

Teachers' Perspectives of the Implementation of Social Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Centers in Shanghai, China

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ABSTRACT

Many early childhood teachers understand the importance of social emotional competency in influencing adjustment and the well-being of the children. However, the readiness of these teachers to integrate and practice social emotional learning is questionable. Therefore, this study examined teachers' perspectives of the implementation of SEL in selected childhood centres in Shanghai, China. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The study was guided by two specific research objectives. The population for the study was 375 kindergarten teachers randomly drawn from the list of schools that agreed to participate in the study. A structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistic such as mean and standard deviation, and inferential statistic such as t-test and ANOVA. The findings of the study among others showed that the implementation of SEL was between the moderate and low level with significant differences based on school type. Therefore, it was recommended that the Ministry of Education should enact and enforce policies that will enhance the implementation of SEL in early childhood centres.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Early Childhood Education (ECE), Implementation of SEL, Aspects of SEL, Implementation of SEL

1. INTRODUCTION

Emerging studies have revealed the relevance of Social Emotional Learning

(SEL) in the Early Childhood Education (ECE). Empirical evidence from Western and a few Asian countries have shown the importance of SEL with regards to better academic performance and higher level of social and emotional competency (Hyson, 2004; Quinn et al., 2016). Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is conceptualized as a continuous process where children and adults learn about emotions, how to manage it by focusing on having and achieving positive goals, learning to feel sympathy and develop positive relationships with other people, have emotional attachment with people and objects and also learn to take responsible decisions (Elias, 1997; Payton *et al.*, 2000; Zins & Elias, 2007). It uses a student centered approach, which emphasises students' involvement, in the development of critical communication and cooperative behaviours among students (Collie et al., 2012). In the context of this study, SEL can be viewed as the adoption of child-centred teaching strategies to support and improve children's social and emotional skills.

According to Goleman (1996), there are five aspects of SEL which reveal a precise description of the concept. These include social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, self-awareness and self-management. Payton *et al.* (2000), discovered seventeen skills and competencies in SEL and grouped them into four sub groups. The groups included; self-awareness, positive attitude and morals,

responsible decision making and social interaction skills. Therefore competent early childhood teachers should adequately support and develop children in these aforementioned specific areas for proper emotional development. SEL assists children during their early childhood education to give efficient performance, increase their ability to analyse and solve problems using different perspectives in finding solutions (Gordon *et al.*, 2016). Payton *et al.* (2008) in a study found that the SEL programme had a positive impact and was effective for both children with and without behavioural and emotional problems. The SEL programme was reported to enhance the children's social and emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behaviour, good academic performance and a decrease in misconduct and emotional problems.

Children in China and U.S. were reported to possess related patterns of effortful control and emotionality (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2009; Zhou *et al.*, 2010). Chen *et al.* (2005), also discovered that both children in China and the West who are withdrawn and aggressive are at a high risk of social exclusion and peer rejection. However, in studies of cultural variation in emotional expression, it was reported that the Chinese and other Asians tend to hide their emotions in order to maintain group harmony (Tsai *et al.*, 2002). This is mostly true for Chinese children in China (Chen *et al.*, 2005). Thus, universal mental health promotion programmes like a school-based SEL intervention is needed in China due to the increase in the rate of mental health problems, substance abuse, suicide and violence in schools among youths in Hong Kong. Recent findings related to the mental health of children have gained attention from the educators and the policymakers. Studies show that kindergarteners with behavioural and developmental problems have a higher risk of developing mental health problems that can affect their childhood and adolescence (Black *et al.*,

2017; Bornstein *et al.*, 2013). It is in this context that Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is seen as providing children with coping strategies that can help them cope with stress that they may encounter in school and out. SEL programmes are crucial for young children, especially when growing up in a culture that promotes the display of emotions (Zhou *et al.*, 2010).

