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The Implementation and Impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs in Early  
Childhood Education Curriculum Design

by

Azadeh Etemadi

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## Abstract

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a transformative force in early childhood education, providing a structured framework that bridges cognitive development with emotional and interpersonal skill-building (Denham, 2006; Durlak et al., 2011; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). A growing body of research confirms that SEL enhances children's self-regulation, empathy, prosocial behavior, and academic performance, underscoring its centrality to holistic education (Blewitt et al., 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017). Guided by Lewin's Change Management Model, this critical literature review synthesizes theoretical, empirical, and cross-cultural research to examine effective SEL integration strategies, implementation challenges, and the systemic reforms necessary for sustainable SEL adoption. Findings underscore SEL's potential to enhance emotional regulation, academic outcomes, and social competence, while systemic barriers such as structural barriers, resource constraints, limited teacher training, and cultural resistance complicate its adoption. Case studies from Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand illustrate that SEL implementation must be culturally responsive, context-specific, and equity-focused, addressing linguistic, racial, and socio-economic disparities in access and outcomes. The analysis emphasizes leadership's role in driving sustainable integration through policy alignment, sustained professional development, culturally responsive pedagogy, and community engagement. By framing SEL as a systemic organizational change, this review contributes to ongoing debates on holistic education, decolonizing curriculum, and equitable pedagogy, offering actionable recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

**Keywords:** Social-emotional learning, early childhood education, curriculum design, educational leadership, policy implementation, cross-cultural education, change management, teacher training

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## Introduction

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a critical component of holistic education, particularly in early childhood education (ECE). Denham (2006) highlights the increasing recognition of social-emotional learning (SEL) as a critical foundation for fostering emotional understanding, interpersonal competence, and self-regulation, all of which are essential for children's adaptation to school and life. SEL programs have been empirically linked to improved emotional regulation, social competencies, and academic outcomes, positioning them as transformative tools in modern pedagogy (Durlak et al., 2011; Blewitt et al., 2018). For instance, universal curriculum-based interventions demonstrate significant reductions in behavioral issues and enhancements in school readiness, suggesting that SEL is not merely supplementary but foundational to child development (Blewitt et al., 2018).

This paper explores the integration of SEL into early childhood education curricula, examining its theoretical underpinnings, implementation strategies, systemic challenges, and cross-cultural implications. The analysis is guided by Lewin's Change Management Model (Burnes, 2020), which structures organizational change into three stages: unfreezing existing educational paradigms, changing through targeted interventions, and refreezing new practices into institutional norms. This framework provides a structured lens to analyze how SEL can be systematically implemented and sustained in ECE settings. By framing SEL adoption as a dynamic process rather than a static program, the model highlights the interplay between leadership, policy, and pedagogy in driving meaningful change.

Additionally, this paper aligns with the broader aims of Studies in Educational Leadership by interrogating how leadership and policy influence SEL implementation and sustainability. Educational leaders—including administrators, policymakers, and educators—

play pivotal roles in advocating for SEL, securing resources, and fostering cultural shifts. For example, district-level leaders in Ontario, Canada, leveraged data on rising student anxiety to reframe SEL as a prerequisite for academic success, illustrating how leadership bridges theory and practice (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Finally, this paper is organized as follows: It begins with a Positionality section that situates the author's personal and professional perspective on SEL. The Purpose Statement and Guiding Research Questions follow, outlining the study's objectives. The Methodology and Literature Search sections describe the research design and criteria used for selecting and analyzing sources. The theoretical framework is then presented, drawing on Lewin's Change Management Model to conceptualize SEL integration as a dynamic organizational process. The main body synthesizes key themes from the literature, including the benefits of SEL, challenges and barriers, effective integration strategies, and cross-cultural implications. The paper concludes with a Discussion section that addresses how the literature review answers the research questions, followed by Implications, Limitations and Future Research, and a final Conclusion that reflects on the significance and future directions of SEL in early childhood education.

### **Positionality**

From both an academic and personal perspective, I approach this research with a deep interest in social-emotional learning (SEL). My experience as an English language teacher in Iran exposed me to an education system that prioritized academic achievement over social-emotional development. This firsthand observation of students struggling with emotional regulation and interpersonal skills led to my strong interest in SEL as a crucial component of early education.

