarify if specific codes worked, ensuring the consistency of the codes used. As a result, some new codes were generated, and some old codes were re-named and merged into other categories.

### **2.5.3. Theoretical Coding (Developing the Themes)**

In this process, the researchers were to move forward to thematic analysis, which aimed at building themes underlying the theoretical categories. All categories under a question were compared to see the commonalities and discrepancies. Further analysis and discussion were performed by the group of researchers, if needed, to identify the most emerging relevance amongst the concepts. The relevance was summarised to build themes.

### **2.5.4. Testing the Themes**

As stated earlier, this study aimed to generate a theory grounded in data. Nevertheless, the transparency is somehow in doubt since the prolonged and complexly iterative processes of data collection and data analysis, particularly the interpretations of all participants' meanings, were done from an early stage of data analysis. Particularly, even though a great deal of discussions about confusing or overlapped codes or categories, separate checking among the researchers and colleagues was conducted due to the vast amount of data collected; the strategy called 'member check' by Lincoln & Guba needed to go further (1985). These testing theme techniques were proposed by Harry (2005). These techniques tested the extent of the themes' connection with data from the interview. First, after having all the themes for all questions, researchers created one PowerPoint file for each question in which each slide displayed one



theme, and the last slide displayed a mind map with the interlink of the themes. We then sent them to all participants and asked them to check the themes by noting down ‘Agree’, ‘Disagree’, or ‘Irrelevant’ on each slide. Besides, teachers were encouraged to send us any feedback or comments about the themes, as well as the potential connections we had made amongst the themes. At this point, we recognised that this technique not only helped to test if the coding had properly described teachers’ experiences but also clarified what we saw that the participants ‘might not have seen during the interviewing but might resonate during this testing process’ (Charmaz, 2001, p.49). Participants mainly agreed with the themes, and made several additional comments on some themes or suggested slight modifications. Particularly, their remarks and comments in the last slides made theoretical connections among the themes more transparent and more rational. Another way to test the themes was by applying them against all the data collected during interviews, field notes, and memos. In this technique, we kept asking whether we understood the evidence from the transcripts and whether our perspectives on these pieces of evidence reflected the researched phenomenon.

#### **2.5.5. Interrelating the Explanations**

In this stage, each theme was compared with others, explaining how they connected and interlinked to describe SEL from the teachers’ views. For example, the first and most powerful category was self-awareness. There were various properties in this category, including ‘understanding your strengths and weaknesses’. This ability is directly related to ‘respect others’ or ‘awareness of others’ difficulties’ since when students recognise their problems, they are more likely to recognise similar problems of others. Alternatively, it was easy for students to respect others, particularly others’ competencies or performance, since everyone had their strengths and weaknesses. These traits helped students to control their negative feelings when working with others easily. As a result, students involved themselves in working groups more pleasantly and productively, and by themselves or together with others, problem-solving becomes less difficult for students. In this interrelating explanation process, the five elements which teachers included in SEL were integrated, making visible the final result of the SEL process from the participants’ perspectives.

#### **2.5.6. Delineating the Theory**

Instead of generating a formal theory that depicted processes that were possibly generalised in a broad range of similar contexts or substantive fields (Harry et al., 2005), this study aimed at generating a substantive theory that consisted of a set of explanations of the specific SEL elements in Vietnamese primary schools. These elements connected and complemented each other, building up teachers’ conceptions of SEL.

### **3. Findings**

The findings of this study present primary teachers’ conceptions of SEL in the context of Vietnamese primary schools. According to teachers’ understanding, SEL is a part of life skills education and consists of five elements: Self-awareness, Empathy, Emotional management, Cooperation, and Problem-solving skills.

Teachers initially felt uncomfortable and embarrassed, thinking they did not know about SEL. It turned out that they were trying to give a ‘proper definition’, which was supposed to be impossible and unnecessary. However, with the researchers’ prompt in the modified questions, they relaxed and described what they thought about social skills, emotional skills, and any connections between the two in their teaching. One teacher surprised herself by making a recognition:

Oh, so, SEL could be everything in kids' lives. Everyone needs to learn basic social skills to participate in social life. In life skills classes, we teach kids everything; yes, we teach kids to recognise their problems, to know their feelings and then control them, solve them to maintain the best relationship with others. (Teacher 3)

Therefore, SEL could be related to everything surrounding students' lives and adhering to life skill education. From teachers' perspectives, even though SEL could have been considered a part of life skills education, it could be defined with five main elements.

