

# Working Paper

## Mapping the Journey of Socioemotional Learning in Educational Settings: A State of the Art

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# MAPPING THE JOURNEY OF SOCIOEMOTIONAL LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: A STATE OF THE ART

## Abstract

This working paper maps recent research-based experiences of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) implementation in educational settings and discusses their reported outcomes and challenges, with special attention to gaps in higher education and teacher education. We conducted a qualitative document analysis and synthesis of a thematically delimited corpus published mainly between 2014 and 2024. Documents were selected through iterative searches using SEL-related descriptors and screened through explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria (educational intervention or implementation guidelines; clear reference to SEL/SEE competencies; and sufficient methodological reporting). Coded data were organized into analytical categories (e.g., target population, setting, SEL approach, duration, outcomes, and reported limitations) to identify convergences and tensions across contexts. Findings suggest that most published interventions concentrate on primary and secondary education and tend to report positive effects on well-being and academic variables; however, evidence is uneven, interventions are often short-term, and cross-curricular integration remains limited. The corpus also shows scarce, less disseminated experiences in higher education and a cultural–geographical skew, which constrains transferability and points to the need for more situated and empirically robust research.

*Key words:* Socioemotional learning, higher education, middle education, basic education, teacher education for socioemotional learning, models of social and emotional learning, experiences in social and emotional learning

## Resumen

Este documento de trabajo mapea experiencias recientes de implementación del aprendizaje socioemocional (SEL) en distintos entornos educativos y discute sus resultados y desafíos, con especial atención a los vacíos en educación superior y formación docente. Se realizó un análisis cualitativo de documentos y una síntesis temática de un corpus delimitado temáticamente, publicado principalmente entre 2014 y 2024. Los textos se seleccionaron mediante búsquedas iterativas con descriptores asociados a SEL/SEE y se filtraron con criterios explícitos de inclusión y exclusión (intervenciones o guías de



implementación; referencia clara a competencias socioemocionales; y reporte metodológico suficiente). La información codificada se organizó en categorías analíticas (población, nivel educativo, enfoque SEL, duración, resultados y limitaciones) para identificar sincronías y contradicciones entre contextos. Los hallazgos muestran que la mayoría de intervenciones publicadas se concentra en educación básica y media y suele reportar efectos positivos en bienestar y variables académicas; sin embargo, la evidencia es heterogénea, muchas intervenciones son de corta duración y la integración transversal es limitada. También se observa escasez de experiencias en educación superior y un sesgo cultural–geográfico del corpus, lo que restringe la transferibilidad y sugiere la necesidad de investigaciones más situadas y con base empírica robusta.

*Palabras clave:* Aprendizajes socioemocionales, educación superior, educación básica, educación media, formación docente para aprendizajes socioemocionales, modelos de aprendizaje social y emocional, experiencias en aprendizaje social y emocional

## Introduction

In recent columns, De Zubiría (2023) has highlighted the socio-emotional problems experienced by young people in Colombia and their possible causes. Within these, the changes in families and the influence of social networks stand out. In the transformations of families, he mentions that fewer family members in comparison to the past, the absence of the father, and for the middle and upper strata, overprotective and permissive parents are causes for emotional issues. These changes have resulted in a generation of more fragile young people, with fewer skills to establish a dialogue to resolve conflicts, as they have no siblings or strong ties to extended family members with whom these competences could be exercised. De Zubiría also argues that the absence of the father affects the development of qualities, such as tenacity, persistence, and autonomy for the achievement of personal objectives.

On the other hand, overprotective or ‘helicopter’ parents transmit their constant anguish to their children, which results in insecure and less autonomous young people, who take much longer to mature. In addition, social media adds up by creating an unreal ‘self-show’ that not only develops problems with image and self-concept in young people, but that also modifies the ways in which young people socialize and communicate since they end up creating closed groups which reinforce individualism and give excessive importance to the self, causing young people to overvalue their personal opinions and reject or hate the contrary. This scenario highlights the pressing need to rely upon human scientists, such as psychologists,



sociologists, and educators to promote critical thinking, empathy, and sensitivity, which is paramount to learning to dialogue, respecting and affirming differences.

In this seemingly discouraging prospect, the need to count on educators who help to practice empathy, foster critical thinking, and develop sensitivity in students is raised. As Lopera (2018) posits, the *raison d'être* of universities surpasses that of providing the youth with academic training, but such education should span scientific, social, and cultural orders, amongst others. Thus, for this author, the quality education universities should be offering must boost capacities in students such as active listening, self-care, and care for others. In this line of thought, Álvarez-Bolaños (2020) claims that the purpose of socioemotional education is the recognition and effective management of our own and others' emotions, as well as developing skills to regulate emotional responses, which focuses on favoring social and interpersonal relationships, preventing increasing social problems such as violence, addictions, anxiety, and depression, among others, and promoting people's general welfare.

Additionally, in July 2024, the Congress of Colombia issued the Law 2383, whose goal is to promote the cross-cutting integration of socio-emotional education for children and adolescents in preschool, primary, and secondary educational institutions across the country, within a framework of holistic development. This law establishes that socio-emotional education involves the development of competencies in various areas, including cognitive skills, which encompass critical thinking and problem-solving; social skills, referring to the ability to interact effectively with others and build healthy relationships; and emotional skills, which involve managing and appropriately expressing one's own emotions as well as those of others. Additionally, it includes non-cognitive skills, such as resilience, empathy, and other interpersonal competencies, which are essential for emotional and social well-being.