Now, as an international student in Canada, I have gained exposure to an education system that integrates SEL more holistically, reinforcing my commitment to examining its implementation across different cultural contexts. This literature review reflects my perspective as both an educator and a researcher, critically analyzing SEL programs while acknowledging the systemic and cultural challenges they face. My goal is to contribute to discussions on how SEL can be effectively adapted and integrated into early childhood education to support well-rounded student development.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into early childhood education curricula fosters holistic development by equipping children with essential emotional and social skills, alongside cognitive competencies. Scholars argue that integrating SEL enhances both emotional and cognitive development, contributing to a well-rounded education (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This critical review synthesizes existing research to explore effective methods of embedding SEL into curricula and examines the cross-cultural applicability of these methods. This review draws on diverse studies, including meta-analyses such as Durlak et al. (2011), to identify evidence-based practices and implementation challenges in SEL integration.

To guide this synthesis, the review focuses on the following research questions:

1. How can SEL be effectively integrated into early childhood education curricula to balance cognitive and emotional development?
2. What are the primary challenges educators face when implementing SEL programs, and how can these challenges be addressed?
3. How do cultural contexts influence the design and success of SEL programs in early childhood education?

## **Methodology**

This literature review follows a qualitative synthesis approach, analyzing findings from empirical studies, meta-analyses, and theoretical papers on SEL. The study identifies recurring themes across multiple sources, critically assessing their implications for early childhood education. The selected studies range from systematic reviews to case studies, offering a diverse perspective on SEL implementation.

## **Literature Search**

The literature for this review was gathered through the University of Alberta Library, utilizing databases including Scopus, ERIC, PsycINFO, APA PsycNet, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, DOAJ, Philosopher's Index, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, and ProQuest Education. Additional searches were conducted through platforms such as EBSCOhost, Education Week, and publisher websites including Springer and Elsevier. The timeframe for the literature selection spans from 2006 to 2024, ensuring that both foundational research and contemporary studies were included. The selection criteria focused on research examining SEL implementation in early childhood education, with an emphasis on curriculum design, teacher training, and cross-cultural variations.

## **Expected Findings and Goals**

This critical literature review aims to identify potential strategies for effectively integrating SEL into early childhood curricula, drawing on evidence from diverse educational contexts. Anticipated findings include the identification of embedded curriculum models, such as Carter's (2016) SEED framework, which integrates SEL into daily activities rather than isolated lessons. The review also seeks to highlight the benefits of SEL programs, such as improved emotional regulation, social skills, and academic outcomes, as demonstrated in meta-analyses by Durlak et al. (2011) and longitudinal studies by Taylor et al. (2017).

Furthermore, the review explores challenges educators and policymakers might face, including structural barriers, resource constraints, limited teacher training, and cultural resistance. Serpell (2020) outlines several structural and cultural challenges faced by educators and policymakers in postcolonial African contexts, particularly regarding literacy and early childhood development. He emphasizes that “institutionalized public basic schooling... was not designed solely on the basis of technical efficacy” but was originally imposed by Christian missionaries and later reinforced by colonial governments (p. 91). This legacy, he argues, led to tensions between indigenous learning traditions and Western schooling models, especially in nations like Zambia, where formal education “was conceptualized as an extractive recruitment process, with a very structured curriculum in the form of a ‘narrowing staircase’” (p. 91). The continued dominance of English and Western curricular goals has at times clashed with local languages and culturally rooted ways of learning. These structural tensions mirror broader challenges policymakers face when integrating holistic education models—such as Social-Emotional Learning—into systems still heavily oriented toward exam-driven academic achievement.

By analyzing studies from diverse contexts, the review provides insights into the cross-cultural applicability of SEL programs. These findings are expected to inform recommendations for policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators. However, as this work represents an initial critical review, the outcomes remain exploratory, and further research will be necessary to substantiate these insights.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Lewin’s (1947) three-step model of organizational change—unfreezing, moving, and refreezing—offers a foundational framework for understanding how Social-Emotional Learning



(SEL) can be systematically integrated into early childhood education. Far from being a simplistic or linear model, Lewin's change process, grounded in field theory, conceptualizes behavior as the product of multiple interacting forces within a dynamic "life space" that must be modified for genuine transformation to occur (Burnes, 2020, p. 36). As Burnes clarifies, Lewin emphasized that effective change requires destabilizing the existing equilibrium: "to bring about any change, the balance between the forces which maintain the social self-regulation at a given level have to be upset"—a condition necessary for initiating the unfreezing process (Lewin, 1943, as cited in Burnes, 2020, p. 37).

The first phase, unfreezing, involves dismantling entrenched assumptions about education's purpose. Burnes (2020) emphasizes that "the more a situation is fluid (unfrozen), the easier it is to bring about change" (p. 38), underscoring the importance of loosening rigid assumptions about traditional academic priorities. For example, in Ontario, Canada, district leaders leveraged data on behavioral incidents to demonstrate SEL's necessity, overcoming parental resistance focused narrowly on literacy outcomes (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). By highlighting rising anxiety rates among preschoolers, administrators reframed SEL as a tool for academic success, illustrating how emotional well-being underpins cognitive engagement.

