# Teacher Perspectives on the Roles and Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning in Vietnamese Primary Schools

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**ABSTRACT**
This study examines primary school teachers' perspectives on the roles and challenges of implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) in Vietnamese primary schools. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers highlight SEL's significance in fostering holistic development, academic performance, and experiential learning. Teachers emphasised SEL's broader benefits for students, schools, and communities. However, key barriers include inadequate teacher training, limited student-focused resources, rigid curricula, and insufficient supportive policies. This research bridges critical gaps in SEL literature by exploring its application in a Southeast Asian, collectivist culture—Vietnam—and highlighting how cultural norms influence teacher perceptions and implementation of SEL. Novel insights include the dual role of SEL in fostering individual growth and reinforcing collective harmony, offering actionable strategies for culturally attuned SEL frameworks.
*keywords: Teacher perspectives, social and emotional learning, primary school, Vietnam*

## 1. Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained significant attention in recent decades as an essential component of education, emphasising the development of students' social, emotional, and behavioral skills alongside academic learning. SEL is particularly important in primary education, where students are at a formative stage of developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills, which are critical for their overall well-being and success (CASEL, 2012). Global studies have shown that SEL not only fosters a positive school environment but also improves academic performance, student behaviour, and long-term social outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Despite this growing recognition, many education systems, including that of Vietnam, have been slow to integrate SEL into formal curricula. Vietnam's education system has traditionally placed a strong emphasis on intellectual development and academic achievement, often prioritising exam preparation over holistic student development. As a result, essential social and emotional skills are often neglected in favour of cognitive skills. Recent reforms in early childhood education have made strides toward incorporating SEL, but at the primary education level, the implementation remains limited and inconsistent (Hoang, 2016).

Teachers in Vietnam face specific challenges in incorporating SEL into their classrooms. These challenges include limited training on SEL frameworks, inadequate resources, and a rigid curriculum focused on academic subjects. Furthermore, societal expectations in Vietnam,

influenced by its collectivist culture, place additional pressure on teachers to prioritise academic success, making it difficult to advocate for the inclusion of SEL. This imbalance raises concerns about students' overall development, as they may not be equipped with the necessary social and emotional competencies to navigate the increasingly complex demands of modern society.

While SEL's importance is well-documented in Western contexts, limited research exists on its application in collectivist cultures like Vietnam. This study pioneers this exploration by investigating primary school teachers' perspectives and uncovering unique cultural interactions with SEL.

In this context, the present study aims to address the following questions:

According to teachers' perspectives and understanding:

1. *What are social and emotional learning roles for students in Vietnamese primary schools?*
2. *What challenges do teachers face in implementing social and emotional learning in Vietnamese primary schools?*

Building on teachers' conceptions of SEL from the earlier phase of this prolonged study, the current research aims to explore how the perceived benefits of SEL integration can offer insights for more effective incorporation into the Vietnamese primary education system. This study is significant not only for its potential to inform educational policy and curriculum development in Vietnam but also for its contribution to the global understanding of SEL in diverse cultural contexts. The findings will provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers on how to overcome the challenges of implementing SEL and ensure that students receive a more balanced and holistic education.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Background

Social and Emotional Learning has emerged as a critical component of education systems worldwide, with a growing body of research highlighting its importance in fostering students' holistic development. SEL equips students with essential skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship-building, which contribute not only to their academic success but also to their lifelong well-being and social adjustment (Greenberg et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). These benefits are particularly significant in primary education, where students are at a pivotal stage of cognitive, social, and emotional development (Durlak et al., 2011).

Globally, the implementation of SEL in education varies significantly across different cultural and national contexts. In Western countries, SEL has been integrated into formal curricula with significant success, supported by extensive research and policy initiatives (Elias, 2019; Zins & Elias, 2007). However, in Southeast Asia and other collectivist cultures, SEL has been slower to gain traction, despite growing recognition of its importance. In recent years, several studies have explored the implementation of SEL in Southeast Asian educational contexts. For example, research in Singapore and Malaysia has demonstrated that SEL programs can improve student behaviour and academic outcomes when adapted to fit local cultural norms (Ee & Cheng, 2013; Dyson et al., 2019). These studies highlight that while SEL frameworks developed in Western contexts are effective, their application in collectivist societies requires adjustments that account for cultural values such as respect for authority, group harmony, and the prioritisation of community over the individual. These cultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping teachers' and students' attitudes toward SEL, influencing both how SEL is taught and how it is perceived.