The law promotes socio-emotional education in a comprehensive manner, including teachers in several key aspects. First, it establishes continuous training in socio-emotional education for teachers, ensuring they are equipped to foster these competencies in their students. Additionally, teachers play an active role in the implementation of socio-emotional education, collaborating with students and parents in carrying out methodological strategies designed for this purpose. Finally, the law stipulates that socio-emotional education must consider the sociocultural characteristics of teachers, fostering an educational environment that respects and addresses these differences.



ÚNICA, as a teacher education institution, is aware of the changes in the coming generations and the issues pre-service teachers will face in their future career. Therefore, we as teacher educators also feel the need to keep up to date on these topics, so that we can make informed decisions and evaluate institutional initiatives critically. Hence, this paper seeks to gather relevant information on recent research and implementation of socioemotional learning in different educational settings over the last decade, with particular attention to the literature most visible in Colombia, North America, and Europe, and to the gaps in other cultural regions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

ÚNICA's model of socioemotional learning has been informed from different theoretical perspectives, such as positive psychology, emotional intelligence, socioemotional competencies, socioemotional learning, and compassionate systems. This section presents a brief description of these components.

### **Positive Psychology**

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describe positive psychology as the scientific study of human strengths and virtues, emphasizing what makes life meaningful and fulfilling. Rather than solely addressing mental health problems, it seeks to identify and promote the factors that contribute to human flourishing and well-being. This field highlights the significance of positive experiences, personal strengths, and supportive institutions in enhancing overall quality of life. Positive psychology explores key areas that contribute to human flourishing, focusing on subjective well-being, character strengths, and positive experiences.

It examines life satisfaction, emotions, and meaningful experiences, highlighting their role in enhancing quality of life. The study of personal strengths, such as resilience and optimism, emphasizes traits that support well-being. Additionally, it investigates engagement and flow, where individuals find deep satisfaction in activities, meaning and purpose, which contribute to happiness. The field also considers positive institutions and communities, examining how schools and workplaces foster well-being. Moreover, it explores under-researched topics like gratitude, forgiveness, awe, and curiosity, seeking to understand what promotes resilience and psychological thriving (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).



Samavi (2022) and Schiavon et al. (2020) argue that positive psychology in education fosters an environment where students develop hope, self-efficacy, and resilience, enhancing their belief in their abilities and positively influencing academic performance and motivation. By integrating socio-emotional skills into the school curriculum, schools can improve students' mental well-being, emotional resilience, and ability to cope with stress. Research highlights that fostering academic hope and character strengths such as empathy and gratitude not only enhances learning outcomes but also strengthens interpersonal relationships and school climate. A positive schooling approach prioritizes individual care, diversity, and goal setting, ensuring that students remain engaged, motivated, and prepared to navigate personal and academic challenges.

Positive psychology serves as a broad theoretical framework which focuses on well-being, character strengths, and personal growth. Within this framework, the concept of emotional intelligence plays a complementary role with the aim of understanding how individuals process emotions and apply them in social and professional contexts, and for this specific case, in education.

### Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional intelligence (EI), first conceptualized by Goleman (1995), is the ability to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions effectively. It enables individuals to recognize their own emotions and those of others, guiding their thoughts and actions accordingly. This aligns with Gardner's (1989) interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, which emphasize self-awareness and the ability to build healthy relationships. The concept was initially introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990) but gained prominence after Goleman's work. Later, Mayer and Salovey (1997) refined their definition, highlighting emotional intelligence as the ability to manage emotions, differentiate them, and use them to guide cognition and behavior.

Mayer and Salovey (1997) identified four key components of EI: emotional perception, emotional thought facilitation, emotional understanding, and emotional regulation. Emotional perception involves recognizing emotions in oneself and others through verbal and non-verbal cues, including language, art, and music. Emotional thought facilitation refers to how emotions direct attention and influence decision-making. Emotional understanding encompasses the ability to identify emotions, label them, and recognize emotional transitions. Lastly, emotional regulation involves controlling one's own emotions and influencing others'



emotions by minimizing negative states and enhancing positive ones. This framework aligns with Goleman's (1995) five elements of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, emotional management, motivation, empathy, and relationship-building.

Parker et al. (2009) and Banerjee (2021) claim that emotional intelligence (EI) significantly influences students' behavior, attitudes, and overall academic experience. Students with higher EI exhibit improved self-awareness, allowing them to recognize their strengths and areas for improvement, fostering personal growth, and academic success. Additionally, enhanced emotional regulation helps them manage stress, anxiety, and academic pressure, particularly in high-stakes situations like exams. This ability enables them to approach learning with a calm and focused mindset, leading to better academic performance. Furthermore, EI fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement, as emotionally intelligent students derive satisfaction from their learning process, setting personal goals, and maintaining a positive attitude towards education. These students also tend to build stronger relationships with peers and teachers, as EI enhances empathy, communication skills, and the ability to navigate social interactions. These positive relationships create a supportive learning environment, contributing to both academic achievement and emotional well-being.