The moving stage entails practical implementation, such as curriculum redesign, teacher training, and community collaboration. In this phase, Carter's (2016) SEED Framework exemplifies an innovative model of embedding SEL in early learning environments through nature-based activities. According to Carter, this framework "blends early childhood education, environmental education, and social-emotional development" and emphasizes the role of experiential learning in emotional skill-building (p. 10). The SEED framework encourages educators to use nature-based experiences—such as gardening and outdoor play—as

opportunities to help children develop emotional vocabulary and resilience. For instance, educators may guide children in naming emotions like frustration when they face challenges in nature-based tasks, aligning with the framework’s emphasis on “individualized and comprehensive early childhood education” that fosters caring relationships and emotional development (Carter, 2016, pp. 11–12).

However, the effectiveness of this change stage depends heavily on teacher support and professional development. As Schonert-Reichl (2017) notes, “teachers are the engine that drives SEL programs” and their own emotional competence directly influences classroom climate and SEL outcomes (p. 138). She argues that “warm classroom environments and positive teacher-student relationships promote both academic learning and SEL” (p. 142). In Finland, for instance, teachers in a national SEL initiative received monthly mentoring sessions to reduce burnout and support implementation fidelity—showing how teacher well-being is integral to SEL success (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The final phase, refreezing, involves embedding new practices into the structures, policies, and culture of an educational system to ensure lasting change. In Lewin’s model, this means achieving the “permanency of the new level,” where the organization reaches a new stable equilibrium (Burnes, 2020, p. 35). In the context of Social-Emotional Learning, this requires integrating SEL principles into formal policy documents, long-term funding strategies, teacher evaluation frameworks, and institutional goals. While various jurisdictions have begun to align policies with SEL objectives, the long-term success of such reforms depends on structural supports that go beyond individual classrooms. When SEL is woven into the broader educational philosophy—through leadership priorities, professional development systems, and sustained resources—it is more likely to become a durable and impactful component of schooling.

In conclusion, Lewin’s model provides not only a useful metaphor but a robust process-oriented lens to understand how SEL integration in early childhood education can be initiated, supported, and sustained. Each phase—unfreezing rigid mindsets, moving through adaptive implementation, and refreezing through systemic reinforcement—mirrors the realities of educational reform, especially when applied to an initiative as culturally and emotionally embedded as SEL.

### **Themes in the Literature**

#### **Theme 1: Benefits of SEL**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) plays a crucial role in fostering emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and academic success in early childhood education. Jones and Kahn (2017) highlight that SEL contributes to improved student outcomes by integrating social, emotional, and academic development, leading to enhanced cognitive functioning and behavioral regulation. They argue that major domains of human development—social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, academic—are deeply intertwined in the brain and in behaviour. All are central to learning and that addressing them together leads to better student outcomes (p. 4). Research conducted by Jones and Kahn (2017) emphasizes that SEL programs have long-term positive impacts on students' academic performance, mental health, and labor market outcomes, demonstrating a strong return on investment of \$11 for every \$1 spent on SEL interventions (p. 11). Additionally, McCormick et al. (2011) found that “across all participants, SEL participants evidenced an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement postintervention as compared to children in the control group” (p. 2).

Empirical research consistently links SEL to improved emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, and academic achievement. A meta-analysis of 213 studies found that students in SEL

programs outperformed peers academically by 11 percentile points, with gains persisting for an average of three years post-intervention (Durlak et al., 2011). Blewitt et al. (2018) further demonstrated that universal SEL curricula contribute to a reduction in behavioral issues in preschool settings, attributing this to enhanced conflict-resolution skills. Longitudinal studies in Australia underscore SEL's long-term impact, showing that children exposed to SEL in preschool are more likely to develop emotional competence, which fosters resilience and perseverance into later educational stages (Taylor et al., 2017).

Garces-Bacsal (2022) underscores the importance of SEL in fostering cultural responsiveness through diverse children's literature, helping young learners develop empathy and appreciation for multiple perspectives. She notes that "Multicultural picturebooks refers to 'mirror' and 'window' books; with the former providing opportunities for young readers to see themselves reflected in the narratives they read, whereas the latter allow children space to imagine sociocultural realities very different from their own" (p. 69). Furthermore, Mahoney et al. (2020) highlight that SEL interventions create a more supportive school climate, reduce behavioral issues, and enhance students' engagement in learning. Mahfouz et al. (2025) stress that "SEL program implementation in preschool settings not only merits special consideration regarding content, instructional approaches, and opportunities to practice skills, but also should be implemented using a culturally relevant and sustaining approach to address the needs of diverse populations" (p. 405).