### **3.1. Self-awareness**

The first emerging theme from teachers' interviews is self-awareness. All ten homeroom teachers identify 'knowing yourself' as the first element of being socially and emotionally competent. Self-awareness apparently appears to teachers as recognising your strengths and limitations.

You must first see your mistakes and your weak points in that particular circumstance. But you also need to be aware of your capability to fix it. (Teacher 2)

Teachers emphasise being aware of one's own strengths as a critical point to act actively and effectively in their lives, and so do their students. This skill includes knowing your 'likes' or 'dislikes' and 'acting on them, respectively.'

It would be a problem when a student does not know which colours she likes for her painting task or what topic she is interested in for her essay assignment. Little by little, students have to know their own preferences and need to choose their own important options in life, such as subjects to study in secondary school, school competitions to take part in, or recreational activities for summer camp. (Teacher 10)

Being confident is another trait that students need to learn and possess.

Primary students are pretty shy in their first year in school, but they can and need to learn, practice being confident, and even be courageous, for instance, raising their hands during the lesson, telling the class what they know/do not know, confident to admit your mistake, express your upset or cheerful feelings. (Teacher 6)

Particularly, self-awareness is strongly defined in students' character as 'value/treasure what you have'. It means that students acknowledge, appreciate, and love the good things they have in life. This seems to be an umbrella trait when teachers report that one of the very first lessons students learn in primary school is gratitude. Regardless of how young primary school students are, they should be able to discover 'love' [good feelings, affection] in people, nature, learning, family, and community.

Students know themselves better when they can see the beauty of all surrounding things since these [elements] build them on to some certain extent. (Teacher 7)

Setting goals was initially mentioned by four teachers, but later it was confirmed by all other teachers as an element of self-awareness. Students are not expected to have far imagination or plan for their future, but they must learn to do so with specific techniques. Setting goals is important to any individual to recognise who they are.

A very smart boy in my class [grade 4] always promises and completes his writing by a particular time so that I can assign him the extracurricular activities of his choice. See, he knows what he likes to do, has capabilities, and is very confident to engage in anything of his choice. (Teacher 4)

### 3.2. Empathy

The trait of having sympathy and developing it into empathy is the second element. When addressing self-awareness, teachers emphasise that everyone, including their students, must see themselves in others and see others in themselves. This point of view is the reason for the emergence of sympathy and empathy elements. Teachers define sympathy as knowing and understanding, while empathy goes further to feeling for others and acting on others' problems [difficulties] appropriately, respectively.

No one was born to live alone; we must know [things of] others too. Knowing here [I] means recognising what is happening with them, problems? Difficulties? Bad moods? Ask to understand the matter first; try to put yourself in others' shoes. (Teacher 9)

Teachers consistently agree that sympathy and empathy involve much in emotional factors. Emotional understanding and feeling them ourselves are highlighted.

Oh, I feel emotional even now recalling this [story]. Many of my students [grade 3] were almost crying or got so moved when listening to a letter written by a student to his recently deceased grandfather. (Teacher 13)

To learn this skill, students need listening skills, a 'non-judgmental attitude' in which students expose their willingness to listen to others, try attentively to understand the stories, thinking, feelings, suffering, struggle behind, and understand either verbal or non-verbal expressions.

It seems impossible for students, but my students [grade 3] have been learning these skills [reading non-verbal language]. Kids often cannot put their thoughts and feelings into words, especially when overwhelmed by an incident. Occasionally, you will see students completely silent or just crying – oh, it is verbal, but actually is non-verbal. [teacher appears serious] (Teacher 6)

Being excited to be involved in different social networks is a critical condition to promote empathy. This is an effective way for students to acquire 'social knowledge,' which deliberately helps students to be aware of the existing differences in society.

Besides, teachers acknowledge the exposure and acceptance of social diversity as an essential requirement for children's skill acquisition. The diversity could be from simple things like dialect, accent, gesture, and lesson answers to macro issues like familial condition, financial status, individual appearance, and abilities. Students, first and foremost, need to know and respect. Furthermore, teachers seem to buy into the concept of respect.