Vietnam, like many Southeast Asian countries, is deeply rooted in collectivist values, where the well-being of the group is often prioritised over individual achievements. These values, influenced by Confucianism, emphasise respect for authority, interpersonal harmony, and social responsibility. Such cultural values have a profound impact on the implementation of SEL in Vietnamese schools, as they shape both the content of SEL programs and teachers' perceptions of their importance (Nickerson, n.d.). Teachers in collectivist cultures may view SEL not only as a means to foster individual student development but also as a tool to enhance group cohesion and maintain classroom order, aligning with the cultural emphasis on harmony and collective well-being (Chong, 2018).

Despite the cultural alignment between SEL and Vietnam's collectivist values, the Vietnamese education system has historically emphasised intellectual development and academic achievement, often at the expense of social and emotional growth (Van Poortvliet et al., 2013). Recent reforms, particularly the introduction of SEL in early childhood education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2009), have laid the groundwork for broader implementation. However, the integration of SEL into primary education remains limited, with many teachers lacking the necessary training and resources to effectively incorporate SEL into their teaching practices (Hoang, 2016). Moreover, teachers in Vietnam face unique challenges in implementing SEL due to societal pressures and the rigid structure of the curriculum. The high-stakes nature of exams and the focus on academic performance leave little room for SEL activities, which are often seen as secondary to cognitive learning. This reflects a broader trend in many collectivist cultures, where academic success is closely tied to family honour and social status, further complicating efforts to prioritise SEL (Huynh et al., 2018).

In the Vietnamese context, SEL can play a crucial role in addressing the social and emotional needs of students while also supporting academic learning. In the initial phase of this study, we explored primary school teachers' conceptions of SEL (Dung, et al., 2024). Accordingly, Vietnamese teachers perceive SEL as part of life skills education, including five elements self-awareness, empathy, emotional management, cooperation, and sharing. By fostering these skills SEL has the potential to enhance student engagement, reduce behavioral problems, and improve academic outcomes. However, for this to happen, teachers must be provided with the necessary training and support to implement SEL in a way that is culturally relevant and aligned with the existing educational goals.

In summary, the literature on SEL in collectivist cultures, including Southeast Asia, underscores the need for culturally responsive SEL programs that reflect local values and educational priorities. In Vietnam, while cultural values such as collectivism and respect for authority provide a strong foundation for SEL, the challenges posed by the current education system's emphasis on academic achievement must be addressed. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring Vietnamese primary school teachers' perspectives on SEL and identifying the key factors that influence their attitudes toward its implementation.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate primary school teachers' perspectives on social and emotional learning (SEL) in Vietnamese primary schools. Grounded theory was selected due to its capacity to generate rich, conceptual insights directly from participant data, allowing for the development of a theory grounded in the experiences and views of the teachers themselves (Charmaz, 2006). The constructivist philosophy aligned with this study emphasises the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants, which is critical in understanding how teachers perceive and implement SEL in their classrooms.

### 3.1. Sample and Participants

The sample consisted of 13 primary school teachers, including 10 homeroom teachers and 3 classroom teachers who taught specific subjects such as English, music, and physical education. The selection of 10 homeroom teachers was intentional, as homeroom teachers are responsible for general teaching and overall student well-being, making them key informants on integrating SEL in daily school activities. Homeroom teachers play a critical role in both academic instruction and the social and emotional development of students, allowing them to provide comprehensive insights into how SEL is perceived and practised in primary schools.

To ensure the diversity of perspectives, participants were selected using purposive and theoretical sampling. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit teachers who had participated in the last three summer professional development programs (2019, 2020, and 2021) for the implementation of Vietnam's new general education curriculum. These teachers represented different school settings (village, district, and city center schools), ensuring a range of teaching experiences and environments that could provide rich data. Teachers from varying school settings were chosen to capture the differences in SEL implementation across urban and rural schools, as well as to explore how socio-economic factors might influence teachers' views and practices. Theoretical sampling was used as data collection progressed, allowing for the recruitment of additional participants based on emerging findings. After initial data analysis, one additional homeroom teacher and three classroom teachers were recruited to explore specific themes that had surfaced in the early stages of coding. The decision to conclude with 13 participants was made when data saturation was reached, meaning that no new significant themes or insights were emerging from the interviews. Data saturation was determined by continuous comparison of incoming data with previously coded data, ensuring that the core categories had been fully developed and validated by multiple sources (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in two phases. In the first phase, interviews were conducted with the 10 purposively sampled homeroom teachers. These interviews followed an initial set of open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' general conceptions of SEL, their experiences with its implementation, and their perceptions of its benefits and challenges. The second phase of data collection involved theoretical sampling, where additional questions were added based on the initial data analysis. This phase focused on deepening the understanding of emerging themes, such as the relationship between SEL and classroom management, or the influence of cultural values on teachers' approaches to SEL.