SEL also strengthens teacher-student relationships, creating classroom environments conducive to risk-taking and innovation. Leithwood and Louis (2012) found that schools prioritizing SEL reported higher levels of trust between staff and students, correlating with improved collaborative problem-solving. Research indicates that SEL programs contribute to

improved classroom behavior and stronger peer relationships by fostering children's emotional regulation and prosocial skills. Domitrovich et al. (2017) highlight that early childhood SEL interventions support children in recognizing and managing emotions, which in turn reduces negative social behaviors and enhances cooperative interactions among peers. Such practices align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, positioning social interaction as a catalyst for cognitive and emotional growth.

By fostering social-emotional competencies, SEL programs contribute to both individual and societal well-being. Research suggests that emotionally competent children are more likely to exhibit resilience in the face of challenges, engage in positive social interactions, and demonstrate higher levels of motivation in academic settings (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). These benefits extend beyond childhood, influencing long-term outcomes such as workplace success and overall life satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 2020). As such, integrating SEL into early childhood education is a strategic investment in both short-term academic success and long-term holistic development.

## **Theme 2: Challenges and Barriers**

Despite its benefits, SEL adoption faces significant barriers. Cultural resistance remains pervasive, particularly in contexts where new educational models conflict with traditional values. Serpell (2020) discusses how Western-style education in Zambia was initially imposed without considering indigenous socialization goals, leading to tensions between formal schooling and culturally embedded learning practices. Similarly, in certain educational systems, parents and educators may resist SEL programs, fearing that emotional reflection and social-emotional skill development could detract from rigorous academic preparation. As seen in Zambia's education system, where the prioritization of English literacy over indigenous languages has shaped

pedagogical approaches, similar tensions arise in SEL implementation, where exam-driven structures leave little room for reflective, student-centered learning.

Moreover, educators often struggle to implement SEL due to inadequate structural support, which can make SEL feel like an additional unpaid burden in an already overstretched system. A study by the Austin Independent School District found that teachers faced significant barriers to SEL implementation, including competing demands, lack of administrative support, and minimal incentives or accountability. One educator noted that advisory periods for SEL were perceived as "30 minutes a day that they take from us but don't pay us for," highlighting the challenges teachers face in integrating SEL without structural backing (Austin Independent School District, 2018).

Additionally, the sustainability of SEL programs remains elusive, even in well-resourced contexts. Research by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) indicates that leadership turnover often leads to the discontinuation of SEL programs, as districts lose expertise, infrastructure, and key champions necessary for sustaining implementation (CASEL, 2018). Furthermore, an Education Week report found that nearly half of educators surveyed cited academic catch-up pressures as a major barrier to SEL, while insufficient professional development and overwhelming student social-emotional needs further hinder sustainability (Will, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of stable leadership, structural support, and long-term investment in SEL programs to ensure their effectiveness and continuity.

Beyond structural and leadership challenges, SEL implementation also faces pedagogical barriers. Gruijters et al. (2024) argue that SEL interventions may not significantly reduce socioeconomic achievement gaps, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle

with lower baseline social-emotional skills, limiting their capacity to benefit equally from SEL programs. Additionally, Jones and Kahn (2017) note that inadequate teacher training in SEL strategies leads to inconsistent implementation and reduced program effectiveness.

Donahue-Keegan, Villegas-Reimers, and Cressey (2019) highlight systemic challenges in implementing SEL, emphasizing that many educators struggle with integration due to a lack of professional development and the absence of culturally responsive SEL frameworks. Despite their interest in SEL and culturally responsive teaching (CRT), educators often lack the necessary training and support, leading to inconsistencies between intention and practice. This gap underscores the need for systematic professional development to equip educators with the skills to effectively implement culturally responsive SEL. Houghton-Katipa (2024) discusses the challenges of integrating bicultural practices into SEL in New Zealand, emphasizing that limited teacher preparedness and insufficient institutional support hinder effective implementation. She highlights the need for professional development to better equip educators in incorporating bicultural approaches within SEL frameworks. Mahfouz et al. (2025) found that “most teachers have little to no training in SEL or culturally relevant pedagogies” (p. 406), leading to challenges in integrating diverse perspectives into SEL curricula.

Iruka et al. (2023) highlight that segregated environments may not provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, which in turn limits the effectiveness of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. They emphasize that the intersection of socioeconomic and racial disparities further exacerbates these challenges, as students in under-resourced schools often receive less support in developing social-emotional competencies, contributing to inequitable outcomes in SEL effectiveness. Research by Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2021) similarly underscores the importance of integrating SEL with a focus on equity, noting

that effective SEL programming should promote critical thinking, perspective-taking, and civic engagement to address structural inequities.

