

## **The Power of Environments in Social and Emotional Learning**

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The Asian Conference on Education 2025  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Compelling research and literature demonstrate the significant impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) on young children. There is a strong correlation between well-developed social and emotional skills and positive academic outcomes, healthy relationships, and the competencies children need to navigate the unfolding future. Adults play a central role in fostering social and emotional skills. Equally important are the environments created for and with children. Emotional, psychological, and physical environments shape children's well-being; their sense of safety and belonging; as well as their engagement and motivation to learn. Environments have the power to facilitate SEL. Why leave it to chance? Using an action research approach, this presentation details trends emerging from a workshop series titled "The Power of Environments in Social and Emotional Learning". Through a thematic examination of data, key findings from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of: 1) the application of frameworks to plan for SEL with intentionality and consistency; 2) a focus on building psychological safety in an early years context; and 3) the messages spaces convey about children's social and emotional learning and development. These findings provide a foundation for further exploration of approaches, strategies, and tools to enhance SEL in early years settings.

*Keywords:* social and emotional learning, environments, psychological safety

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## Introduction

Today's children are experiencing unprecedented social and emotional challenges (Frey et al., 2022; Haidt, 2024; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2021). With overstructure and management in the real world and under protection in the digital landscape, children are becoming an increasingly fragile generation. Thus, social and emotional learning (SEL) is at a crossroads.

While SEL is not a new discussion, the current context in which children are growing up necessitates a shift. Students have always learned social and emotional skills. However, SEL remains part of a hidden curriculum, not explicitly taught with intention and fully integrated into the classroom fabric (Frey et al., 2022). This type of learning is not effective and unsustainable. SEL requires a deliberate, explicit presence in schools. The most important question is not about the merits of different programs that support social and emotional development or which one to use. The question should be about how teachers authentically integrate SEL into everyday practice and interactions with children.

In the 2022 Transforming Education Summit (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022), a global call to action was issued, urging a prioritization of children's social and emotional development and well-being. SEL is not an add-on. It is learning that matters. Early childhood teachers play a crucial role in driving this commitment. Like any other skill, social and emotional competencies must be taught and it begins early in life.

### Why SEL? What Does the Research Say?

There is broad support and growing evidence that consistently show social and emotional learning makes a powerful difference (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-a). It helps children build mental wellness and healthy well-being by equipping them with strategies and tools to understand and manage their emotions; face challenges with perseverance and resilience; and develop skills for learning and life (United Nations Children's Fund, [UNICEF], 2020). Developing these skills at an early age sets children up for future success. SEL also shape healthy behaviors as it encourages empathy, positive relationships, and responsible choices that extend well beyond the classroom (UNESCO, 2022). These play an important role in children's overall well-being and their capacity to learn. At the same time, SEL strengthens learning and academic achievement (CASEL, n.d.-b). When students feel safe, supported, and connected, they are motivated and able to engage more deeply and perform at their best. SEL therefore equips children to be successful today and prepares them for the future. It supports them with the adaptability, collaboration, and problem-solving skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex world.

A structure to support the development of social and emotional skills is essential. A framework like CASEL guides the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes across five competencies. It supports the creation of equitable learning environments and offers evidence-based SEL strategies to implement.

The CASEL framework was chosen for this study as it is widely recognized, research-backed, and adaptable across diverse educational contexts. It provides a comprehensive structure for integrating SEL skills into schoolwide practice including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The table below details each of the competencies, however is not exclusive.