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, and participants were encouraged to share personal experiences, specific classroom examples, and reflections on their professional development. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised to protect participants' confidentiality. Memo writing was employed throughout the data collection process, allowing the researchers to reflect on emerging insights and adjust the interview questions as needed.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the steps of grounded theory outlined by Charmaz (2006), including initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. The process was iterative, with constant comparison used to refine the emerging categories.

Initial Coding: After each interview, the transcripts were coded line-by-line to identify key actions, processes, and experiences described by the participants. This stage was open-ended, with the goal of capturing a wide range of concepts related to teachers' perceptions and practices of SEL. Codes were kept as close to the data as possible to avoid premature interpretation.

Focused Coding: During this phase, the most significant and frequent codes were identified and grouped into broader conceptual categories. Codes that emerged repeatedly across different interviews were prioritised, such as those relating to the role of SEL in classroom management, the impact of SEL on students' academic learning, and the cultural expectations around emotional expression. These focused codes helped in organising the data into more cohesive themes.

Theoretical Coding: Theoretical coding was employed to relate the focused codes to each other and to develop the final conceptual categories. At this stage, the researchers explored how different categories interacted and contributed to a broader understanding of teachers' perceptions of SEL. For example, one key conceptual category that emerged was the notion of SEL as a means of classroom management, where teachers saw socially and emotionally competent students as contributing to a more orderly and harmonious learning environment. Another conceptual category revolved around the perceived alignment between SEL and Vietnamese collectivist values, where SEL was seen as fostering group cohesion and respect for authority.

Throughout the analysis, memo writing played a critical role in developing these conceptual categories. Memos were written after each coding session to document the researchers' reflections, questions, and hypotheses about the data. These memos helped trace the evolution of the categories and provided a record of how theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was determined when additional data no longer generated new properties of the core categories and when the relationships between categories were well defined.

## 3.4. Credibility and Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were employed to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. First, member checking was conducted, where participants were asked to review the transcripts and preliminary findings to ensure the accuracy of the data. Second, triangulation was achieved by comparing the findings across different participant groups (e.g., homeroom teachers vs. classroom teachers) and across different school settings (urban, district, and village). Finally, peer checking was used throughout the research process, with the researchers regularly discussing emerging themes and coding decisions with colleagues to ensure the robustness of the analysis.

## 4. Findings

The study revealed that social and emotional learning (SEL) is widely recognised by Vietnamese primary school teachers as an essential component of holistic student development. Teachers perceive SEL as instrumental in improving students' social and emotional competence (SEC), academic learning, and experiential skills. However, despite acknowledging these benefits, teachers face significant challenges in implementing SEL due to various barriers, including a lack of training, limited resources, and insufficient policy support.

### 4.1. SEL is a Crucial Component of Student Development

### 4.1.1. Social and Emotional Learning Directly Benefits Primary School Students

Firstly, as part of life skills education, SEL equips students with essential foundational abilities for life. Socially and emotionally competent students demonstrate age-appropriate levels of self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. These competencies create favourable conditions for students to actively and effectively engage in their daily activities. Teacher 4 indicated that "once students develop self-awareness, they become conscious of their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and dislikes. More importantly, in certain simple contexts, they can take steps to either provide for themselves or protect themselves". Students actively and joyfully engage in group activities, especially those in class and school settings. Generally, socially and emotionally competent students are perceived to maintain good mental and physical health, as they possess the ability to care for themselves independently to a certain degree. One teacher remarked, "When students can manage their emotions, they handle conflicts better, they are more focused on learning, and they work well with their peers" (Teacher 3). As a result, primary school students gradually learn to meet their own needs and safeguard themselves from risky or harmful situations. Moreover, a healthy mind and body, combined with social and emotional skills, prepare students to actively and enthusiastically participate in educational activities offered in primary school. This readiness enables them to fully engage with and benefit from any social context they encounter. Teachers consider primary school students to be in a prime stage of development, during which they constantly acquire new knowledge throughout each moment of their lives. Especially, students establish healthy relationships with others by actively and effectively engaging in social activities. Since this is the first time that pupils have had the chance to form a bond with someone who is not family, it is an important milestone. In general, schools are made to be the healthiest, most fulfilling social settings for children to learn and grow in their fundamental life skills. In that social setting, maintaining positive relationships in schools is crucial. Teachers feel that it ensures that kids will have a positive and fulfilling school experience as well as long-term advantages in their future education and lives.