### **Theme 3: Effective Integration Strategies**

Several studies suggest effective strategies for embedding SEL into early childhood education. Mahoney et al. (2020) advocate for a systemic SEL approach that includes teacher training, family engagement, and school-community partnerships to reinforce SEL skills across multiple contexts. They suggest that:

Implementation is likely to be more effective and sustained if they: (a) integrate SEL across grade levels; (b) take a whole school approach that infuses SEL into practices and policies; (c) provide ongoing training and consultation; (d) engage families and community partners in program selection, refinement, and improvement and in reinforcing skill development at home. (p. 1134)

Carter (2016) highlights the integration of SEL and environmental education through the Social-Emotional and Environmental Education Development (SEED) Framework. This framework “blends early childhood education, environmental education, and social-emotional development” to create a holistic approach that fosters children’s emotional and cognitive growth (p. 9). Rather than treating SEL as a separate curriculum, Carter (2016) emphasizes that the SEED Framework “is not a new intervention package or curriculum, but a systematic framework for establishing a nature- and connection-based culture” (p. 10). Nature-based learning environments, such as forest kindergartens and nature-focused preschools, provide children with opportunities to develop empathy and a sense of care for others and the environment.

Professional development is crucial for effective Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) implementation. McCormick et al. (2015) highlight the crucial role of professional development



in implementing SEL programs, stating that “most effective SEL programs are implemented by providing professional development (PD) and training to teachers” (p. 2). However, they also acknowledge a gap in research, noting that “there is very little research identifying the specific training, coaching, or PD critical for enhancing fidelity or impacts” (p. 2). Schonert-Reichl (2017) emphasizes that teachers require training to model SEL authentically. Research indicates that educators with strong social and emotional competencies report higher job satisfaction and reduced burnout, underscoring the importance of teacher well-being in sustainable SEL practices. Moreover, interventions focusing on enhancing educators' social-emotional-behavioral health have been linked to improved teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. These findings suggest that investing in teacher professional development not only benefits educators but also positively impacts the broader educational environment.

Additionally, Jones and Kahn (2017) highlight that SEL integration “should be developmentally and culturally aligned to the needs of students” (p. 10), with ongoing assessment to track progress. CASEL’s Program Guides provide evidence-based SEL curricula that align with these best practices, ensuring structured lesson delivery and clear developmental sequencing.

Houghton-Katipa (2024) suggests a ‘braided’ approach, where SEL is interwoven with bicultural teaching strategies to create culturally responsive learning environments. Furthermore, Mahoney et al. (2020) advocate for incorporating SEL into academic subjects such as language arts and social studies to ensure its integration into daily learning activities. Hayashi et al. (2022) emphasize the role of situated and embodied learning in SEL, stating that “situated and embodied learning occurs when learners interact with others in physical or virtual environments to engage in activities and practices that are authentic and culturally responsive” (p. 751). They

further argue that aligning learning activities with real-life contexts enhances “deep learning, transference, and application of the skills attained” (p. 751).

#### **Theme 4: Cross-Cultural Implications**

SEL implementation varies across cultural contexts, necessitating adaptations to fit diverse educational settings. Gruijters et al. (2024) highlight that SEL’s impact on learning outcomes is context-dependent, with collectivist cultures placing different emphases on socio-emotional competencies compared to individualistic societies. Mahoney et al. (2020) emphasize the need for social and emotional learning (SEL) programs to be adapted to various sociocultural contexts, ensuring equity in both access and effectiveness. They explain:

Systemic SEL is an approach to create equitable learning conditions that actively involve all Pre-K to Grade 12 students in learning and practicing social, emotional, and academic competencies. These conditions require aligned policies, resources, and actions at state and district levels that encourage local schools and communities to build the personal and professional capacities of adults to: implement and continuously improve evidence-based programs and practices; create an inclusive culture that fosters caring relationships and youth voice, agency, and character; and support coordinated school-family-community partnerships to enhance student development. (Mahoney et al., 2020, p. 1128)

This perspective underscores the necessity of embedding SEL strategies within broader systemic efforts that engage communities, educators, and policymakers in fostering inclusive learning environments.

Houghton-Katipa (2024) explores the integration of SEL within Māori educational frameworks, emphasizing the importance of bicultural practices and Te Whāriki, New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum. She highlights that “understanding how pedagogy and practices that

draw on the richness of kaupapa Māori approaches to facilitating social and emotional learning could benefit all tamariki (children) and contribute to the promise of Te Whāriki as a bicultural curriculum” (p. 176). Similarly, Garces-Bacsal (2022) promotes the use of diverse children's books to support SEL across different cultural settings, fostering global citizenship and empathy. Iruka et al. (2023) discuss how racial and ethnic segregation in early education affects SEL outcomes, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive teaching practices. They argue that “although classroom quality, measured through traditional tools, did not vary by school racial/ethnic composition, sociodemographic risk factors, children’s language, and social-emotional outcomes did vary by this variable” (p. 1341).