Recent development in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in China has shown its increasing interests in the importance of implementing the SEL teaching and learning practices (Guo *et al.*, 2015). The Ministry of Education launched the new ECE guidelines in 2012 to promote child-centred, play-based teaching and learning with the ideas of respecting children and active learning (Liu & Du, 2014). Consequently, under the backing of China's Ministry of Education (MoE) together with the "United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)", the "MoE-UNICEF Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Programme" was launched in 2012. The Programme is aimed at addressing problems with the current education in China and the challenges faced by China's education system and students' social and emotional development. Alongside this SEL approach; however, "China's "rational" education approach has also been emphasized in schools and classrooms". As noted, China's schools have tended to follow the "rational" education model, emphasizing knowledge-dominated instruction, while ignoring psychological factors that are thought to be unrelated to academically-relevant cognitive processes. Thus," emotional intelligence, ethics cultivation, emotion and character development have not been a significant focus in contemporary education in China" (Ho *et al.*, 2016). The development has shown a significant shift from the teacher-centred classroom and academic-oriented practices to the student-centred classroom and constructivist classroom practices.

More so, the two prime features of the social emotional development as stated

in the guidelines of SEL programme launched by UNICEF are interpersonal interactions and social adjustment. The guidelines acknowledge the potential implications of the social emotional skills for their development in other domains and overall well-being. The specific goals stated in the guidelines have a sense of belongingness, getting along with peers, care for and respect for others (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Educationalist Guo Xiaoping of UNICEF stated that since the launch of the SEL project in 2012, the number of participating schools has increased to over 500. In addition, previous research has revealed that the SEL framework has been introduced and implemented in various schools already, which revolved around four key components of the implementation plan. The first component was prototyping which is an action research model wherein the schools focus on a particular result, develop various approaches to achieve them and then systemically test those approaches (Barry *et al.*, 2017). However, the training was put in place to make sure that both the existing and the trainee educators are able to implement such approaches in the schools. A set of curriculum resources was also introduced to facilitate the inclusion of SEL into the curriculum and finally there was evaluation where the framework was implemented and reviewed (Barry *et al.*, 2017).

However, there are numerous factors that influence the implementation of SEL in schools. These factors include attitude of students, adequacy and appropriateness of school resources available, school leadership, skills and abilities of the teacher, nature and management of the classroom environment (Maina, 2010), role of parents, social circles and friendship Kudari (2016), psychological and health related factors, visual and hearing impairments (Srinivas & Venkatkrishnan, 2016), teaching-learning methods (Graczyk *et al.*, 2000), approachability and professionalism (Humphrey, 2013). Considering these

factors are capable affecting goals of SEL implementation, it is therefore essential to evaluate the progress of SEL implementation in early childhood centres in China for needful improvements.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Studies have revealed an increased prevalence of mental health problems among young learners and Chinese youths in recent years (Denham & Weissberg, 2004; Weare, 2010). This probably could be as a result of poor implementation of SEL in early childhood centres in China. Researchers observed that many early childhood teachers understand the importance of social emotional competency in influencing adjustment and the well-being of the children. However, the readiness of the teachers to integrate and practice social emotional learning is questionable. Socially and emotionally competent teachers are capable of designing and implementing activities that aim to build socially and emotionally competent children. Despite the mounting research evidence suggesting the benefits of the implementation of social and emotional skills across early childhood teaching and learning, the readiness to implement SEL and the necessary Knowledge, the skills and attitudes of the teachers in implementing the SEL practices are not well understood. Also, there is a gap in the literature with respect to the level of the implementation of SEL in early childhood settings in China. Therefore, it is crucial to examine teachers' perspectives of the implementation of SEL in early childhood settings. Significantly, this study would provide empirical information for relevant educational authorities on the level of implementation of SEL in early childhood centres in Shanghai, China. This will thus spur them to enacting and enforcing educational policies that would facilitate adequate implementation of SEL in early childhood centres in China. Hence, this study explores the implementation of SEL in selected early childhood centres in Shanghai, China.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine teachers' perspectives of the implementation of SEL in selected early childhood centres in Shanghai, China. Specifically, the study seeks to study the:

1. level of implementation of SEL in selected early childhood centres in Shanghai, China; and
2. the level of implementation of SEL in selected early childhood centres based on type of school, location of school and teaching experience.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the study

1. What is the level of implementation of SEL in selected early childhood centres in Shanghai, China?
2. Are there any differences in the level of implementation of SEL based on type of school, location of school and teaching experience?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design and Area of Study

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. The study was carried out in selected early childhood centres in the city of Shanghai, China. Shanghai alongside Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen are top four most developed cities in China. Among these four cities, Shanghai was chosen because it has the most varied childhood programmes which include public, private and international early childhood centres, and also has the best resources for early childhood education. There are 16 districts in Shanghai with a population of 24.19 million.

2.2. Population and Sampling

The target population for this study was kindergarten teachers from selected public, private and international early childhood centres in Shanghai, China. In the Shanghai district, there are a total of 896 public schools with early childhood centres, 452 private schools with early childhood centres, and 30 international schools with early childhood centres. For the purpose of

this study, a total of 10 schools from public, private and international early childhood centres were chosen randomly from a list of public, private and international early childhood centres that agreed to participate in the study. Respectively, four public, three private and three international kindergartens participated in the study. A total of 375 teachers were involved in the study. Out of these 375 teachers, 135 teachers were from public schools, 128 from private and 112 teachers were from international schools. All the schools involved in the study were randomly chosen from a list of schools that agreed to participate in the study by the researcher. Simple random sampling was conducted as the process of eliminated sampling bias where each and every school had an equal chance to be selected (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

2.3. Instrumentation and Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was 5-point scale structured questionnaires which comprised five dimensions, namely teacher self-reflection, professional learning in SEL, school climate, resources for student support and educating all students. The questionnaire used in this study was developed by adapting items from two instruments published in the literature. The first instrument was Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) and second one was Civic Enterprises by Peter D. Hart Research Associates. These questionnaires have been used elsewhere and both have been found to be reliable (DePaoli *et al.*, 2017). The questionnaire comprised of two main sections. Section A of the questionnaire explored the respondents' demographic information (School type, school location and teaching experience). Section B investigated level of implementation of SEL at the school levels. This section comprised a total of 50 items. Firstly, to ensure the items accurately measured the main construct of SEL it aimed to measure, the researcher submitted the questionnaire to a panel of experts comprising three experienced academics from SEGi University, to validate questionnaire. The

panel was required to look into various aspects of validity such as face validity, content validity and construct validity. All the members of the panel of experts confirmed that the items and constructs they represented, accurately reflected SEL in early education of children.

Afterwards, a pilot study was conducted to establish the reliability. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient index determined was 0.90. Based on the recommendation by Goertzen (2017), this questionnaire was deemed reliable and hence could be used to collect data from the actual sample population identified in the study. Since the questionnaire was adapted from a study by Fischer (2017), exploratory factor analysis confirmed the presence of the latent factors within this scale. Factor analysis on data collected in the study confirmed the number of factors reported by the developers of the questionnaire. Researchers obtained approval to collect data from the supervisor at the Faculty of Education of SEGi University and the Institute of Graduate Studies (IGS). Upon receiving the approval, the researchers contacted the selected kindergarten principals via email through ex-colleagues. The principals from these schools agreed to meet the researcher on the agreed date which was early September, the first two weeks of school after the end of the summer holiday. The researchers met with the school dean from each school administrative office to explain the purpose of this research study. After this meeting, the officers gave official permission for the researchers to meet the faculty staff to conduct the research study. In order to collect the questionnaires more quickly and conveniently, the questionnaires were designed from paper to online questionnaires and sent to each participant via email or WeChat because everyone in China uses WeChat, all the questionnaires were completed through WeChat.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Researchers ensured that prior permission was obtained from the relevant

authorities such as the District and State Education offices and the schools involved in the research. After that, researchers ensured prior consent was also obtained from the respondents. All participation was voluntary. Secondly, all respondents were assured of the confidentiality and privacy of their identities and responses to all the questions. To maintain respondent confidentiality, all teachers were identified by a given number such as R1, R2, R7, and R25 and so on.