Second, SEC enhances students' academic performance. Academic accomplishment is the cornerstone for developing academic knowledge or learning competency, even though it is not given much attention in primary school. Academic learning abilities are essential for primary school pupils, who are in their initial years of formal schooling. According to teachers, SEC helps students identify their learning interests quickly and helps them adopt and build the optimal strategies for reaching their learning objectives. Additionally, students who have a good attitude toward learning are open to learning from others, willing to learn from their mistakes, and empathetic enough to assist others.

> I've noticed that students with positive attitudes toward learning are more open to learning from mistakes, and they're eager to help others too, which really enhances their overall learning experience. (Teacher 1).

SEL helps students to be confident, persistent, and well-organised when dealing with difficult learning tasks. When students perceive a task as a challenge and are committed to solving it, they learn the most. Additionally, students' intellectual potential is greatly enhanced by a broad variety of social and emotional competencies, particularly the development of language and cooperative skills. As a result, it offers a cognitive basis for future social and emotional skill development and adaptation. As a result, these iterative procedures help students reach their full potential.

Thirdly, experiential and practical competency both inside and outside of the classroom are linked to the advantages of SEL for students. According to teachers, experiential learning is a novel and significant activity in primary school where students actively participate, learn, practise, and gain a variety of non-academic but useful and significant skills, such as cooking, gardening, shopping, fixing things, or designing clothing or interior furnishings.

> It's clear that their ability to manage emotions and interact with others helps them engage in hands-on tasks such as cooking or planting trees, which makes them more resilient when faced with new challenges. (Teacher 9)

Through these activities, teachers can see that SEC students are interested in a variety of activities. Students always strive to learn new abilities during their experiential learning period. When faced with new tasks, these students also have a tendency to be more creative and utilise or combine experiences successfully. As a result, students are thought to perform well and are more likely to handle real-world difficulties outside of the classroom. SEL is generally beneficial to instructors in practically all areas of primary school students' activities. Teachers in particular are certain that social and emotional skills should be incorporated into every activity where children connect, support, and enhance one another in order for them to realise their full potential throughout primary school and beyond.

### 4.1.2. Social and Emotional Learning Indirectly Benefits Other People and Systems that Students Engage in Their Daily Activities

Teachers emphasise classroom management as a key aspect of SEL. It encompasses all elements within the classroom that influence its orderliness and the creation of a supportive and welcoming environment, either directly or indirectly. Several factors reflect the impact of SEC on classroom dynamics. Firstly, socially and emotionally competent students tend to demonstrate a high level of adherence to class rules. Additionally, they often volunteer to assist classmates in following the rules with flexibility and ease. This behaviour is particularly evident in self-disciplined students who not only understand the established rules but also adhere to them effectively while contributing to their enforcement.

> This sense of self-discipline becomes evident as early as the second semester of grade 1. Despite still receiving guidance from their parents, students make an effort to be punctual and participate promptly in forming groups [before entering the classroom]. Notably, it is remarkable to observe grade 1 students maintaining quietness or taking turns to speak and attentively listen to one another during lessons. (Teacher 10)

Secondly, students with SEC build and sustain positive relationships with both their peers and teachers, including homeroom and subject teachers. This is crucial in fostering a friendly, comfortable, and supportive classroom environment. Such an atmosphere allows students to feel at ease, eager to attend class daily, see their friends and teachers, and approach learning with enthusiasm and dedication. This creates a joyful school experience for everyone involved. In a well-managed class, SEC enables students to feel connected, collaborate effectively with others, and follow teachers' instructions appropriately. Consequently, students strengthen friendships and teamwork dynamics, ultimately enhancing all related activities.

> That's such a joyful scene to witness! The excitement and eagerness young students show when they team up with their favourite peers really reflect their enthusiasm for learning and collaboration. It's a beautiful sign of their engagement and anticipation. (Teacher 2)

Moreover, when students are socially and emotionally competent, it allows teachers to save significant time in organising class activities. This extra time can be utilised for providing other essential and supplementary instructions.

> Organising group activities can be quite challenging, especially for younger children, and my main concern is that they tend to be time-consuming. However, when there are many good students [students with SEC], it greatly helps. (Teacher 2)

Another benefit is directly on teachers. Teachers report feeling much less stressed when having these students [students with SEC] as an important result of good classroom management.

> They not only perform well but also assist in managing their classmates. With just a few of them in the class, I feel as though I have extra hands to organise things more efficiently and additional feet to move quickly across the classroom. (Teacher 6)

After all, it has a big influence on teaching and learning quality. One teacher commented "Literature or Maths lesson in my class [grade 2] is just a piece of cake if I have many students with SEC" (Teacher 5). Although academic results are not heavily emphasised, they are well-presented at the end of the academic year as a reflection of students' achievements. These results serve as a reference for students' future learning journeys.