Beyond academic performance, EI equips students with coping strategies to manage challenges and setbacks, fostering resilience and a growth-oriented mindset. Students with strong EI are more likely to view failures as learning opportunities, demonstrating persistence in achieving long-term success. Additionally, EI supports conflict resolution skills, enabling students to handle disagreements with peers or teachers constructively, leading to a harmonious classroom environment. The ability to communicate effectively, demonstrate empathy, and work collaboratively enhances students' ability to participate in group work and teamwork, which are crucial for success in modern education. Furthermore, emotional intelligence promotes goal-setting and self-motivation, ensuring that students remain committed to their academic aspirations. By integrating emotional intelligence into educational settings, schools can cultivate students who are not only academically successful but also emotionally resilient, socially competent, and well-prepared for future challenges (Banerjee, 2021; Parker et al., 2009). While Emotional Intelligence focuses on the recognition and regulation of emotions, socioemotional competencies encompass a broader set of skills that enable individuals to interact effectively with others, build relationships, and navigate social situations. EI is thus one of the foundations for developing socioemotional competencies.



## Socioemotional Competencies

In education, social and emotional competencies are critical for navigating interpersonal relationships, whereas emotional competence enables individuals to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Among the most widely used frameworks for addressing these competencies is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017). However, the concept of Social and Emotional Education (SEE) offers a broader perspective, emphasizing the educational processes that help individuals develop social and emotional competence. Scholars have increasingly moved away from viewing social and emotional skills as separate abilities and now consider them as a multifaceted construct. The literature also reflects a paradigm shift from SEL to SEE, which provides a more comprehensive and school-wide approach to developing these competencies.

Social competence is regarded as the ability to utilize environmental and personal resources for positive developmental outcomes, while emotional competence refers to an individual's ability to process emotions, regulate emotional expression, and interact effectively with others. Consequently, social-emotional competence encompasses the ability to understand, manage, and express emotions and relationships in ways that enhance daily functioning. Bisquerra et al. (2015) revisit McClelland's (1973) discussion, in which he argued that the concept of competence is more relevant to education than intelligence. McClelland contended that intelligence is traditionally viewed as an innate, monolithic, and unchangeable trait throughout a person's life, which contradicts the educational goal of helping individuals improve, change, and learn, as there are no proven methods to enhance intelligence itself. In contrast, McClelland (1973) emphasized that individuals can indeed develop their competence to perform tasks through practice and learning. Consequently, Bisquerra and Pérez (2007) define competence as a set of knowledge, abilities, skills, and attitudes required to carry out various activities with a certain level of quality and effectiveness. In this framework, they break down emotional intelligence into a series of emotional competencies, including emotional awareness, emotional regulation, emotional autonomy, social competence, and life skills for well-being.

Emotional awareness refers to the ability to recognize and name both one's own emotions and those of others, as well as to perceive the emotional climate of a given context. Emotional regulation relates to the capacity to manage emotions appropriately, ensuring coherence between emotions, thoughts, and actions. This competence is further divided into four micro-competencies: appropriate emotional expression, regulation of emotions and feelings, coping skills, and the ability to self-generate positive



emotions. Emotional autonomy encompasses a set of self-management skills, including self-esteem, a positive attitude toward life, responsibility, critical analysis of social norms, the ability to seek help, and emotional self-efficacy. Social competence refers to essential social skills that enable individuals to maintain positive relationships with others, including effective and assertive communication, respect, and prosocial attitudes. Finally, life and well-being competencies involve the ability to develop behaviors that help individuals navigate the challenges of everyday life, regardless of their nature—personal, familial, social, professional, or recreational. These competencies contribute to leading a healthy and balanced life, fostering experiences of satisfaction and overall well-being.

While SEL provides a structured approach to teaching socioemotional competences, Compassionate Systems Thinking expands this perspective by embedding these principles into the broader educational ecosystem, ensuring that emotional well-being is not only an individual pursuit but also a collective responsibility.

### Compassionate Systems Framework

The Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF) is defined as a model aimed at cultivating "compassionate integrity" (Senge et al., 2019, p. 2) in students and teachers. This involves aligning thoughts, feelings, and actions through an ever-unfolding awareness of interconnectedness. The framework emphasizes the importance of understanding and responding to systemic challenges with compassion, acknowledging that these challenges are part of interconnected, interdependent global systems. By developing this framework, the goal is to equip individuals with the skills necessary to navigate complex issues, promoting human prosperity and survival in a world defined by interdependency.

The Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF) in schools is structured around three key components: developing the skillsets of a systems thinker, cultivating social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, and integrating contemplative practices. The framework promotes the use of systems thinking tools and practices to help individuals recognize patterns of change, analyze deeper systemic structures, and understand the interconnected nature of complex systems. Additionally, it emphasizes the development of social and emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, all of which are essential for fostering empathy, compassion, and ethical behavior. Another fundamental element is the integration of contemplative practices, such as mindfulness and reflection, which enhance self-awareness, emotional regulation, and



stress management, while encouraging a deeper understanding of personal and systemic relationships. By merging systems thinking, SEL, and contemplative practices, the Compassionate Systems Framework equips both students and educators with the skills and mindset needed to navigate complex challenges with greater empathy, insight, and interconnectedness.