2.5. Method of Data Analysis

Data collected for the study were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22.0. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Foremost, the basic information of teachers and their perspectives of the level of implementation of SEL in school were identified by computing descriptive statistic such as mean and standard deviation. Secondly, group differences (school type, location and teaching experience) were evaluated using inferential statistic like t-test and ANOVA.

3. RESULTS

Results for answering research questions are presented in the Tables below.

3.1. Research Question 1: What is the level of implementation of SEL in selected early childhood centres in Shanghai, China?

Data for answering research question 1 are presented in Table 1 below

The Level of Implementation of SEL

Table 1: Level of implementation of SEL in school (n=375)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Level of implementation of SEL in school	375	2.954	.695

Scale: 1=very low, 2=low, 3=moderate, 4=high, 5=very high

Data entries in Table 1 show the overall level of SEL implementation in the early childhood centres involved in the study. The results indicate that the level of SEL implementation was between moderate to low [M = 2.954, SD = 0.695] level.

3.2. Research Question 2: Are there any differences in the level of implementation of SEL based on type of school, location of school and teaching experience?

Data for answering research question 2 are presented in Table 2-7 below.

The Level of SEL Implementation by School Type

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of implementation of SEL in type of schools (n=375)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Public school	135	3.666	0.288
Private school	128	2.265	0.585
International school	112	2.931	0.207
Total	375	2.954	0.696

Scale: 1=very low, 2=low, 3=moderate, 4=high, 5=very high

Data presented in Table 2 show the mean and standard deviation scores of teachers' perspectives of overall implementation of SEL in their respective schools based on type of schools. The highest mean score was recorded by teachers from public schools [M = 3.67, SD0.29] followed closely by teachers from international schools [M = 2.93, SD = 0.21]. The lowest mean score of M = 2.27, SD = 0.59, was recorded by teachers who taught in private schools indicating that the level of implementation of SEL in the school was low.

Table 3: Analysis of variance of SEL implementation in type of schools involved in the study (n=375)

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	103.113	2	51.556	330.183	.000***
Within Groups	48.717	372	.156		
Total	151.830	374			

p-value :<0.001

Data presented in Table 3 show a one-way between subjects' ANOVA was conducted to compare differences in the mean scores of teachers from different schools on the level of implementation of SEL in their respective schools. There was a statistically significant effect of school type on level of implementation of SEL, [F (2, 312) = 330.18, $p < 0.001$], indicating that teachers' perspectives of the level of implementation of SEL in the different schools that were surveyed was statistically significant.

The Level of SEL Implementation by School Location

Table 4: Level of SEL implementation in schools by school location (n=375)

	Sch Loc	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SEL_IN_SCH	1	226	2.947	.701	.050
	2	149	2.964	.687	.063

Scale: 1=very low, 2=low, 3=moderate, 4=high, 5=very high

From the Data in Table 4, it can be seen that the overall level of SEL implementation in the early childhood centres in both urban and rural schools ranged between moderate and low levels [MR = 2.95, SD = 0.70; MR = 2.96, SD = 0.69].

Table 5: Distribution of mean, standard deviation, t- and p-values by school location (n=375)

	Location	N	Mean (SD)	t-values	p-values
Level of Implementation of SEL in schools	Urban	226	2.947(0.701)	-0.210	0.834
	Rural	149	2.964(0.687)		

p-value ≤.05

Data shown in Table 5 display the mean, standard deviation, t- and p-values of the level of implementation of SEL by school location. From the data in Table 6 it can be seen that the p-value recorded was .834 which is above .05-level of significance. This implies that even though

there are differences in the perspectives of both urban and rural teachers on the level of SEL implementation in their schools but the difference was not statistically significant.