As every student is valued, students with SEC play a crucial role in class management, leading to numerous advantages for the school. These students are not only active participants in their own classrooms but also engage in various activities beyond their classroom. Whether as individuals or class representatives, they help foster connections between classes within the school, particularly among those in the same grade level.

> My grade 2 class, along with other classes in the same grade segment, has performed exceptionally well this year. The students in this segment generally exhibit excellent behaviour, which has fostered a very healthy, strong, and cohesive group. (Teacher 2)

Moreover, teachers from different classes, grade segments, school leadership, and other staff members are more likely to collaborate effectively in such cases. They recognise a shared approach to fostering students' competencies and believe in the possibility of working together for the overall development of students throughout the school.

> I remember I did have one for a while, stressful times, unfriendly relationships with other teachers, and even some big disappointment with leadership people. I was much younger, and I had a very hard time managing students in my class, I think they were all stubborn kids to me at that time. I blamed teachers of other classes with well-behaved students; I blamed the principal for appointing me to this class or giving me unhelpful support. Now, I know what the problems were; they were about my students and how I helped them to behave well. (Teacher 9)

Teachers are more inclined to collaborate to learn how to promote SEC for their students. This allows them to easily identify differences between classes with SEC students, motivating them to be more persistent in implementing SEL or life skills education. This shared focus fosters a sense of unity aimed at enhancing students' social and emotional well-being and creating a happy school environment. Ultimately, as a result of successful classroom management and overall achievement, the school's collective success is ensured. Schools can establish and maintain a strong reputation for educational performance and the learning environment.

Teachers believe that families also benefit from their children's SEC, which is often an unexpected outcome when teachers discuss the advantages of SEL with students' families. Beyond the formal teaching-learning relationship, teachers view their students with a sense of care and responsibility, much like they would for their siblings or children at home. As a result, they observe a strong connection between the benefits of students with SEC at school and the positive impact it has on their home life. A teacher said, "Students with SEC, I can see immediately how well they behave at home too, that is a huge benefit since I also have 2 kids, I know what it is like*"* (Teacher 2). Through life skills and academic achievements, both of which are directly influenced by SEC, students bring either pride or disappointment to their families. Parents feel satisfied and proud when their children exhibit good behaviour and achieve favourable results in their studies. Conversely, when students underperform, parents are sometimes observed to be disappointed, sad, or angry. In both situations, parents tend to become more involved in their children's learning and practice, frequently reaching out to teachers and other parents to discuss their children's progress and new accomplishments. As a result, not just individual parents but the entire group of parents within a class is impacted.

> Although parents claim not to prioritise academic scores, they still take immense pride in their children's success. When their children perform well, they actively engage in the parent group, sharing updates and offering advice or seeking guidance from teachers and other parents on how to better support their children's learning. (Teacher 4)

Students with SEC are capable of taking care of themselves and demonstrating independence at home. Teachers observe that these two key traits have a significant positive impact on the relationships and overall atmosphere within the family. Families are more likely to experience joyful moments together, with each member enjoying the company of others and being willing to share, listen, support, and respect one another. As a result, the family environment becomes one of joy, peace, and mutual value. This harmonious atmosphere enables everyone in the family to effectively support the students in their learning tasks, both at school and at home.

Interestingly, teachers believe that their students' attitudes, skills, and behaviours at home have a significant impact on either strengthening or weakening the neighbourhood in which they live. This perspective reflects the influence of students' SEC on their local community. Teachers see the role of schools and families as key contributors to society. Schools, they believe, have a positive impact on the community when they fulfil their educational responsibilities, which are closely linked to students' life skills, academic progress, and experiential growth. At the same time, families play a central role in shaping how healthy, active, and positive a community is. Traditions, social norms, routines, and contemporary developments are established, maintained, and energised by every community member, with young people possessing SEC expected to make substantial contributions to all of these aspects. One teacher said, "Our students, young citizens are always important characters in communal life. As such, if they have high SEC, the benefits would be very apparent" (Teacher 10).

## 4.2. Barriers to the Practical Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning

Teachers identified several barriers to SEL practical implementation in their daily teaching. One of the most significant challenges was the lack of formal training in SEL frameworks. Many teachers reported that while they understand the value of SEL conceptually, they have not received adequate professional development on how to incorporate it into their lesson plans. "We know SEL is important, but we're not really taught how to teach it. It's not in our formal training," explained one teacher (Teacher 1).

