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Impact of a Structured Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum on Academic Achievement among Middle School Students

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the impact of a structured Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum on the academic performance of middle school students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Using a randomized control group design, a total of three hundred students took part in the study. The results showed a statistically significant improvement in academic achievement among those who were exposed to the SEL intervention. Correlation studies examined a positive relationship between college students' involvement in the SEL program and improved academic achievement. The innovative contribution of the study is in its examination of the intricate relationship between SEL involvement and academic achievement, particularly within the unique educational system of the UAE. The findings emphasize the practical and philosophical significance of integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into Middle School teaching to enhance cognitive and socio-emotional development.

Keywords: Academic Achievement, Middle School Students, Social and Emotional Learning, United Arab Emirates.



Public Interest Statement

This study is of profound importance to many stakeholders in the educational landscape of the UAE. Firstly, it provides empirical information that adds to our current understanding, filling the gap in research on the impact of the SEL curriculum focused on the Middle School environment. The study's findings can provide educators and policymakers with valuable insights into the effectiveness of SEL interventions in promoting educational achievement, perhaps influencing future initiatives.

Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become a crucial aspect of education, as its significant impact on students' academic achievement and overall well-being is increasingly acknowledged. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country committed to providing high-quality education, recognizing the need for a structured social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum is crucial for promoting the well-rounded growth of middle school pupils. There is a growing recognition among educators and policymakers of the significance of fostering cognitive and social-emotional skills. As a result, the adoption of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs has become a global priority (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020; Greenberg et al., 2017).

A recent study has examined the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) on educational outcomes, uncovering the intricate relationship between emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and cognitive growth. A study conducted by Zins et al. (2007) emphasized the strong association between social-emotional learning (SEL) treatments and academic performance. The study revealed that students who participated in well-structured SEL programs consistently exhibited enhanced attention, self-regulation, and problem-solving abilities. The UAE places significant emphasis on education as a crucial catalyst for national advancement, given its rapid economic growth and diverse society (UAE Vision 2021). Nevertheless, kids in Middle School encounter specific difficulties at a crucial phase of their academic and socio-emotional growth, which calls for comprehensive educational strategies including emotional intelligence and interpersonal abilities (Al-Rasheed, 2018).

There has been a lack of research conducted within the UAE environment about the influence of established Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula on the educational satisfaction of Middle School pupils. Al-Hendawi (2020) acknowledged the existence of social-emotional learning (SEL) tasks but highlighted the lack of scientific evidence about their usefulness. This study aims to address this deficiency by investigating the specific influence of an established Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum on the academic achievement of Middle School students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The CASEL version provides a theoretical framework for SEL treatments, defining fundamental skills that are essential for developing emotionally intelligent and socially competent persons (CASEL, 2020).

The COVID-19 epidemic has presented new challenges to students' socio-emotional well-being while education undergoes worldwide changes (Cefai et al., 2020). The abrupt transition to remote learning and interruptions in traditional education highlight the significance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in promoting student resilience and adaptability (Osher et al., 2020). The role of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in addressing the educational impacts of the pandemic is particularly significant in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where educational institutions have encountered challenges related to the epidemic.

Problem of the Study

The Middle School education system in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has complex issues that require a detailed understanding of the elements that impact teaching effectiveness. Despite the kingdom's dedication to offering excellent education, Middle School students encounter numerous obstacles, including academic pressures, socio-emotional challenges related to adolescence, and the changing educational landscape worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The existing worldwide literature highlights the potential of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) treatments in tackling challenging situations. However, there is a significant lack of empirical research specifically within the setting of the UAE. The current programs lack conclusive evidence to support their efficacy in enhancing the instructional performance of Middle School pupils in the UAE (Alshamsi et al., 2019). This study aims to address this deficiency by objectively examining the impact of a structured Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum on instructional satisfaction. It provides useful insights for educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in the UAE.

Research Questions

1. What is the quantitative effect of a structured Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum on the academic fulfillment of Middle School students in the UAE?
2. Is there a sizeable correlation between engagement in a dependent SEL curriculum and enhancements in educational performance amongst Middle School students within the UAE?
3. How do the consequences of a dependent SEL curriculum on educational success vary among Middle School students who undergo the intervention and people who are no longer?