Implementing the Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF) in schools enhances student well-being, academic engagement, and social-emotional development while fostering a positive, inclusive school culture. By integrating systems thinking, social and emotional learning (SEL), and contemplative practices, CSF helps students develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience, reducing stress and improving focus. It also strengthens critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills, preparing students for complex real-world challenges. Teachers benefit from greater emotional well-being, professional growth, and more effective classroom management, creating a supportive learning environment for all. Ultimately, CSF equips students and educators with the skills and mindset needed to navigate challenges with empathy, adaptability, and a sense of interconnectedness, fostering long-term success in both academic and personal spheres.

The Compassionate Systems Framework (CSF) and ÚNICA's socioemotional learning (SEL) model share significant overlaps in their goals and methodologies, both emphasizing the holistic development of individuals through emotional regulation, resilience, and systemic awareness. The ÚNICA HÁBIL component, which integrates cognitive and metacognitive skills such as mindfulness, executive thinking, and leadership for systemic understanding, aligns with the CSF's systems thinking approach, which encourages recognizing patterns of change and understanding interconnected structures. Similarly, ÚNICA EMPÁTICA, which focuses on emotional regulation, empathy, and non-violent communication, resonates with CSF's emphasis on SEL, fostering self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The ÚNICA RESILIENTE dimension, which develops resilience, forgiveness, and a sense of purpose, is closely related to CSF's contemplative practices, which promote emotional regulation, mindfulness, and deep self-reflection. Both frameworks seek to create learning environments that promote well-being, self-awareness, and interconnectedness, ensuring that students and educators can navigate complex challenges with emotional intelligence and a systemic perspective. By integrating these approaches, universities can cultivate more compassionate, self-aware, and socially responsible individuals, reinforcing education as a transformative force for personal and collective growth.



Likewise, ÚNICA's SEL model was also informed by the Big Five model proposed by the OCDE (Kankaraš, 2017). This model, also known as the Five-Factor Model (FFM), is a widely recognized framework for understanding human personality. It outlines five broad dimensions that capture the key traits shaping individual behavior and emotional patterns. (1) Openness to experience reflects traits such as creativity, curiosity, and a preference for novelty; individuals high in this trait tend to be imaginative and open-minded, while those lower in openness often favor routine and familiarity. (2) Conscientiousness relates to a person's sense of organization, reliability, and self-discipline—those who score high are typically responsible and goal-oriented, whereas those who score low may be more spontaneous and less dependable. (3) Extraversion describes sociability and the tendency to seek stimulation through social interaction; extraverts are outgoing and assertive, while introverts may prefer solitude and quieter environments. (4) Agreeableness refers to a person's tendency to be compassionate, cooperative, and empathetic—high scorers are generally warm and trusting, while lower scorers may be more skeptical or competitive. Finally, (5) neuroticism reflects emotional instability and the propensity to experience negative emotions such as anxiety or irritability; individuals who score low on neuroticism tend to be more emotionally stable and resilient. Together, these five traits provide a comprehensive view of personality and its influence on human behavior. At this point, it is pertinent to highlight the role of self-knowledge and sustained inner work as foundational tools for socioemotional learning, which is one of the reasons why personality perspectives such as the Big Five can inform SEL initiatives.

## Methodology

According to Morgan (2022), papers, books, articles, and other textual documents are considered "texts"—information carriers that communicate how people construct and represent their realities. These written sources reflect the beliefs, values, and viewpoints of their authors or originating communities similarly to data captured through direct interaction (e.g., interviews) or immersion (e.g., observations). Researchers do not create this data themselves but instead engage with naturally occurring or pre-existing texts produced independently of the research process.

Altheide's (2000) tracking discourse approach and Wach & Ward's (2013) adaptation converge on a systematic, transparent process for qualitative document analysis. You begin by immersing yourself in the source context—understanding formats and practices—and by setting clear inclusion criteria that define which organizations, document types, and publication time frames to review. From there, you collect an initial sample of documents (often 6–10) that meet those criteria and draft a coding protocol, articulating



key themes or variables to guide your analysis. This protocol is then tested and refined through emergent coding and theoretical sampling—adding new categories as patterns arise—while ensuring reliability and validity via double coding and consensus building. Finally, you interpret the coded data to identify trends, gaps, and insights, using Boolean and iterative search strategies to refine your document pool and maintain rigor throughout the process.

For this review, we applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to build a thematically delimited corpus. We prioritized documents published mainly between 2014 and 2024 to capture a decade of developments in socioemotional learning (SEL) and related approaches (e.g., SEE). We included national and international studies that reported educational interventions or offered implementation-oriented guidance explicitly linked to socioemotional competencies. Although our initial focus was on higher education, the limited number of published experiences in this context led us to broaden the scope to primary and secondary education. Documents were retained only when ‘socio-emotional learning’, ‘social and emotional learning’, or closely related descriptors appeared in the title, abstract, keywords, or main text, and when methodological information was sufficient to support interpretation. Purely conceptual pieces without pedagogical or implementation implications, duplicates, and texts without clear SEL linkage were excluded.

**Search strategy and screening.** The corpus was identified through iterative keyword searches and snowballing (backward/forward tracing) in academic search engines, journal platforms, and institutional repositories. Screening was conducted in two stages (title/abstract; full text) to verify relevance to SEL implementation and to document reasons for exclusion, including limited empirical reporting or mismatch with educational settings.