**Table 1**  
*CASEL Framework (2020)*

<b>CASEL Competencies</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Self-awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding own values, thoughts, and emotions</li> <li>• Knowing one's personal and social identities</li> <li>• Having a sense of purpose</li> <li>• Identifying own prejudices and biases</li> <li>• Being aware of own strengths and challenges</li> </ul>
<b>Self-management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being able to effectively manage own thoughts, behaviors, and emotions across situations</li> <li>• Having self-discipline and self-motivation</li> <li>• Setting personal and collective goals</li> <li>• Using stress-management strategies</li> <li>• Practicing planning and organizational skills</li> </ul>
<b>Social awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking on different perspectives</li> <li>• Empathizing with others and showing compassion</li> <li>• Being sensitive to diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts</li> <li>• Knowing own impact on others</li> </ul>
<b>Relationship skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forming and maintaining positive relationships</li> <li>• Collaborating in a team</li> <li>• Understanding social demands</li> <li>• Resolving conflict in constructive ways</li> <li>• Knowing when to offer support or challenge to others</li> </ul>
<b>Responsible decision-making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making constructive and caring choices on a personal level and across diverse social interactions</li> <li>• Reflecting and knowing one's impact to promote personal and social well-being</li> <li>• Analyzing information, data, and facts to make reasoned decisions</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from Wong-Powell, 2023

The CASEL framework is beyond a set of skills. It is an essential foundation for children's well-being and preparing young people for the world ahead. It is about a recalibration for the next generation, necessitating a shift in how learning experiences and environments are planned and designed to support children in developing the social, emotional, and academic skills they need to flourish. When thinking about SEL in this manner, it raises an important question: *Can we really leave the development of these competencies to chance?*

## **An Action Research Approach to Social and Emotional Learning**

The purpose of educational action research is to engage in systematic inquiry to evaluate pedagogy and practice, and improve areas that impact student learning (Clark et al., 2020). The participative and collaborative nature empowers teachers to take ownership of learning and school improvement as they plan, design, implement, evaluate, revise, and refine their practice in real-time.

Given the increasing social and emotional challenges children are facing today, teachers identified there is a pressing need to focus on social and emotional learning in early childhood education. This study was initiated to respond to this urgency, exploring the impact of a structured approach to embed SEL into practice and enhance its effectiveness. Thus, the question framing this study is: *What impact does participation in an SEL workshop series have on teachers' approaches in nurturing young children's social and emotional skills?*

The workshop series titled "The Power of Environments in Social and Emotional Learning" involved 22 early childhood teachers working in international schools in Asia and Europe. The series consisted of three 90-minute sessions delivered virtually. The intent behind this model was to provide a structure that enabled participants to learn, apply, and reflect on their SEL approaches and on-the-job practice through synchronous and asynchronous engagements. Also, collaboration with peers working in different schools across the globe provided diverse educational, cultural, and social contexts to give a wider perspective on experiences, knowledge, and ideas. Consequently, the workshop series provided a structured, iterative, and collaborative framework for this study.

### **Methods**

Three data sources were used to triangulate for validity and reliability as well as for depth and nuance in data.

First, data were gathered at an individual level. Self-assessments were used to capture teacher perceptions of their knowledge, confidence, and current practice in supporting student development of social and emotional skills. Participant reflections offered both verbal and written insights, providing qualitative data on teachers' on-the-job experiences. The use of exit tickets at the closure of each session served as formative check-ins to record immediate learning or shifts in thinking based on the content presented. Participants also completed a webinar evaluation form at the end of each session to gather further data on perceived learning, immediate applicability, and learning needs. At the end of the workshop series, an impact survey was administered to collect data on participants' overall learning; changes in and impact on knowledge, practice, and behavior; perceived effects on student development; and sustainability in practice.

Second, data were collected at a collaborative level. The teachers engaged in non-judgemental peer feedback using protocols which provided data on the application of concepts and professional development throughout the course. The feedback enabled teachers to identify areas for improvement and plan for next steps. Participation in small-group dialogue and engaging in collaborative inquiries captured how the teachers built shared understanding and generated practical strategies around SEL.

Third, data gathered occurred at a collective level. The whole group engaged in processing and reflection throughout the workshop series. This provided a collective voice, allowing teachers to identify patterns; areas of agreement and tensions; and shifts in thinking. It also helped synthesize insights from individual and collaborative work.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of data was approached in three complementary ways to provide a richer and more robust understanding of the impact of participating in an SEL workshop series.

From all data sources, recurring words, phrases, and statements were identified through frequency analysis. NotebookLM was employed to cross-reference findings. Beyond simple counts, the analysis considered the context and sentiment of repeated units, providing an interpretation of those counts to capture meaning and the significance behind participant responses.