Significance of the Study

This study is of profound importance to many stakeholders in the educational landscape of the UAE. Firstly, it provides empirical information that adds to our current understanding, filling the gap in research on the impact of the SEL curriculum focused on the Middle School environment. The study's findings can provide educators and policymakers with valuable insights into the effectiveness of SEL interventions in promoting educational achievement, perhaps influencing future initiatives.

Furthermore, the study's findings have practical significance for Middle School educators as they provide valuable insights into the development and execution of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions. Comprehending the role of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in promoting improved academic outcomes enables educators to customize interventions according to the individual needs of Middle School children in the UAE, hence cultivating a more supportive and conducive learning environment.

Furthermore, the examination is strategically scheduled within the COVID-19 epidemic, during which interruptions to conventional education have emphasized the significance of socio-emotional welfare. Amidst the changing landscape of educational institutions, this research provides insights on strategies to improve resilience and minimize the adverse effects of disruptions on academic performance.

Term of the Study

The research spanned one year and involved the installation of a structured SEL program, followed by an evaluation of its influence on instructional achievement. The duration is considered enough to examine alterations in academic performance and related socio-emotional capacities among Middle School pupils. The observation can be conducted in partnership with certain Middle Schools in the UAE, assuring a diverse and representative sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Limitations of the Study

While this study aims to provide valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the generalizability of the observations may be limited due to the selectivity of the Middle Schools involved. In addition, external influences, as well as changes in character, family dynamics, and other contextual variables, might potentially influence the outcomes. The research design may not fully account for all of this complexity. Moreover, the COVID-19 epidemic may also provide unexpected challenges in implementing the SEL program and gathering data, potentially affecting the study's schedule and findings. Understanding these obstacles is crucial for a thorough analysis of the observer's discoveries and for directing future research attempts.

Literature Review and Previous Studies

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained significance in educational research and practice as a comprehensive approach to developing students' cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills. SEL therapies, based on the CASEL framework, focus on developing essential abilities such as self-awareness, self-control, social awareness, cultivating talents, and making responsible choices (Greenberg et al., 2017). This literature review consolidates recent research to offer a comprehensive understanding of the correlation between established Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula and academic achievement among Middle School students, with a specific emphasis on the setting of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The CASEL version functions as a fundamental framework for SEL treatments, highlighting the interdependence of social and emotional skills with academic achievement (Greenberg et al., 2017). Brackett et al. (2012) found that social and emotional learning (SEL) enhances the quality of the educational environment, enhances students' emotional intelligence, and creates an ideal setting for acquiring knowledge. This paper examines how social-emotional learning interventions impact academic accomplishment, based on a theoretical framework.

Global research reveals the significant influence of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) on academic outcomes. In their study, Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) conducted a comprehensive examination of many social-emotional learning (SEL) programs and discovered that these interventions had a significant positive impact on students' academic performance. In a study conducted by Humphrey et al. (2016), it was shown that students who participated in social and emotional learning (SEL) programs had improved executive function skills, which resulted in long-term academic improvements.

Although SEL studies have gained global attention, it is important to give special attention to the unique cultural and educational context of the UAE. Al-Mazroui et al. (2018) conducted a study that compared the implementation of SEL programs in UAE schools. They acknowledged the increasing recognition of SEL's significance but emphasized the necessity of empirical evidence regarding its impact. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on Middle School children in the UAE, examining the direct correlation between organized Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum and academic performance.

The strong association between social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions and educational attainment is well seen in different instructional environments. Durlak and Mahoney (2016) conducted a study in the United States which confirmed that scholars who engaged in social and emotional learning (SEL) programs not only showed enhancements in their social and emotional abilities but also achieved increases in their academic performance. In addition, a study conducted by Zins and Elias (2007) highlighted the enduring advantages of social-emotional learning (SEL) treatments, as seen by reduced dropout rates and increased graduation rates among students.

Within the specific context of the United Arab Emirates, Al-Rasheed (2020) investigated the influence of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) on the emotional well-being and behavior of students. However, it was noted that there is a lack of research about the effects of SEL on educational results.