**Analytical procedure.** Following qualitative document analysis, we developed an initial coding protocol (population, context, SEL framework, intervention features, outcomes, and reported constraints) and refined it through repeated reading. The synthesis foregrounds both convergences (synchronies) and tensions or contradictions across settings to support a more critical and situated interpretation of the field.

**A priori limitations.** Despite efforts to include culturally and geopolitically diverse sources, the final corpus shows a stronger presence of Colombian, North American, and European references and comparatively fewer studies from Asian and other Latin American contexts. In addition, many publications provide limited empirical detail about intervention design, duration, and follow-up, which restricts transferability and motivates the critical discussion in the conclusions.



Table 1

*Methodological procedure*

Source types searched	Core descriptors	Time span	Inclusion (must have)	Exclusion (discard if)	Notes on diversity/rigor
Academic search engines, journal platforms, institutional repositories; snowballing	“social and emotional learning” OR “socio-emotional learning” OR “socioemotional competencies” OR “SEE”	2014–2024 (mainly)	Educational intervention or implementation guidance; explicit SEL/SEE link; sufficient methodological reporting.	Purely conceptual/non-educational; no explicit SEL link; duplicates; insufficient reporting for interpretation	Corpus skew toward Colombia/US/Europe; limited empirical detail in part of the literature

## Findings

Upon conducting a comprehensive review of studies conducted in Colombia over the past five years regarding the development of socio-emotional skills in children at schools, three major trends emerged, as it will be detailed as follows:

### National studies

#### The Connection between Socio-emotional Development and Academic Performance in Young Learners

Within this category the notable contributions from the case study by Chaparro and Suescún (2020), the action research by Cervantes and Castro (2021), and the curriculum design by Díaz and Quintero (2023) stand out. Chaparro and Suescún build upon the theoretical proposition that there is a direct and observable impact of socio-emotional development on the academic performance of children in early childhood education within their primary school classrooms. In this regard, the role played by teachers at this educational level is paramount, as to a large extent, it depends on these educators to ensure that their students maintain a high level of motivation, which in turn will positively impact the academic performance of these children. This implies that primary school teachers undertake a crucial role as social educators in the holistic development of students, wherein emotions now more than ever occupy a central position.

The findings of these researchers regarding the repeated use of technological media in classes with children are striking, as it is observed that such tools sometimes inhibit their participation and prevent them



from expressing their emotions spontaneously. It seems that children between the ages of 6 and 9 tend to restrain themselves from sharing their opinions and emotions in public settings, such as virtual classrooms. This phenomenon may be attributed to the fact that during these early childhood stages, children heavily rely on their social role in direct interactions with their peers and teachers. The various situations and experiences they encounter in their classrooms help strengthen their character and enhance their emotional intelligence. Consequently, this suggests that primary school teachers should engage in dynamic activities that enable their students to participate and express how they feel and what they think about various topics related to their class, classroom, and life itself.

In line with the idea that the management of emotions is vital in the academic performance of children, Cervantes and Castro (2021) propose the importance of implementing strategies based on emotional intelligence in strengthening the academic performance of primary school children. These authors argue that for primary school teachers to offer an appropriate formative process and consistent with the needs of their students, it is substantial that they teach children to manage the emotions that involve responsibility for school tasks, and in general to deal with the various issues to which they must answer in school, apart from all the social, economic, and family issues that they must also face.

As a result of ten pedagogical interventions focused on the knowledge and recognition of one's own emotions and those of others, as well as the control and self-regulation of emotions, Cervantes and Castro (2021) revealed that a group of fifth graders increased their motivation toward their learning. This motivation was particularly derived from children's interaction with emotional strategies that allowed them to be more attentive, participate more in class, feel self-confident, and tolerate frustration. These findings show the need for primary teachers to generate spaces that enable students to be closer to their social realities for they are daily immersed in a series of complex situations from which it is difficult for them to detach; however, when children enter the classroom, their socio-familial realities are often left unaddressed due to curricular pressures, large class sizes, limited teacher preparation in socioemotional education, and institutional constraints. Making these factors explicit situates why SEL interventions require sustained whole-school support rather than isolated activities.



## Incidence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on a Renovated Interest in Socioemotional Learning in Children's Welfare

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 from 2020 to almost 2022 led to strict measures such as extended lockdowns, which had negative effects on people in general, but mostly on children, who were not able to go to school not only to start or continue their learning processes, but also to interact with adults and other children. Thus, there were not too many studies in Colombia focused on implementing socioemotional learning interventions per se, except Estupiñán et al.'s study (2020), but there were many studies oriented mostly to describe what emotions emerged in children during this time of isolation. Therefore, the interest there was in this field of socioemotional learning before the pandemic was increased due to the negative effects it had on people's lives.