I believe that love and respect can drive us to every good thing in life, so I teach my students to accept, respect and love people first. Things are meant to be different all the time; little ones are likely to be attracted by differences, so it is good to let them see the differences and respect them simultaneously. (Teacher 8)

During the interviews, teachers provide a number of examples in which respect can be expressed outwardly, not only in thinking. Every act or attitude can be described as respectful or not, for instance, saying 'hi' to each other, not stepping on the new mopping floor [by other cleaning duty group], listening attentively to others during lessons, and commenting politely on others' mistakes. Additionally, after all, being empathetic requires primary students to be brave, to be open to expressing themselves, and to share their understanding, feelings, and supporting intentions with others.

Many times this year, my students [grade 2] come to me not knowing how to express their thoughts and support to their classmates [friends]; one just some days ago asked me if he could call his best friend to tell how sorry he felt when knew about her loss of



her beloved doggy. [COVID-19 was still a precaution; students were not likely to come to see each other in person] (Teacher 5)

### **3.3. Emotional Management**

This element appears in every teacher interview as a critical element of SEC. Primary school students who are socially and emotionally competent usually avoid arguments or direct confrontations with other classmates or their friends and do not get into a tantrum while dealing with disappointment or uncomfortable situations.

This [throw a tantrum] occurs often in grades 1 and 2; of course, students are small and start learning things. They want and act like they are at home; when things are not like their expectations, they instantly act out or get angry. Students need to learn self-discipline. It is understood that students know what is allowed and not allowed in school, at home, or in any other social context. They are impulse control skills. (Teacher 1)

As a result, less socially and emotionally competent students are often seen as angry, upset, or burned out during the day. Besides, teachers observe that many students quickly get upset when being chastised or criticised by their parents at home or during their time together at school. Learning to listen to their parents without feeling offended is a way to be socially and emotionally competent.

Stressful management is another element of SEC. Stressful situations could occur all the time in primary students' active lives. However, teachers figure out that a problem that comes to the fore in stress management is the difficulty of expressing or speaking out in stressful circumstances.

Speaking about what is wrong and how they are feeling is tremendously challenging to small students, you know, even we [adults] have problems at times too, but cannot help them [students] if we have no idea what is happening. (Teacher 9)

The articulation in stress management is affected by the student's emotional calm ability. Teachers believe that if students can stay calm, for instance, when being picked up, dealing with another annoying person, or dealing with disappointment, they can spare their thinking on the problem and find a way to solve it.

### **3.4. Cooperation**

This is the next emerging theme that directly links to all the above-mentioned skills. During the interviews, rather than mentioning these essential skills individually, teachers often relate other skills to describe a particular skill. Co-operation skills are built upon the previous skills, particularly as a critical component in the social skills of any children, and critically requires much in emotional skill aspect. Students generally have low cooperation skills in primary school; however, they have started learning basic things such as saying 'sorry', 'thank you', and 'please' in conversation with others. An effective conversation is a vital tool for cooperating with work. Students who sound talkative, willingly engage in different conversations, and listen attentively to teachers and other classmates are socially and emotionally competent. Teachers believe that when students communicate well, they are likely to be accepted in different groups, have more productive contributions, and can reach a joint agreement in a group. Another contribution to cooperation comes from the active engagement of students in different networks. Experience always matters. The more groups students are in, the more experience they learn, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and willingness. When

students are in a different network, trust, sharing, and commitment are three highlighted traits students need to possess. Teachers report that having trust is the most significant advantage of young children.

Oh, I see it. Clearly, it gets harder to tell students in grade 4 or 5 to do something than in grade 1 or 2. My students now [grade 5] seem to question me or other classmates repeatedly before they commence on an assignment. (Teacher 7)

### **3.5. Sharing**

Sharing is the next important element of SEC. When students have trust in others, they are likely to be open to sharing and being shared.

I teach my students to be happy to give away what their friends need if possible. It is necessary to develop [this] from empathy; their friends may need this too, and he/she would be pleased to have it from your sharing. (Teacher 9)

Sharing skills come into practice when students are willing to share their learning materials, seat or play space, take turns talking, listen, and avoid cutting off or interrupting somebody. Sharing is also about confidently and excitedly sharing their previous experience, either opinions or feelings and practice. Finally, the commitment to any activity students engage in should be mentioned. Teachers describe this skill as staying active and effective in their tasks individually or collectively.

When assigning group work, I always try to design them as it requires individual and group work. Students must be disciplined and determined and dedicate themselves to fulfilling either their task or group one to achieve the best result. (Teacher 4)

Moreover, making and keeping promises appear to be essential lessons students have been learning in primary school.