Using thematic analysis, patterns in thought were also examined. Themes were identified from the most significant and consistent units that were supported across data sources. Attention was given to shifts in thinking and perspectives including changes in how participants understood SEL; application of workshop content and resources in practice; and how the teacher's role in supporting children's social and emotional development was reimagined.

Finally, connections and nuances across data sources were detected. By identifying connections, it revealed the relationships between themes, leading to a more integrated understanding of findings. By exploring nuances, diverse perspectives and contexts were acknowledged in this international group of participants. Changes over time were also explored. By comparing early reflections and webinar evaluations with later ones, development and impact strengthened findings.

The analysis was shared with teachers to ensure their participation in the process. It also served to strengthen the accuracy and credibility of findings, and promote transparency about the impact of the workshop content on practice and student social and emotional development.

### **Findings**

The analysis revealed key themes of impact from the workshop series including:

1. integrating social and emotional learning with intentionality and consistency;
2. building psychological safety as the condition for SEL to flourish; and
3. having the power to shape learning environments to convey messages about SEL.

#### **With Intentionality and Consistency**

The findings show that when professional learning for SEL is structured, teaching and supporting social and emotional development becomes more intentional, consistent, and purposeful. As one teacher noted:

The most significant takeaway for me was understanding how intentional use of the physical environment can support and enhance children's social and emotional development. I learned that even subtle changes in classroom setup, materials offered,

or the atmosphere we create can influence children's sense of belonging, emotional regulation, and peer relationships.

The webinar series equipped teachers with resources and empowered them with recommended practices, enabling them to integrate SEL more intentionally. The PERMA framework (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) developed by Martin Seligman (2011) was introduced as its elements support the development of well-being, self-growth, and relationships. The framework was therefore used to strengthen SEL integration in a meaningful way. Table 2 details how PERMA supports SEL.

**Table 2**  
*PERMA Supporting SEL*

<b>Elements of PERMA Framework</b>	<b>Connection to SEL Competencies</b>
Positive Emotion	When children experience positive emotions like belonging, connection, and purpose, they are more attuned to their internal states (self-awareness) and they can better manage their emotions (self-management).
Engagement	Engagement enables children to experience flow as they remain focused and self-motivated. It allows them to demonstrate agency as they set goals, and plan and organize initiatives (self-management). Engagement also helps children make constructive choices, and express their curiosity and open-mindedness (responsible decision-making).
Relationships	This element supports the ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships (relationship skills) and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups with empathy and compassion (social awareness).
Meaning	When children have a sense of purpose, they connect to personal values (self-awareness) and they set goals for themselves based on these (self-management). When they find meaning, they see themselves as contributors to something larger, reflecting and evaluating their personal, interpersonal, and community impact (responsible decision-making).
Accomplishment	Experiencing success and achieving goals give children a sense of accomplishment. This process requires self-efficacy and a growth mindset (self-awareness), and self-motivation and resilience in challenging times (self-management).

While the teachers experienced the benefits of using the PERMA framework to be more intentional about SEL, it was also necessary to have a structure to maintain consistency. The SAFE model (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit), popularized by Durlak et al. (2011), provided this foundation. The teachers realized that SEL needed to be *sequenced* with thoughtfully planned and designed learning experiences that were connected and provided in a way where the competencies complemented each other and were mutually reinforcing. This

involved an *active* approach to learning where students were given opportunities to problem-solve and make real-life applications. Therefore, SEL required *focus* where time and attention to supporting children's social and emotional development were deliberate. Additionally, learning was made *explicit* as specific competencies were targeted and children were aware of the skills they were practicing and using.

In the end, the PERMA framework and SAFE model ensured a balanced approach, giving attention to each social and emotional competency where none were overlooked or underrepresented. The teachers felt that the resources held them accountable for integrating SEL into daily practice in purposeful and meaningful ways. As one teacher concluded:

The webinar helped me see how intentionally designed environments can support social and emotional learning in powerful, everyday ways. I plan to apply what I've learned by intentionally creating a more responsive classroom setup that encourages independence, collaboration, and emotional regulation.