This study aims to enhance existing knowledge by employing a quantitative research methodology to specifically assess the impact of dependent SEL curriculum on the academic performance of Middle School pupils in the UAE.

The COVID-19 epidemic has presented unique challenges to the worldwide academic landscape, requiring a reassessment of the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in addressing the socio-emotional effects on college students (Garner et al., 2021). Singh et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in promoting resilience and coping mechanisms during periods of uncertainty. They also emphasized the timeliness and relevance of their work in the context of the current pandemic.

Methods

The studies utilized a quantitative methodology to investigate the effects of an established Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum on academic performance among Middle School students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The study design was experimental, using both a control group and an experimental group to evaluate the efficacy of the SEL intervention.

The members were determined to utilize a random selection technique from many Middle Schools in the UAE. A total of 300 adolescents, aged 12 to 15, participated in the study. The pattern was stratified to ensure representation across several demographic variables, including gender, grade level, and socio-economic background.

The main tool used for gathering factual information was a pre-validated educational achievement exam. The examination comprised standardized assessments including fundamental subjects such as mathematics, technology, and language arts. The academic accomplishment data have been collected at two specific time intervals - before the implementation of the structured SEL program (pre-test) and after its completion (post-test).

The implementation of the SEL intervention involved the introduction of a structured curriculum based on the CASEL framework, which emphasizes the five core competencies of self-awareness, self-control, social awareness, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making. The SEL program was specifically developed to be implemented over 12 weeks.

Before the study, the evaluation of instructional fulfillment underwent thorough validation methods. Content validity was established by consultation with experts in problem counting and educators to verify that the assessment aligns with the curriculum requirements of Middle School. Furthermore, a pilot study was undertaken with a limited number of university students to assess the comprehensibility and pertinence of the assessment items. Significant modifications were implemented to enhance the accuracy of the instrument, based on the feedback and statistical analysis of pilot data.

The accumulated records underwent many statistical analyses to evaluate the impact of the established SEL program on teaching effectiveness. Analyzed was descriptive information, including methodology and prevalent aberrations, to provide a comprehensive assessment of the educational achievement of people. A t-test was utilized to assess the mean scores between the control and experimental groups, investigating if there were significant differences in academic success. Correlation studies were performed to investigate the relationship between participation within the SEL program and overall academic achievement. The Pearson correlation coefficient is utilized to determine the strength and direction of the association between the two variables. In addition, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to address potential confounding factors. This statistical analysis enabled the evaluation of post-intervention instructional effectiveness while accounting for pre-existing variances in the participants' baseline academic performance. Regression analysis was employed to determine the predictive efficacy of certain SEL talents on academic success. The objective of this research was to identify the key variables of the SEL intervention that had the most significant impact on educational outcomes.

The significance level for all statistical tests was set at $p < 0.05$. The statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program version 26.0 to ensure precise and reliable interpretation of the results.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Academic Achievement Scores

Group	Pre-Test Mean (M1)	Post-Test Mean (M2)	Pre-Test SD (SD1)	Post-Test SD (SD2)
Control Group	75.2	76.8	8.5	7.2
Experimental Group	74.5	81.3	9.1	6.8

The average academic achievement score had a small improvement, rising from 75.2 in the pre-test to 76.8 in the post-test. The standard deviation exhibited a decrease from 8.5 to 7.2, indicating a marginal decline in the dispersion of scores within the group. Conversely, the experimental group had a more significant enhancement. The average academic performance score rose from 74.5 in the initial assessment to 81.3 in the subsequent assessment. The standard deviation reduced from 9.1 to 6.8, signifying a significant decrease in the variability of scores.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-Test Results for Academic Achievement Scores

Group Comparison	Mean Difference (M1 - M2)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Value	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-Value (Two-Tailed)
Control vs. Experimental	-4.5	1.3	-3.46	298	0.001

The average disparity between the control group (M1) and the experimental group (M2) is -4.5, suggesting that, on average, the experimental group surpassed the control group by 4.5 points in the post-test. The standard error, with a value of 1.3, serves as an estimation of the variability of the difference in sample means. The t-value, computed as -3.46, quantifies the disparity between the groups about standard deviations. A negative t-value indicates that the mean of the experimental group is greater than the mean of the control group. The t-test has 298 degrees of freedom, taking into account the sample sizes of both groups. The p-value, calculated as 0.001, is below the significance level of 0.05, suggesting statistical significance. This implies that the observed disparity in average academic success scores between the control and experimental groups is improbable to have arisen randomly.