Promises are beautiful; keeping them is much better. So, I do this so that my students can imitate. Everyone, especially young children, lives up happily to their expectations and others' promises. (Teacher 7)

Keeping promises requires students not only to practice their strong willpower, and strict self-discipline but also to have strong empathy for others.

### **3.6. Problem-Solving**

Teachers highly agree that students do not have good problem-solving skills, so this skill is one of the priorities in skill education. Apparently, from teachers' view, students need all the above-mentioned skills, especially self-awareness and emotional management, to effectively deal with problematic issues. Teachers mention that often, students try to find a solution for a problem by themselves, but they need to consider their strengths, weaknesses, and possible feelings of pride or shame.

A little girl in my class now [grade 2] has cried a few times this year when she gets a score lower than 8 [within a 10-point grading scale]. Getting a low score is not a problem, but mis-recognising a problem is a problem. (Teacher 2)

Besides, seeking help from capable people is also an effective strategy that teachers observe from SEC students when they face adversity. Either with an actual or imaginative problem, most primary school students turn to teachers, parents, or another adult for help. Even though this is a typical phenomenon observed in young children, students still acknowledge it as an

effective solution. Students are likely to cope with existing problems better when they know to turn to capable, trustable people for advice, support, or timely intervention.

The monitor [student as the leader] in my class always tries to be responsible and manage the class well. She can handle problems in the class when I am not there, but sometimes she waits for me to ask what she should do with friend A or friend B. (Teacher 12)

Leading and organisational skills are also reported as necessary in many problematic situations students face. There are several cases in their classes where teachers observe that a group with a good and skilled leader seems to have fewer problems than others. Teachers assume that minor issues are solved quickly in their group work before they become big problems observed by the teachers.

Contextual consideration and appropriateness are the following factors in problem-solving skills. Students are expected to be mindful of every element issue around a happening so that they can assess and reflect on the situation before deciding on the final solution.

I tell my students to put themselves in others' shoes to understand why he/she reacted like that that time. In some lesson scenarios, my students reflect that they could not have done something since a friend would have been hurt or embarrassed about the situation. (Teacher 11)

Teachers especially emphasise the importance of acknowledging traditions, community habits, and customs.

All the time, I infuse students with our positive traditional perspectives and introduce them to local customs. Though students might not understand, I guess that is also a fact of tradition, which everyone follows first, tries to comprehend later, or even never. (Teacher 6)

Teachers assume students' choices and solutions are appropriate if they align with their cultural norms. Therefore, cultural factors apparently should be included in SEC.

Developing creative thinking to generate multiple choices is mentioned by three teachers out of ten homeroom teachers; however, it was later agreed upon by all.

When coping with a problem or working on a task or an assignment, I always require as many as possible solutions proposed. I want students to think in different ways, consider different solutions, and dare to propose any ideas they come up with. (Teacher 7)

Teachers expect their students to develop critical thinking and creative ability. Besides, this technique promotes not only intellectual skills but also soft skills such as being confident to raise their voices and being courageous to think differently.

The last element that could contribute to problem-solving skills is using the 'time out' or 'stay away' techniques. Teachers report that they are often amazed at students' skills of staying away or avoiding 'others' storm'. When their SEC students confront a classmate or friend in an awkward situation, rather than solving a problem with a fight, they are likely to say, 'We could stop it here' or 'Let it go, move on to the next task'. This technique is 'super effective', even for an adult to learn when coping with an uncomfortable and escalating problematic matter.

#### **4. Discussion**

SEL is a part of life skills education and consists of five elements: Self-awareness, Empathy, Emotional management, Cooperation, and Problem-solving skills. That is a proven benefit of

good life skills education worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020). According to the World Health Organization, life skills education covers six areas: communication and interpersonal skills, decision-making and problem-solving, creating thinking, self-awareness and empathy, assertiveness and equanimity, or self-control, resilience, and ability to cope with problems (Huynh et al., 2021). It is understandable when one indicates SEL within life skills, especially in Vietnamese education, where life skills education is currently the only term to indicate non-academic skill education.