Moreover, there is a scarcity of resources and materials specifically designed to support SEL in primary classrooms. Teachers expressed frustration over the absence of structured programs or lesson plans that could guide them in delivering SEL content. "We don't have textbooks or any official materials on SEL. It's mostly up to us to figure it out," noted a participant (Teacher 6). The lack of formal resources places an additional burden on teachers, who must create their own methods of integrating SEL into their teaching.

Another significant barrier is the rigid structure of the curriculum, which places a heavy emphasis on academic subjects and exam preparation. Teachers reported that the pressure to meet academic standards leaves little time for SEL activities, which are often viewed as secondary to subjects like mathematics and science. "Our curriculum is so focused on exams. There's hardly any room for social and emotional learning unless we squeeze it in between academic lessons," said one participant (Teacher 10). This time constraint limits teachers' ability to implement SEL effectively, especially when they are expected to cover a large amount of academic content within a limited timeframe.

Additionally, teachers highlighted the lack of policy support for SEL at the primary education level. While SEL has been included in early childhood education curricula, its integration into primary education remains optional and sporadic. Teachers expressed concern that without official directives from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), SEL would continue to be overlooked in favour of academic subjects. One teacher commented, "We need policies that mandate SEL in schools. Without that, it's always going to take a back seat to other subjects" (Teacher 4).

Teachers also reflected on how cultural values in Vietnam, particularly those related to collectivism and respect for authority, shape their approach to SEL. While they see SEL as aligning with these values—such as promoting group harmony and cooperation—they also noted that certain aspects of SEL, like emotional expression, are not always encouraged in Vietnamese classrooms. "In our culture, students are expected to control their emotions, not express them too openly. That can be a challenge when we try to teach them to be more self-aware and expressive," shared one participant (Teacher 9). The cultural emphasis on emotional restraint sometimes conflicts with SEL principles that encourage open emotional expression and self-awareness. As a result, teachers often struggle to find a balance between respecting cultural norms and fostering social and emotional competencies. "We want students to be emotionally aware, but we also want them to behave properly according to our traditions," explained a teacher from a rural school (Teacher 2).

## 5. Discussions and Implications

### 5.1. Discussions

The findings of this study reveal important insights into how Vietnamese primary school teachers perceive SEL roles and the challenges they face in implementing them. These insights extend beyond the immediate classroom to broader considerations of school culture, family dynamics, and societal values, providing a comprehensive view of the potential and limitations of SEL in the context of a collectivist culture like Vietnam. Given that teachers' beliefs are shaped by their understanding of the significant impact of cultural traits like collectivism, the benefits of SEL extend beyond individual primary school students to encompass their families, schools, and communities. These perspectives are valuable for inclusion in the existing body of literature.

Firstly, teachers recognise several individual benefits of SEL for students. However, they emphasise that social and emotional skills, practical and experiential skills, and academic skills are interconnected and mutually supportive. At the same time, life skills and positive attitudes are viewed as the ultimate goals of education. In Vietnam, educational objectives align with the framework established by UNESCO, which emphasises the development of three core elements of competence: knowledge, skills, and attitudes (UNESCO, 2015). According to this model, these components are interdependent, with attitudes being the outcome, built upon knowledge and skills. Consequently, teachers' views on SEL are consistent with this overarching educational principle. Teachers believe that SEL supports students' academic success and the development of essential skills. These perspectives align with findings from studies by Schonert-Reichl (2019), Greenberg et al. (2017), Elias (2019), and Buchanan et al. (2009), which highlight teachers' awareness of SEL's role in fostering holistic student growth. However, conflicting evidence challenges these claims. For instance, research by Ee and Cheng (2013) and Dyson et al. (2019) found no clear link between SEC and academic achievement. On the other hand, Taylor et al. (2017) and S. M. Jones et al. (2017) emphasise SEL's significant impact on academic learning over other non-academic skills. Vietnamese education has faced criticism for its heavy focus on academic learning, despite students performing well on OECD assessments (OECD, 2019). This critique can be traced back to the foundational aim of SEL, which prioritises developing students' competencies and positive attitudes for both immediate and long-term contributions to the community. Thus, regardless of the emphasis on academic instruction, the importance of SEL in cultivating social, intra-, and inter-personal skills remains unquestionable. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the interconnectedness of knowledge, skills, and attitudes forms the basis of student competence. Teachers recognise and leverage these interconnections, particularly using SEL's benefits to enhance students' academic outcomes.