### **Building Psychological Safety**

While intentional and consistent approaches using the PERMA framework and SAFE model supported children in building their social and emotional skills in purposeful ways, the teachers emphasized that deliberateness is only effective when paired with psychological safety. Children need to feel accepted, safe, and respected in order to take risks, express emotions, and fully engage in learning without fear of judgment. Without this, even the most well-planned and designed engagements will not achieve their intended impact.

This led to an exploration of "yes" and "no" environments and language. "Yes" fostered trust and encouraged children's curiosity, experimentation, and participation. It signalled that their ideas, questions, and efforts were being invited, honored, and valued. "No", even when unintentional, limited exploration, reduced engagement, and sent subtle messages that some behaviors and contributions were not welcomed. Changing or reframing to "yes" had a significant impact. "Yes" environments and language contributed to children's sense of safety because they were being heard and valued. As the teachers shared their shifts in practice:

Participant 1: I'm using what I learned about creating a 'yes environment' by giving children more choices, using positive words instead of saying 'no,' and setting up the classroom so they can do things by themselves more easily.

Participant 2: During the course, I learned how powerful it is to shift from saying 'no' to offering positive alternatives that guide children's behavior while still respecting their curiosity. This approach helps children feel understood and encourages them to explore in a safe and appropriate way.

Being thoughtful and purposeful about how they planned and designed their environments, the language they used, and their responses to children, the teachers gave more attention to practicing "yes". As Elkins (2019) writes in her article on creating "yes" environments, "Saying yes as often as possible empowers children to make positive choices and have more control in their daily lives. It builds high-quality teacher-child relationships, limits teacher intrusion, increases authentic learning experiences, and promotes independence and self-esteem" (para. 2). Understanding the powerful effects of "yes" environments and language, one teacher concludes: "I will very much try to think of how to turn a 'no' into a 'yes'!"

## Shaping Learning Environments

With intentionality and consistency, and recognizing psychological safety as the foundation, the teachers also came to understand the impact learning environments have on children's experiences. Spaces have the power to send specific messages and expectations about SEL. Every choice the teachers made about their environments held significance. Thoughtfully planned and designed learning environments were just as important as intentional and purposeful learning experiences. As some teachers reflected:

Participant 1: The biggest thing I learned is that the way we set up our classroom really affects how children feel and behave. A calm and friendly space helps them feel safe, manage their emotions, and get along better with others.

Participant 2: The most significant takeaway has been understanding how a supportive and empowering environment enhances children's ability to express emotions and build relationships.

Participant 3: The webinar provided valuable insights into how the physical and emotional environment can be intentionally designed for learning. For example, I will incorporate more natural elements, and quiet corners to help children regulate their emotions. I also intend to set up visual prompts and SEL-focused areas where children can reflect, express their feelings, and engage in cooperative activities.

Consideration and forethought in creating spaces that inspire, nurture, and support children's social and emotional development are essential. It goes beyond basic planning and design. The workshop series enabled teachers to engage in ongoing reflection on their environments and its impact based on the messages being signalled. The teachers then used their assessment to rethink their spaces to optimize SEL opportunities.

### Implications

The findings of this study hold important implications for practice. Table 3 presents the outcomes for students, teachers, schools, and research.

**Table 3**  
*Implications of Structured Professional Learning*

Impact On	Practical Implications
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate in more planned and purposeful SEL engagements</li> <li>• Experience SEL in more authentic and integrated contexts</li> <li>• Support in becoming more independent, self-directed learners</li> <li>• Develop future readiness and foundations for lifelong skills</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase confidence and intentionality in practice</li> <li>• Gain practical approaches, strategies, and tools for SEL integration</li> <li>• Foster a deeper awareness of the values and expectations communicated through student-teacher interactions and environments</li> <li>• Reflect on the impact of environments on social and emotional development</li> <li>• Implement changes to create more supportive classroom environments</li> </ul>
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a shared language and vision for SEL to strengthen coherence</li> <li>• Contribute to a safe and healthy culture focused on well-being</li> <li>• Make data-informed decisions to improve SEL practices</li> <li>• Build professional capital (Hargreaves &amp; Fullan, 2012)</li> </ul>
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add to literature base with focus on SEL in early childhood education</li> <li>• Provide a model for action research by demonstrating how cycles of reflection, practice, and adjustment can empower teachers as researchers of their own classrooms</li> <li>• Offer a promising approach that can be adapted to support children’s social and emotional development</li> </ul>

Given the implications for practice, structured professional learning is essential to effectively support student social and emotional development.