The five elements teachers believe are the core elements of SEL are more or less in alignment with the general structure of SEL worldwide. One of the well-known structures is developed by Collaborative Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This framework provides the researchers with the sensitivities of the researched phenomenon and clarifies if SEL is an existing phenomenon to conduct the study. Therefore, several aspects of SEL identified by the participating teachers are expected to be similar to CASEL's definition. However, it is clear to recognise the difference in the thoroughness of the two. Teachers in this study identify the core elements that contribute the most to SEC of students, as well as the most being taught in schools, considering the demands of teaching other life skills. Even though teachers' perspectives are not as elaborate as seen in other well-researched models, they reflect teachers' practical and actual views from their practice. Besides, considering a number of life skills in the request for primary school education in Vietnam, teachers are not expected to cover every aspect of SEL known in the literature either in their conceptions or in practice. Particularly, self-awareness is the first and single domain emphasised as a core domain of SEL by CASEL and the participant teachers. However, there are several significant differences, especially in the emotional aspect. For example, CASEL identifies 'Identifying emotions' as a core element of self-awareness, and Vietnamese teachers navigate directly to 'Identify liking/dislike', 'Love', and 'Value what you have'. Empathy is only one property in the Social awareness domain by CASEL. It appears to be a core domain for the participants in this study. One explanation for this view is that Vietnamese teachers value the genuine meanings of this specific competence. The emotional management domain could be an element in the Self-management domain of CASEL. The participants emphasise it as a core domain, as the demand of controlling or suppressing solid emotions, significantly harmful and unhealthy emotions, while promoting positive feelings. It probably signifies how much attention or awareness teachers have paid to the emotional aspect. The Cooperation domain, according to the teachers' views, covers many elements such as Accepting failure, Goal orientation, Communication skills, Establishing, and maintaining relationships, Active engagement in different networks, Commitment, Sharing, and Trust in others. Several of these elements are also found in the 'Relationship skills' domain or one to two in other domains of CASEL. However, with the density of properties in this domain, teachers strongly highlight the significance of Cooperation competence for their students.

Even though the core domains of SEL defined by Vietnamese teachers are somewhat different from those defined by CASEL, a number of elements among the domains are similar, overlap, or interlink with each other. This proves a normal sense when educating a whole child; SEL aspects certainly overlap one way or another; each element or domain incorporates different skills and incorporates with each other to promote the whole education for the whole child.

## **5. Recommendations and Conclusions**

Throughout the research, it is appropriate to state that teachers are aware of social and emotional elements in their teaching. Teachers are likely to integrate SEL into their educational practices, especially when perceiving social and emotional competence as part of life skills. It

is highly recommended that SEL be implemented rigorously in Vietnam. Examining the issue in the context of Vietnam, three following elements emerge: (1) Vietnamese education has a long history of applying life skill education, and there are more than 15 different major groups of skills to be taught in primary schools; (2) Vietnamese school culture is influenced by the national collectivist culture which group/community needs are more valued than individual needs; (3) Life skills and moral learning for children are concerned and taught by every stakeholder. This study, within its broader prolonged research, provides insights into the most effective approach to promoting students’ SEC. In agreement with Cefai et al. (2018), S. M. Jones & Bouffard (2012), and CASEL (n.d.-b) should SEL be implemented officially in primary school education, it has to be a schoolwide approach. In addition, it is necessary to build on the existing achievements of the SEL program in Vietnam and advance SEL research worldwide. As proposed by S. M. Jones and Bouffard (2012), SEL programs should be sustained so that students experience continuity from one year to the next. It is particularly critical in the case of SEL in preschool and primary school. Pre-schools in Vietnam have integrated SEL as one of five core targeted competencies since 2009. The SEL program in preschool had been developed based on CASEL’s framework available at the time (2009), considering the national traditional values and educational targets, as well as the available conditions. This study is developed initially from CASEL’s knowledge of SEL, and CASEL’s SEL work is the most widely cited worldwide as evidence of their valuable research and practice work. It, therefore, is recommended that when SEL is designed for primary school education, CASEL’s SEL framework will be the primary reference. Notably, the available CASEL’s SEL framework broadly approaches schoolwide and community-wide design. This point is aligned with teachers’ conceptions of SEL, which strongly indicates Vietnamese educational principles and values. Besides, Vietnamese teachers’ conceptions of SEL also share a number of common aspects with a model of social and emotional education (SEE) developed by The Network of Experts working on the Social Dimension of Education and Training (NESET) (Cefai et al., 2018). In this SEE model, SEL is advanced to the educational approaches that embed relational and contextual curricula to develop SEC for crucial aspects of individual development, including personal, social, and academic (Cefai et al., 2018). As such, SEE should be implemented from the whole-school approach. Therefore, Vietnamese education has the advantages of advanced knowledge and practices worldwide, and there is no better time to design their own SEL program to meet their education requirements.

**Disclosure statement:** The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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