Estupiñán et al. (2020) conducted a study with school children in the pandemic context. This project was aimed at children from 3 to 5 years of age, being the grades of kindergarten and preschool. To collect the information, researchers employed didactic strategies, such as 'the feelings panel' and a book album. They also did some game-based activities involving dance and gestures used to express emotions, as well as workshops and emotional dialogues. In this study, data showed that in the context where the project was developed, a lot of importance to children's emotions was paid because their mood in classes may affect their way of learning, and because the institution perceived understanding emotions was essential early childhood education. The explicit teaching of emotions was also observed, developing these emotional competencies in children, including the set of knowledge, capacities, skills, and attitudes necessary to become aware of them. This study also highlighted the need to fully incorporate emotions and feelings into personal and professional life. The social dimension and the power of emotions in both students and teachers have sometimes been forgotten.

Although the following studies do not account for implementations, their insights on how to initially approach this topic with children are valuable as they help understand contexts of primary school and set the ground for children to identify and name their emotions. Pedraza and Pedraza (2023) conducted a study in two schools in Bogotá, one public and one private, whose goal was to record and analyze the various experiences lived by fourth graders during the pandemic and the post-pandemic. Their study showed that consequences of the pandemic such as long-term home overcrowding, being away from relatives, and fear of contagion affected children's socioemotional experiences. In the same way, changes in family, school, social and work dynamics, for example, job loss, worry about family sustenance, fear of contagion and of



death, and lack of experience to help children with online learning, affected parents, who also needed socioemotional accompaniment during this period.

Likewise, Parra (2021) developed a study entitled *Niños y niñas: sus saberes, experiencias y emociones durante la sindemia por la COVID-19 [Children: Their knowledge, experiences and emotions during the COVID-19 syndemic]*. She collected 40 stories, involving 10 children, 7 girls and 3 boys, aged 9 to 12 years old. She found that children constructed knowledge around the pandemic which showed their awareness about the level of transmissibility of the virus, as well as about the mortality and lethality that the disease produced. They were also aware of the biosafety measures and standards that had to be taken to prevent the spread of the virus. During the pandemic, children's narratives showed coexistence with parents was one of the most difficult aspects because as in all human relations conflicts occur; during preventative lockdowns tensions, disagreements and discussions between family members occurred. Therefore, children learned to live together and get to know others, as well as to mediate in conflict situations and express their emotions because in their stories they showed they managed to identify, express and distinguish their emotions, they understood and recognized the causes and facts generated by the well-being or discomfort, thus it seems to be a generation that has been permeated by discourses, theories, and practices of emotional education and emotional intelligence.

Aristizábal et al. (2021) did some research with children studying in a non-profit organization. Its goal was to determine the impact the pandemic had on children's emotions. The results showed that the most frequent emotions children experienced were fear, stress, sadness, and some more serious depressive symptoms and anxiety that affected children on an academic, social, and personal level. These findings uncovered the need to offer and assess tools so that children gain more emotional resources to maintain and promote their mental health. Cruz et al. (2023) did a similar study with children from 6 to 11 years old in a school in La Calera, Cundinamarca. After analyzing the data, they found that the most impactful emotions were fear, sadness, and happiness. On a positive note, they found the bond with parents or caregivers was strengthened; however, children's interpersonal relationships and secondary socialization were affected. They also state that although children were resilient and had a good response towards the threat, these features were also influenced by individual and family features, and thus, the effects on interpersonal relationships and school coexistence will be seen in the future.

As can be seen, this set of studies demonstrates that the pandemic reignited interest in socioemotional learning, but mostly in describing its effects on children's emotions, probably because at



the time of the pandemic, the main concern was with children's loss of learning and psychological effects of lockdowns. Additionally, it was noticed that just one of the studies briefly shows the implementation of some activities to work socioemotional learning with children. Finally, there were no studies in relation to socioemotional learning whose population were adults and either in-service or pre-service teachers

## **International studies**

### **Emotional Education at the Service of Catering to the Well-being of Students**

International research on the well-being of students in educational settings consistently highlights the importance of integrating emotional education and positive psychology into curricula to foster both academic and personal growth. A key example is the study by Bisquerra-Alzina and Hernández-Paniello (2017), conducted in Spain, which emphasizes that well-being imbues students' personal and social lives with meaning. According to the authors, people often pursue happiness through misguided paths, which can lead to hasty decisions, risky behaviors, and disrupted peace of mind. This observation underscores the necessity of introducing emotional education early in life and continuing it throughout. However, a major barrier to achieving this goal is the lack of training for preservice teachers in emotional education, making it difficult for educators to develop the emotional competencies their students need.

Despite this challenge, the researchers found that teachers who engaged with positive psychology-based practices expressed high satisfaction, reporting improvements in emotional competencies, reduced conflict, better classroom climates, and even enhanced academic performance. This success was attributed to the supportive emotional education programs that schools had implemented, which aligned with an integrative model focusing on personal and social development, mindfulness, and personal strengths. These programs were flexible, cross-curricular, and designed not to burden teachers with additional tasks but to seamlessly fit into their existing responsibilities.

Támašová and Zapletal (2022) offer insights into how positive psychology can be effectively implemented in secondary school curricula. They emphasize the importance of creating an educational environment that nurtures students' strengths, shifting the focus from correcting mistakes to identifying and cultivating individual talents. Such an approach not only enhances students' academic performance but also supports their emotional well-being. Key strategies for implementing positive psychology in schools include collaborating with school psychologists, utilizing innovative teaching methods like problem-based and



project-based learning and fostering a school culture that prioritizes positive relationships among students and staff. They also advocate for revising assessment methods to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses, integrating life skills education to build resilience, and fostering intrinsic motivation to enhance self-discipline. These strategies are in line with the broader vision of Kern et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of embedding well-being into educational systems to promote sustainable, long-term positive changes.