Global adaptations of SEL also illustrate the importance of cultural responsiveness. In Canada, the "Roots of Empathy" (ROE) program has been implemented to reduce aggression and promote prosocial behavior among students. This program involves regular classroom visits by a parent and their infant, allowing students to observe and reflect on the baby's development and emotions. A randomized, longitudinal evaluation conducted in Manitoba demonstrated that children participating in ROE exhibited a decrease in physical and indirect aggression, as well as an increase in prosocial behaviors, such as sharing and empathy, both immediately and three years after program completion (Santos et al., 2011). Similarly, in South Africa, community arts initiatives like the Community Arts Project (CAP) in Cape Town provided artistic training and facilities to empower marginalized communities through creative expression, addressing social and emotional challenges through collaborative engagement (Hagg, 2010).

These global examples highlight how SEL programs, while culturally responsive, often face the same structural challenges in traditional education systems. Educational reforms aimed at fostering holistic learning often highlight tensions between structured curricula and alternative

pedagogies. Serpell (2020) explains that colonial-era schooling in Africa introduced rigid, hierarchical academic pathways that persist today, limiting the adoption of more flexible, learner-centered approaches. He describes how "missionary/colonial schooling was conceptualized as an extractive recruitment process, with a very structured curriculum in the form of a 'narrowing staircase' to be climbed in a rigid sequence" (Serpell, 2020, p. 91). Similarly, Zambia's shift from an English-only curriculum to multilingual literacy instruction required overcoming deep-seated assumptions about educational effectiveness. Serpell notes that "arguments against that policy as alienating and ineffective led to its demise" (p. 91), highlighting the ideological shifts necessary for systemic reform. Just as language policies had to be restructured to accommodate local linguistic diversity, integrating SEL into traditionally exam-oriented systems requires significant structural and ideological transformation.

Mahoney et al. (2020) argue that cross-cultural SEL requires equity-focused programming that acknowledges social inequalities and empowers students through transformative SEL approaches. They emphasize that SEL interventions should not follow a universal, one-size-fits-all model but must be adapted to address cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity. As they explain, "SEL should follow a developmental, sequential approach from preschool through high school with the goal of preparing youth to build SECs throughout their lives" and must include "equitable, culturally responsive opportunities for learning" (p. 1132). Hayashi et al. (2022) advocate for integrating embodied learning processes into SEL to ensure that SEL competencies are meaningful and transferable across diverse cultural contexts. They argue that "SEL skills are inherently culturally responsive or situated in learners' authentic experiences, and SEL skills are inherently embodied" (p. 746). This approach recognizes the

necessity of grounding SEL programs in learners' lived experiences to maximize their impact across different educational and cultural settings.

### **Discussion**

This review aimed to answer three guiding research questions: (1) How can SEL be effectively integrated into early childhood education curricula to balance cognitive and emotional development? (2) What are the primary challenges educators face when implementing SEL programs, and how can these challenges be addressed? (3) How do cultural contexts influence the design and success of SEL programs in early childhood education?

In response to the first question, the literature consistently affirms that effective SEL integration requires embedding social-emotional competencies into the daily rhythms of classroom life, rather than presenting them as isolated or supplementary content. This reflects the “moving” phase of Lewin’s Change Management Model, in which change is enacted through targeted interventions. Carter’s (2016) SEED Framework illustrates how nature-based experiences can support emotional literacy, empathy, and resilience by aligning SEL with environmental and experiential education. Similarly, Mahoney et al. (2020) advocate for systemic approaches that incorporate SEL across grade levels, supported by ongoing professional development, family engagement, and school-wide practices. Developmentally and culturally aligned programs, such as those promoted by CASEL and described by Jones and Kahn (2017), demonstrate how curricular integration can support both emotional growth and academic achievement, particularly when SEL is responsive to learners’ sociocultural identities.

The second research question focuses on the challenges that constrain SEL implementation—barriers that often arise during the “unfreezing” and “moving” phases of systemic change. Educators face structural constraints such as limited planning time, lack of

administrative support, and insufficient training. Findings from the Austin Independent School District (2018) reveal that some teachers perceive SEL as an additional, unpaid workload, particularly when it is not clearly aligned with broader academic or policy priorities. Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019) and Mahfouz et al. (2025) underscore the absence of culturally responsive training as a key pedagogical gap, leading to fragmented or superficial implementation. Moreover, leadership turnover and inconsistent funding, as noted by CASEL (2018) and Will (2022), disrupt program continuity and inhibit institutionalization—hindering the “refreezing” process required for SEL to become a sustained, normalized practice within educational systems.