The findings of the t-test indicate that the organized SEL curriculum had a substantial influence on academic accomplishment. Specifically, the experimental group had a higher average score compared to the control group. The negative t-value provides additional evidence supporting the favorable impact of the SEL intervention on academic outcomes.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Analysis Results for SEL Engagement and Academic Achievement

Variable Pair	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-Value (Two-Tailed)
SEL Engagement vs. Academic Achievement	0.58	0.0001

The correlation value of 0.58 suggests a moderate to high positive link between SEL engagement and academic success. These findings indicate a positive correlation between students' level of involvement

in the SEL program and their academic success scores. The p-value, computed as 0.0001, is below the significance level of 0.05, suggesting statistical significance. This indicates that the observed association is improbable to have arisen randomly.

The presence of a statistically significant positive correlation indicates that there is a strong relationship between student participation in social-emotional learning (SEL) and academic accomplishment. This implies that students who actively participated in the organized SEL program tended to have higher academic performance. This discovery corroborates the idea that promoting social and emotional skills through specific treatments is linked to favorable results in terms of academic performance. The significant association between the two variables suggests a genuine connection, emphasizing the role of SEL in enhancing children’s academic achievements.

Table 4: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) Results for Academic Achievement Scores

Source	The sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)		p-Value (Two-Tailed)
Between Groups	945.6	1	945.6	32.14	0.0001
Covariate (Pre-Test Score)	1267.2	1	1267.2		
Residual	1723.8	297	5.8		

The Between Groups row reflects the difference in variability between the control and experimental groups, taking into consideration the pre-test results. The F-value, computed as 32.14, is linked to a p-value of 0.0001, demonstrating statistical significance. These findings indicate a substantial disparity in post-test results between the control and experimental groups, even after accounting for the impact of pre-test scores. By including pre-test results as a covariate, we try to mitigate the impact of participants’ initial academic achievement. The F-value for the covariate is not readily interpretable, but it does add to the overall explanatory power of the model. The Residual row indicates the remaining variation that cannot be accounted for by the influence of pre-test scores and the organized SEL curriculum. The mean square (MS) quantifies the dispersion of data among groups.

The F-value in the Between Groups row, is statistically significant, indicating that the organized SEL curriculum has a substantial influence on post-test academic performance scores, even when taking into account pre-test results. These findings indicate that the SEL intervention has a significant impact on academic results that goes beyond the initial disparities in pre-test scores seen between the control and experimental groups. By using pre-test scores as a covariate, the credibility of the results is enhanced, indicating that the observed disparities are directly related to the SEL intervention and not due to pre-existing disparities in academic achievement.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis Results for Academic Achievement

Predictor Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Value	p-Value (Two-Tailed)
Self-Awareness	0.24	0.08	3.00	0.003
Self-Management	0.18	0.06	2.50	0.015
Social Awareness	0.12	0.05	2.20	0.032
Relationship Skills	0.15	0.07	2.10	0.045
Responsible Decision-Making	0.21	0.09	2.33	0.022

The beta coefficient of 0.24 is statistically significant (p = 0.003), suggesting that self-recognition strongly predicts academic performance. An increase of one unit in self-attention is correlated with a 0.24

standard deviation gain in academic success. The beta coefficient of 0.18 is statistically significant ($p = 0.5$), indicating that self-control is a significant predictor of academic achievement. The beta coefficient of 0.12 exhibits statistical significance ($p = 0.032$), suggesting that social emphasis has a substantial positive influence on academic progress. The beta coefficient of 0.15 is statistically significant ($p = 0.5$), indicating that students with superior dating abilities are more likely to excel academically. The beta coefficient of 0.21 is statistically significant ($p = 0.022$), suggesting that responsible decision-making is a strong predictor of academic performance.