Secondly, teachers report various benefits of students' SEC for other stakeholders who interact with students directly or indirectly. While some of these benefits overlap with foundational competencies and academic growth, teachers often emphasise them as concrete evidence of SEL's relevance in real-world social interactions and societal contexts. Students' SEL has a notable impact on teachers, school administrators, and staff. Teachers highlight how students' SEC influences various aspects of the school environment, including their teaching practices, classroom management, and the school's reputation. This perspective aligns with literature that underscores the relationship between school climate and culture. According to Hemmelgarn et al. (2006) and S. M. Jones and Bouffard (2012), school climate encompasses norms, beliefs, and practices, while it also reflects individuals' perceptions of how their psychological environment affects their well-being. Broadly, school climate and culture create a shared psychological environment that shapes or mediates interactions and relationships within the school community, such as those between leaders and staff or teachers and students (Gottfredson et al., 2004). It is evident that students' SEC affects school climate and culture, either directly or indirectly. For instance, everyone is expected to behave in a kind and positive manner; this might significantly enhance the school's culture of respect and nurture, and everyone is prepared to uphold it. This leads to the development of loving connections, especially among children, adults, and peers (Thapa et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is thought that teachers create or alter school norms primarily, but students also play important roles in upholding and strengthening the established norms (Henry, 2008). For instance, a disruptive student may create a tense environment in the classroom, which will disrupt the teachers' interactions with the entire class. The teachers in this study highlighted that student misconduct significantly impacts relationships among teachers, their colleagues, and school administrators, creating tension within classrooms and across the school system. Consequently, students' SEC is closely tied to the reinforcement and adherence to positive and meaningful school norms—

or, conversely, their disregard. In the context of Vietnam's collectivist culture, everyone within the school community, including parents, places a high value on safety, harmonious social interactions, group cohesion, and personalised relationships within the school (Nickerson, n.d.). This cultural perspective may explain why teachers emphasise the influence of students' SEC on the overall school environment.

Teachers emphasise the significant influence of students' SEC on their families. They view their relationship with students as akin to a familial bond, a perspective rarely highlighted in existing research. Consequently, teachers recognise the importance of SEL in shaping students' family dynamics and well-being. In traditional Vietnamese families, children are regarded by their parents as "the most treasured possession." While Vietnamese culture typically exhibits low levels of indulgence, this is often contradicted by parents' treatment of their children. Parents tend to provide as much as possible to ensure their children are happy, healthy, and academically successful, as this brings pride to the family (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). This cultural context underscores the teachers' views on the role of SEL in enhancing students' ability to thrive within and contribute positively to their families. Handling unreasonable requests can have both positive and negative effects on students. A clear example is the COVID-19 pandemic and similar crises. While the pandemic has been deeply unfortunate, it has significantly impacted students' SEC and introduced challenges for families. During such upheavals, parents face increased difficulties in maintaining stability, often experiencing heightened stress and financial pressure. According to a 2020 study by the American Psychological Association, 71% of parents expressed concerns about their children's social skills, and approximately 55% reported observing more instances of their children "acting out" compared to pre-pandemic behaviour. These findings highlight the critical role of SEL in helping students and their families navigate such challenging circumstances. Unfortunately, during societal crises, children may struggle to rely solely on their parents for social and emotional support due to the increasing responsibilities and concerns parents face (Garbe et al., 2020; Varghese & Natsuaki, 2021). This underscores the importance of promoting SEC, particularly self-regulation and problem-solving skills, as essential tools for both parents and students to navigate these challenges effectively.

Students' SEC profoundly impacts their communities. While less discussed, SEC aligns with the core of SEL, which aims for effective community contribution. Firstly, SEL is pivotal for preventing social issues and promoting prosocial behaviour (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins & Elias, 2007). Evidence supports the notion that a society's ability to thrive is closely linked to the SEC of its citizens. Current global challenges, such as climate change, economic complexities, and social conflicts, emphasise the urgency of the SEC (Schleicher, 2018). Global challenges have become increasingly pressing, with climate change standing out as an urgent issue requiring immediate attention. Meanwhile, advancements in science, innovation, and technology—particularly artificial intelligence—have introduced complex economic dilemmas, raising questions about human value, security, and stability. On the social front, key issues include race, immigration, urbanisation, and, most critically, the rise in wars and terrorism. These interconnected challenges have already had profound impacts on nations worldwide. Social and emotional skills are highlighted as one of the three essential competencies that the OECD Learning Framework 2030 advocates for all individuals to develop, in alignment with the UN 2030 Global Goals for Sustainable Development (Schleicher, 2018). These perspectives align with the recommendations of other scholars. While SEL begins with the individual, it ultimately aims to eliminate prejudice and injustice across society, particularly regarding issues of race and immigration (Brackett et al., 2016). This includes teaching students how to solve problems effectively, fostering an appreciation for diversity, and addressing social inequities and prejudice in the world. Legette et al. (2020)