A workshop series presented in this study is even more critical given that few opportunities exist for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills around teaching SEL (UNESCO, 2024). According to the authors of “Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning” (Dobia et al., 2020), one of the key challenges to implementing SEL is the provision of adequate time given to teacher professional learning and few teachers receive training in SEL during their pre-service learning. A mixed-methods study substantiates this claim with teachers reporting a lack of training for delivering SEL (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). Priorities therefore need to be given to professional learning, embedding SEL into ongoing teacher development and training. A workshop series can close the gap and provide teachers with the professional learning needed to effectively integrate SEL into pedagogy and practice.

## Limitations and Recommendations

Although the implications for practice are promising, this study has several limitations including being context-specific as the findings reflect those teaching in an international school setting. Additionally, the small sample size limits the range of experiences and perspectives captured. Also, being that the workshop series was held within a short time span of three 90-minute sessions, the longer-term impact on teacher practice and children's social and emotional development was not fully observed. Finally, the data sources presented participant subjectivity on how they perceived and interpreted the impact of the workshop series on their practice.

While the limitations present constraints to the study, there are recommendations for practice and research. Supported by UNESCO's 2024 executive summary on mainstreaming social and emotional learning, teacher education and professional learning are essential to successfully integrate SEL. However, there remains a need to provide educators with adequate training and ongoing professional development (Hamilton & Doss, 2020; Huck et al., 2023; Oliveira et al., 2025). A workshop series on SEL can address this, providing schools with a model to offer professional learning opportunities.

In addition to offering a model, the workshop series gives a structured way to support teacher reflections that are necessary for the sustainability of SEL practices and an SEL-based culture (CASEL, 2021; Hausburg, 2024; UNESCO, 2024). Not only does it develop teachers' self-awareness to become more intentional about modelling social and emotional competencies, reflection also enables teachers to identify progress and areas for improvement to align with school priorities and ensure systematic and systemic SEL implementation. Providing a workshop series empowers teachers to engage in an iterative cycle of reflection, offering approaches, strategies, and tools to measure and evaluate impact, success, and school development.

For future research, there are also promising directions. Studies could replicate this work in different schools and across contexts to expand on scope and to test its generalizability. Extending the time span would also allow observations of longer-term effects on teacher practice and children's social and emotional development. Besides gathering the perspectives and voices of adults, incorporating children into the data gathering process and reflections would provide greater depth of understanding. Finally, a mixed methods approach with both qualitative and quantitative sources would strengthen the evidence to provide more comprehensive findings.

## Conclusion

The teachers who participated in the workshop series understood the need to be intentional and consistent in their approach to SEL, that psychological safety is essential to children's social and emotional well-being, and that the choices they make about their learning spaces affect the messages and expectations communicated about SEL. While the study was context-specific, used a small sample size, held in a short time span, and presented participant experiences and perceptions, the implications of professional learning surpass the limitations.

With a growing “Anxious Generation” (Haidt, 2024), the urgency to pay attention to and support children’s social and emotional development is imperative. To effectively integrate SEL into practice, teachers require training and ongoing professional development. In turn, SEL is provided in a more effective way through a structured, deliberate, and meaningful approach. This study makes a case for a workshop series to provide teachers with opportunities to develop their skills, reflect on their practice, and adjust their approach to optimize impact.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the teachers who participated in this workshop series. Prioritizing SEL and dedicating your time on supporting children’s social and emotional development will drive meaningful change with the well-being of our children at the heart.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

Generative AI, specifically ChatGPT was used to assist with language refinement including improving clarity and academic expression.

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