The Level of SEL Implementation based on Teaching experience

Table 6: Level of SEL implementation based on teaching experience (n=375)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
<5 years	130	3.057	0.562
5-10 years	168	2.903	0.758
> 10 years	77	2.888	0.746

Scale: 1=very low, 2=low, 3=moderate, 4=high, 5=very high

From the Data presented in Table 6, it can be seen that the highest means score was observed for teachers who had <5 years of teaching experience [M = 3.05, SD = 0.562]

reflecting that teachers with low experience were displaying more SEL implementation. Likewise, teachers with moderate teaching experience 5-10 years displayed an average level of SEL implementation (M=2.90) whilst very experienced teachers, >10 years displayed the lowest level (m=2.89) of SEL implementation.

Table 7: Analysis of variance of level of SEL implementation in schools based on teaching experience (n=375)

	SEL_IN_SCH	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	1.811	2	.906	1.884	.154
	Within Groups	150.018	372	.481		
	Total	151.830	374			

p-value ≤.05

A one-way between subjects' ANOVA was conducted to compare differences in the mean scores of teachers' perspectives of the level of SEL implementation based on their teaching experience. Data in Table 7 shows that the calculated p-value from ANOVA is .154 [1.884] which is above .05-level of significance. This implies that even though there was a difference in mean scores, the difference between the three groups of teachers was not statistically significant. This indicates that those teachers' perspectives of the level of implementation of SEL in their respective schools were similar, that is between moderate to low level of SEL implementation in their classrooms.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study investigated the implementation of SEL in selected childhood centres in Shanghai, China. The major finding of the study is that the level of SEL implementation was between moderate to low in selected early childhood centres in Shanghai. In agreement, findings from another study revealed that in China more emphasis was given to children's academic achievement and cognitive abilities compared to SEL. More so, children's social emotional learning skills have not gained much attention from researchers until the past decade. (Zhou et al, 2010). The current increased attention could partly be due to

the accumulated research on young children's social emotional learning among western samples. Some researchers have investigated the associations between social emotion learning and academic achievement among Chinese school age children (Chen et al, 2008). The ECE guidelines within the Chinese curriculum have recently emphasized the need for greater attention to be paid to young children's social emotional development (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Thus, it is important to examine the relations between social emotional learning and its level of school implementation in early childhood education. Empirical evidence has shown that well delivered SEL programs are essential to the short-term and long-term improvements in academic achievement, social skills, and mental health of students across ages and abilities. In the past few years, SEL has been introduced to mainland China and efforts have been taken to localise it in the cultural context. With such initiatives, it is obvious why the SEL program was integrated into the curriculum. Huang Guizhen (2017), an official with the Ministry of Education, believes SEL not only improves teaching competence but enables vulnerable groups like left-behind children to feel more cared and loved from school and the family. The current study further shows that the implementation of SEL is moderate to low in Shanghai. The

Chinese government is providing a favourable environment for the promotion of SEL in mainland China. Although the implementation of SEL is facing challenges, the nationwide popularization of SEL is forthcoming.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated teachers' perspectives of the implementation in selected early childhood centres in Shanghai, China. The study involved a total of ten randomly selected early childhood schools which involved a total of 375 teachers. The findings of the study indicated that the implementation of SEL was between moderate to low levels. In addition, it was found that there was a statistically significant effect of school type on level of implementation of SEL while there was no statistical difference between mean scores of teachers' perspectives of SEL implementation based on school location and teaching experience. Though this study has its share of limitations in terms of sample size and scope of study, it cannot be denied that the study has to a certain extent shed some light into the implementation of SEL in early childhood centres in China. It is hoped that the findings of this study will spur more research in this area as studies have indicated that SEL offers numerous benefits such as enhanced student academic achievement, fewer behavioural problems and more positive social behaviour resulting in children having productive relationships with peers, parents, teachers and the community. Therefore, researchers join the host of others to say that "when students feel safe and supported, they are truly able and ready to learn."

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

- The Ministry of Education should enact and enforce policies that will enhance the implementation of SEL in early childhood centres.
- Relevant educational authorities and school principals need to provide

continuous professional development to teachers to ensure SEL is embraced in their classrooms. .

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