The third question addresses the influence of cultural contexts on SEL design and effectiveness. Cross-cultural analyses and case studies demonstrate that SEL must be adapted to local values, languages, and pedagogical traditions. In Zambia, Serpell (2020) reveals that colonial legacies in formal education have created enduring tensions between Western academic structures and indigenous ways of knowing, illustrating the ideological shifts necessary to support holistic development. Houghton-Katipa (2024) emphasizes the need for bicultural practices in New Zealand’s early learning system, showing how SEL can be aligned with Te Whāriki and kaupapa Māori principles. Similarly, the Roots of Empathy program in Canada (Santos et al., 2011) and the Community Arts Project in South Africa (Hagg, 2010) demonstrate how culturally grounded SEL models promote empathy, prosocial behavior, and community engagement. As Mahoney et al. (2020) and Hayashi et al. (2022) argue, SEL is most effective when situated in learners’ authentic experiences and enacted through inclusive, culturally sustaining pedagogies.

Overall, the literature reviewed affirms that SEL integration is not a technical task, but a systemic, adaptive, and culturally responsive change process. It requires rethinking traditional

educational priorities, equipping educators with the tools and support to model SEL authentically, and embedding SEL values into the broader architecture of schools through leadership, policy, and pedagogy.

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This review contributes to educational change literature by applying Lewin’s Change Management Model to the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in early childhood education. By conceptualizing SEL adoption as a systemic transformation rather than a discrete programmatic intervention, the model helps illuminate the broader organizational and ideological shifts required for sustained implementation. The “unfreezing” phase, as described by Burnes (2020), involves disrupting entrenched assumptions about the primacy of academic performance, making space for holistic frameworks that value emotional development and social well-being. In the context of early childhood education, this means challenging assessment-driven mindsets that marginalize SEL as secondary to cognitive outcomes (Serpell, 2020; Austin ISD, 2018).

The ‘moving’ phase involves adopting concrete practices such as curriculum redesign, professional learning, and school-community collaboration—actions demonstrated in the literature through models like Carter’s (2016) SEED framework and Mahoney et al.’s (2020) systemic SEL approach. Finally, the ‘refreezing’ phase reinforces new norms and behaviors through policy alignment, leadership commitment, and structural supports that institutionalize SEL across educational systems (Burnes, 2020; CASEL, 2018). By framing SEL integration within this cyclical and context-sensitive process, the review bridges gaps between educational leadership theory, curriculum studies, and implementation science. It also positions SEL as a lens

through which broader educational reform efforts—particularly those focused on equity and inclusion—can be understood and operationalized.

### **Practical Contributions**

This review offers several practical insights for educators, policymakers, and educational leaders seeking to embed SEL meaningfully into early childhood education. First, the findings underscore the need to move beyond fragmented or short-term SEL programs toward comprehensive, embedded approaches. As Mahoney et al. (2020) and Jones and Kahn (2017) argue, SEL should be integrated across subjects and developmental stages, using evidence-based frameworks aligned with students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Teacher training emerges as a central lever for change: studies by Schonert-Reichl (2017) and McCormick et al. (2015) highlight that educators’ own social-emotional competencies directly impact the success of classroom-level SEL, while Houghton-Katipa (2024) emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive professional development in bicultural contexts.

Recommendations for implementation include allocating protected time within the school day for SEL, investing in sustained and equity-focused professional learning, and adopting curricula that center diverse cultural narratives and practices (Garces-Bacsal, 2022; Mahfouz et al., 2025). In addition, leaders must advocate for policy changes that embed SEL into district or national educational standards, funding streams, and teacher evaluation frameworks—steps shown to enhance sustainability and impact (CASEL, 2018; Will, 2022). Programs such as Roots of Empathy (Santos et al., 2011) and the Community Arts Project (Hagg, 2010) illustrate how culturally grounded, community-based SEL initiatives can foster social cohesion and improve outcomes, particularly in marginalized communities.



Ultimately, SEL implementation cannot succeed without leadership that is both visionary and responsive. Educational leaders must guide their institutions through each phase of change, aligning values, resources, and pedagogical practices with a shared commitment to whole-child development. This requires not only technical solutions but also ethical and relational leadership capable of fostering inclusive, emotionally safe learning environments. As this review demonstrates, integrating SEL into early childhood education is both a pedagogical and organizational imperative—one that can only be realized through sustained, collaborative, and equity-minded efforts.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this critical literature review synthesizes a wide array of theoretical, empirical, and cross-cultural sources on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in early childhood education, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis is constrained by the availability of English-language, peer-reviewed literature, which may result in the underrepresentation of localized SEL practices and non-Western pedagogical models. Although the review includes case studies from diverse contexts such as Canada, South Africa, Zambia, and New Zealand, it does not capture the full global range of SEL frameworks, especially those developed outside dominant academic publishing circuits.