It is important to highlight that before implementing SEL programs, for them to be effective, institutions should rely upon a robust set of guidelines to tailor the different theories and models to respond to their specific needs. In this sense, Kern et al. (2025) propose several key guidelines for designing effective Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, focusing on a solid scientific foundation, contextual customization, and ethical values. SEL programs should be grounded in positive psychology principles, such as Seligman’s PERMA model, which emphasizes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. A holistic approach is recommended, addressing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral learning by promoting critical thinking and linking activities to students’ feelings. SEL should be embedded into the school culture, supported by policies and rituals that reinforce positive education principles, while also promoting virtue ethics to foster character development and social responsibility.

Customizing programs to fit local cultural contexts is crucial for ensuring their relevance and effectiveness, as is involving the entire school community—students, teachers, school leaders, and parents—in the process. Ongoing support through workshops and mentoring ensures continuous improvement in teaching practices, while real-life application of skills enhances their transferability to everyday situations. Teacher engagement is also vital, not only for the successful implementation of SEL but also for supporting their mental health and commitment to the program. Additional recommendations include encouraging reflective practices among educators, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and supporting ongoing research to refine SEL practices. These comprehensive guidelines provide a framework for developing and implementing SEL programs that promote the holistic development and well-being of students.

The benefits of integrating positive psychology into education are manifold. According to Kern et al. (2025), students who engage in positive educational practices experience not only improved academic achievement but also greater life satisfaction and reduced levels of anxiety and depression. Positive education fosters stronger community connections by focusing on individual strengths, which helps students



feel a sense of belonging and support. Furthermore, cultivating traits such as self-discipline and resilience not only contributes to academic success but also prepares students to navigate future challenges, leading to better long-term outcomes, including higher earning potential. By embedding positive traits into educational practices, schools can create environments that foster holistic development, ultimately preparing students to thrive as resilient, socially responsible individuals. However, as Kern et al. (2025) point out, for positive education to succeed in the long term, challenges such as program quality, integration into diverse educational systems, and the need for evidence-based practices must be addressed. These challenges, once overcome, will ensure the continued growth and success of positive education initiatives worldwide.

### Emotional Education Supporting the Prevention of Social Problems and Laying Foundations for Outstanding Student Performance

López Salmorán (2020) argues that integrating emotional education into secondary schools is essential for fostering peace and harmonious relationships among students. To achieve this, it is necessary to implement an intervention plan that develops emotional competencies in a practical and dynamic way, enabling students to manage their emotions and resolve conflicts peacefully. One key strategy is to incorporate activities that teach students how to identify and express their emotions. For example, games and dynamics can be used to help adolescents articulate their feelings and reflect on how these emotions affect their behavior and relationships with others. This not only promotes self-awareness but also encourages empathy, which is crucial for creating a supportive and peaceful school environment.

Furthermore, it is important for teachers to receive training in emotional education to create a classroom environment where students feel respected and heard. This allows educators to address school conflicts confidently and view them as opportunities for creative change rather than problems leading to violence. Emotional education should complement cognitive learning, and its inclusion in the academic curriculum is vital for students' overall development. This means not only teaching emotional skills but also promoting a school environment that fosters respectful communication and conflict resolution. Ultimately, by promoting emotional education, students are expected to learn to regulate their emotions, reduce negative feelings, and enhance positive ones, contributing to a peaceful atmosphere in the school. To integrate emotional education effectively and sustainably, various strategies can be applied, including emotional competence development, dynamic activities, teacher training, curriculum integration, continuous reflection, and the creation of a positive school environment.



Within the studies that link socioemotional learning to accomplishment, for example academic performance, and avoidance of social issues is the one done by Martínez-Whiting (2023). This study set out to inquire, through a metaanalysis, about the impact that the implementation of emotional education could have on high and primary school students. Also, it sought to collect views from teachers regarding these interventions. It was revealed that the students who took part in the SEL projects improved their positive social behavior, showed fewer behavioral issues, suffered less emotional distress, and achieved higher academic performance. All this improvement was intrinsically related to students' better attitudes about themselves, their peers, and their teachers as well as a closer connection with their learning and their school.

Another relevant finding this study unveiled was that precisely in most of the North American schools where SEL initiatives had been implemented successfully, the socioemotional competencies of teachers had been considered. In this sense, Martínez and Whiting (2023) discovered that educating teachers in SEL is vital, among other reasons, because this contributes to the strengthening of relationships between educators, and between students and teachers, the reduction of staff burnout along with stress inherent in teaching and building trust among colleagues. However, despite these encouraging results, this researcher warns that part of the failure of socio-emotional programs is explained by the misconceptions that educators have about these projects. Within such misconceptions lies the idea that SEL is just a tool to control students' behavior, the thought that SEL is exclusive for youngsters and not for adults, and the belief that the success of these programs is simply secured when SEL is included in the Curriculum.