and Rogers (2022) argue that SEL is essential for fostering a culture where both adults and children feel valued, respected, and understood, regardless of differences, especially those related to skin colour and individuality. Achieving this requires social awareness, which encompasses active listening, maintaining an optimistic perspective, practising empathy, and understanding why others feel a certain way about specific situations (Brackett et al., 2016). It also involves appreciating the viewpoints of others, particularly those from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. While these issues may not be as urgent or pressing in Vietnam, proactive SEL education is vital for future prevention and intervention, considering the interconnectedness of the world.

Both the literature and empirical data support teachers' beliefs that students' SEC can influence their academic performance, overall well-being, and their ability to contribute to society as responsible citizens. Consequently, students' SEC plays a crucial role in the development and well-being of their family, school, and society as a whole. The interplay between SEL and Vietnamese cultural values reveals a dynamic tension: while SEL reinforces communal priorities, such as group cohesion, it challenges norms like emotional suppression. This duality necessitates a nuanced approach, where SEL frameworks are adapted to respect cultural values while promoting progressive attitudes toward emotional health.

## 5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on SEL by examining it within a non-Western, collectivist context, challenging some of the assumptions embedded in widely used SEL frameworks, such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model. While CASEL's model emphasises competencies like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, these competencies are often presented in an individualistic framework, which may not fully align with the cultural values of collectivist societies like Vietnam.

In the Vietnamese context, SEL is perceived by teachers not only as a tool for individual development but also as a mechanism for promoting group harmony, respect for authority, and community well-being. This reflects the cultural emphasis on interconnectedness and social cohesion, which contrasts with the more individual-centred approach of many Western SEL models. Teacher 9 noted that while self-awareness and emotional expression are valued, they are often subordinated to the need for students to conform to social expectations and maintain classroom harmony. This suggests that SEL in collectivist cultures might prioritise group dynamics over personal emotional expression, requiring adaptations to SEL frameworks to ensure cultural relevance.

Thus, this study supports the argument that SEL programs must be culturally responsive. While the core competencies of SEL remain essential, how these competencies are taught and understood can vary significantly across cultural contexts. The findings suggest that, in collectivist societies like Vietnam, SEL frameworks should incorporate elements that emphasise social harmony, respect for authority, and collective well-being. This study challenges the universality of Western SEL models by advocating for a hybrid framework. By blending individual-focused competencies with collectivist priorities, such frameworks can address the unique needs of non-Western societies.

## 5.3. Practical Implications

The study highlights several practical implications for educators and policymakers in Vietnam. Teachers face significant barriers to implementing SEL, including a lack of formal training,

limited resources, and a rigid curriculum structure, which prioritises academic achievement. To overcome these challenges, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, SEL should be integrated into Teaching Training Programs. Policymakers should prioritise SEL in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. By providing comprehensive training on how to embed SEL into daily lessons and activities, educators can be better equipped to support students' holistic development. Secondly, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) should consider revising the primary school curriculum to formally include SEL as a core component. SEL currently takes a back seat to academic subjects, with little time allocated for its instruction. Integrating SEL into the national curriculum would give it the same importance as academic subjects, ensuring that all students receive instruction in social and emotional competencies. Lastly, teachers expressed frustration over the lack of structured SEL resources, such as lesson plans and materials. To address this, policymakers could develop a national SEL resource bank that provides teachers with access to culturally relevant materials that align with the Vietnamese education system's goals. This would relieve the burden on teachers to develop their own SEL strategies and ensure consistency in how SEL is delivered across schools.

In addition, for effective integration, SEL programs in Vietnam should emphasise collective well-being and respect for authority while gradually introducing practices that normalise emotional expression. Any training modules should aim to balance traditional values with SEL competencies.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the role of SEL in Vietnamese primary schools, highlighting both the benefits and challenges of its implementation. While teachers recognise the importance of SEL in fostering students' social, emotional, and academic development, significant barriers must be addressed to ensure its successful integration into the curriculum. Policymakers and educators must work together to provide the necessary training, resources, and policy support to make SEL a core component of Vietnamese education.

By addressing these challenges, Vietnam has the opportunity to lead the way in developing a culturally responsive SEL framework that reflects its collectivist values while preparing students for the social, emotional, and academic demands of the future. Further research and policy development in this area will be essential to ensuring that SEL is not only embraced in Vietnamese schools but also fully integrated into the broader education system to support students' holistic development over time.

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