Second, the review is limited by its methodological scope. While it draws on meta-analyses (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011), longitudinal studies (Taylor et al., 2017), and conceptual models (e.g., Carter, 2016; Mahoney et al., 2020), it does not include primary empirical research such as classroom observations, stakeholder interviews, or implementation case tracking. Such fieldwork could enrich understanding of the day-to-day realities of SEL integration and offer more context-specific insights into barriers and enablers at the practitioner level.

Another limitation lies in the evolving nature of SEL frameworks. As Mahoney et al. (2020) and Jones and Kahn (2017) emphasize, SEL is not a fixed or universally defined construct but a continually adapting field shaped by sociocultural, political, and educational developments. This dynamism, while offering flexibility, also means that findings drawn from current literature may not fully account for emerging models—particularly in regions where SEL policy or curriculum integration is still in early stages or undergoing reform.

To address these limitations, future research should prioritize longitudinal and context-specific studies that examine the sustained impact of SEL across cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic contexts. There is a pressing need to investigate how SEL influences not only academic performance but also long-term mental health, civic participation, and workplace preparedness. Additionally, empirical evaluation of professional development programs—especially those designed to equip educators with culturally responsive SEL tools—is critical for enhancing implementation fidelity (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Mahfouz et al., 2025; Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019).

An important direction for future inquiry involves exploring the intersectionality of SEL with race, language, and class. Scholars such as Iruka et al. (2023) and Jagers et al. (2021) highlight persistent inequities in SEL access and outcomes, especially in segregated or under-resourced educational systems. Addressing these disparities will require inclusive research methodologies, collaboration with communities, and the centering of historically marginalized voices in SEL discourse and design.

Finally, further theoretical exploration is needed to evaluate the adaptability of organizational change models like Lewin’s three-step process across various educational systems. Given the diverse levels of centralization, community involvement, and cultural

complexity in global schooling contexts, future studies should examine how change management frameworks can be localized and extended to foster sustainable, equity-driven SEL integration. Such inquiry could offer valuable guidance for policymakers and practitioners working to institutionalize SEL within both formal and informal learning systems.

### **Conclusion**

The integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into early childhood education presents a transformative opportunity to promote holistic child development by bridging emotional, social, and cognitive growth. This review has synthesized a broad body of theoretical and empirical literature to identify evidence-based strategies for SEL implementation, including embedded curricula, experiential learning models, teacher professional development, and school-community partnerships. Programs such as Carter’s (2016) SEED framework and systemic approaches outlined by Mahoney et al. (2020) demonstrate that when SEL is developmentally and culturally aligned, it can enhance emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, and academic success from early learning onward.

However, this review also reveals that SEL adoption is far from uniform or universally accessible. Cultural resistance, structural inequities, and insufficient training often impede implementation, particularly in systems shaped by exam-oriented or colonial legacies (Serpell, 2020; Mahfouz et al., 2025; Austin ISD, 2018). These challenges highlight the need for adaptive, context-sensitive approaches that attend to the specific needs of diverse learning communities and address systemic barriers to access and sustainability.

Framed through Lewin’s Change Management Model, this review contributes a structured understanding of how SEL can be institutionalized within early childhood education. The model’s three stages—unfreezing entrenched assumptions, moving through practical

interventions, and refreezing new norms through policy and culture—offer a conceptual roadmap for educational leaders and policymakers. As shown throughout this review, SEL integration is not a linear process but a dynamic transformation that requires cultural responsiveness, leadership commitment, and long-term structural support.

Future research should build on this foundation by examining how SEL programs function over time and across contexts, particularly in under-resourced and plurilingual communities. Longitudinal studies, policy analyses, and community-based participatory research are needed to evaluate the sustained impact of SEL on academic achievement, emotional well-being, and civic engagement. Further theoretical exploration of change models tailored to educational contexts with varied cultural and institutional structures would also strengthen the field.

In conclusion, advancing SEL in early childhood education requires more than technical fixes—it demands a deep rethinking of educational priorities, a commitment to equity, and the cultivation of emotionally safe and inclusive environments. By viewing SEL as a systemic change process grounded in cultural and relational understanding, educators and leaders can better support the full development of every child, and help reimagine early education as a foundation for both academic and human flourishing.

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