### Gaps in the Adoption of SEL Frameworks across University Contexts

In the literature studied, it was evident that there is not a lot of research that has taken place in university contexts. Most of the studies found were undergraduate and graduate students' dissertations and thesis applying interventions in school contexts. However, there were not many that addressed initiatives related to socioemotional learning in higher education. Among the few found appears Elmi's (2020) study about the outcomes of applying SEL in mineralogy, an Earth science introductory course. The study highlights the potential of SEL strategies to enhance students' cognitive development, focus, confidence, and interpersonal relationships. In response to the growing diversity of student populations—including those from varied cultural backgrounds and with disabilities—the course design emphasized SEL competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills, aligning instruction with the principles of multiple intelligences. Findings suggest that not only did SEL reduce stress and improve



student engagement, but also enhanced motivation, academic achievement, and peer interaction. Students valued mistakes as learning opportunities and experienced a greater sense of community and support.

Another study explored how embedding Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and a humanization framework into higher education can improve the wellbeing of mature and part-time students, particularly those who often feel isolated or struggle to find a sense of belonging in traditional academic settings (Wilson et al., 2024). Through the Positive Digital Practices (PDP) project, a co-creation methodology was used to develop teaching resources grounded in SEL competencies—self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills—while promoting empathy, student agency, and inclusion. The project involved listening workshops, co-creation activities, and the development of digital tools, such as a Digital Literacy Journey Map and Best Practice Assessment Guidance, all designed with and for students. These resources were well received and proved effective in promoting a sense of community, motivation, emotional resilience, and academic engagement. Students directly involved in the creation process reported enhanced socio-emotional intelligence, greater confidence, and stronger connections with peers and instructors.

García-Chitiva and Correa's (2023) study presents a novel framework using bipartite networks to estimate the centrality and distribution of soft skills across graduate programs in Colombia. Drawing from a sample of 230 graduate programs at 49 higher education institutions, the research analyzed program descriptions using natural language processing and network centrality measures to identify the most prominent soft skills embedded in curricula. Results revealed that creativity, leadership, and analytical orientation emerged as the most central soft skills across programs, while others appeared less frequently. Although program type and accreditation level showed some variation, differences in soft skills emphasis were not statistically significant, suggesting a broad but uneven integration of these competencies in graduate education.

From a conceptual standpoint, the study underscores the importance of soft skills—such as problem-solving, social interaction, and self-management—in preparing students for real-world challenges and aligning with global sustainability goals. The findings also reflect how universities articulate the added value of their academic offerings through mottos and program descriptions, signaling the inclusion of both technical and interpersonal competencies.



## Conclusions

The literature reviewed indicates that there is an undeniable connection between social-emotional learning initiatives and the successful academic performance of young students. To this extent, one of the suggested tasks for elementary school teachers is the promotion of activities and workshops through which students confidently express how they feel and what they think about various topics related to their class, their classmates and their lives. It is worth mentioning here that at a national level, there is a scarcity of studies that provide detailed SEL interventions or concrete SEL strategies in high schools. We hypothesize that this is because, despite the growing interest in the emotions of pre-adolescents and adolescents in many Colombian schools, teachers are not encouraged to publish such interventions on account of the lack of systematization of experiences in these contexts, the lack of methodological clarity on how to implement consistent SEL-based interventions, and the lack of empirical evidence.

Similarly, research points to the fact that one of the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic was a renewed interest in the emotional well-being of young students, not only on the part of teachers and administrators but also on the part of their parents. They all began to pay more attention to the emotions that emerged particularly in children at that time, and those that have emerged since. On the other hand, the research reviewed here highlights the fundamental role of schoolteachers in emotional education proposals, since educators who are convinced of the benefits of Positive Psychology in the classroom express a high level of satisfaction. Among the reasons they mention the most are improvements in emotional competencies, reduced conflict, better classroom climates, and enhanced academic performance. In this regard, most researchers on emotional education in young learners consider it necessary, on the one hand, to constantly educate teachers in emotional education, since such training strengthens relationships among colleagues, with students and among students, reduces professional burnout and stress commonly associated with teaching, and significantly increases trust among teachers, among other benefits.

It is evident that most of the studies reviewed emphasize the numerous benefits that SEL programs bring to the educational system, however it is worth mentioning that there are various studies that warn that these initiatives could fail due to misconceptions about such projects; some of these are that SEL programs are only mechanisms to control student behavior, that they are only useful for young learners and not for adults, and that their success is guaranteed by their mere inclusion in the curriculum.



From a more critical standpoint, the review also invites to question the uncritical transfer of ‘traditional’ SEL frameworks across geopolitically and culturally diverse contexts. What assumptions about emotions, selfhood, and ‘appropriate’ social behavior are embedded in dominant SEL models? Which voices, knowledges, and lived experiences remain underrepresented in the literature? Addressing these questions can help move from a universalizing view of SEL toward more situated, culturally responsive, and ethically grounded designs for research and implementation..

It is striking that within the literature there is a lack of research on SEL in higher education settings. A large part of the few studies found in this context are undergraduate degree projects and Master's theses and not scientific articles as such. The few studies found suggest that SEL is a great option to reduce stress, increase students’ engagement and motivation, facilitate interaction, and enhance learners’ achievement. The implementation of SEL project in colleges and universities workshops, co-creation activities, and the development of digital tools, designed for and with students, proved effective in promoting a sense of community, motivation, emotional resilience, and academic engagement.

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