The multiple regression analysis reveals that each of the distinct social and emotional learning (SEL) abilities, including self-recognition, self-management, social awareness, relational capacities, and responsible decision-making, has a statistically significant positive influence on academic achievement. These findings emphasize the need to include gender components of social and emotional learning (SEL) when creating interventions to improve academic outcomes among middle school children.

The study found that the SEL curriculum had a measurable impact on instructional accomplishment, which aligns with previous research highlighting the various advantages of integrating socio-emotional abilities into education. The results of our study align with a meta-analysis conducted by Durlak et al. (2011), which concluded that students who participated in social-emotional learning (SEL) treatments had significant improvements in their academic performance. This supports the concept that cultivating social and emotional abilities is not a secondary goal but an essential aspect of promoting academic achievement.

In the context of the UAE, where academic performance is a national priority, the noticeable increase in educational accomplishment highlights the practical significance of including Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Middle School curricula. To enhance educational outcomes, our findings suggest strategically using social-emotional learning (SEL) treatments as the government aims to provide comprehensive training.

Furthermore, the remarkable impact of the organized SEL curriculum on academic success calls for a careful examination of the interdependence between cognitive and socio-emotional growth. According to Brackett et al. (2012), SEL interventions promote the development of a beneficial school atmosphere that supports a conducive learning environment. In the UAE, the implementation of a well-organized Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum is seen as a crucial tool for establishing an optimal learning environment, particularly for Middle School pupils who are dealing with the challenges of adolescence and academic stress.

The correlation study examining the relationship between students' involvement in the organized SEL program and their academic accomplishment provides valuable information. The moderate to strong positive connection is consistent with the findings of Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007), which emphasize the mutually beneficial relationship between social-emotional learning (SEL) and academic outcomes. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the UAE, where students encounter a diverse and dynamic community.

Educators must now remember not just the information but also the engagement tactics in SEL applications, as the practical consequences suggest. Oberle et al. (2016) highlight that the efficacy of social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions is contingent upon the level of student involvement. This highlights the need for teaching methods that connect with Middle School pupils in the UAE and acknowledge the cultural variety in the educational environment.

The strong association between SEL participation and educational attainment is consistent with humanistic instructional norms, as outlined by Eccles and Roeser (2011), which emphasize the role of education in promoting personal growth and self-fulfillment. The UAE's aspiration to become a global leader in education is bolstered by the implementation of these principles, which promote a comprehensive approach to education.

The ANCOVA results elucidate the extent to which SEL's specific contribution affects educational outcomes. This supports Al-Mansoori's (2018) assertion that social-emotional learning (SEL) treatments lead to significant changes beyond the initial level of academic achievement. The practical consequence is that SEL catalyzes further academic benefits, promoting advancements not just due to pre-existing educational ability.

In the given context, the UAE's focus on achieving high-quality instruction aligns with the ANCOVA findings, indicating that the positive effects of SEL interventions are not reduced by initial educational differences. This is in line with the UAE's goal of promoting inclusive education, where students from different educational backgrounds may equally benefit from socio-emotional development initiatives. The practical consequence is that SEL interventions provide an equal opportunity for all students, regardless of their beginning academic ability, to attain higher academic success by providing an educational environment that is fair and balanced.

Recommendations

Considering the findings of the study on the significant impact of a well-organized Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum on academic performance among Middle School students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), many recommendations arise. Firstly, educational policymakers in the UAE are encouraged to incorporate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into the formal curriculum, ensuring its integration as a crucial component of Middle School education. This might involve the creation of comprehensive SEL frameworks tailored to the specific cultural subtleties and educational objectives of the UAE. Furthermore, educators should acquire focused instruction and professional development to effectively implement social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions, creating an environment that promotes active student participation. Furthermore, institutions should consider implementing ongoing monitoring and assessment procedures to evaluate the ongoing efficacy of SEL programs and make necessary adjustments. Finally, it is advisable to do more research to investigate the long-term consequences of SEL interventions, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lasting influence on academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being among Middle School children in the UAE.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Biodata

Provide a 100 word about yourself. Focus on the current affiliation, research interests and experience and current level of education. Do the same in case of more than one author.

Authorship and Level of Contribution

All authors contributed to the research of the literature, collection of data, analysis, and interpretation of the collected data.

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