

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Remote School Curriculums

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ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) encompasses a comprehensive set of competencies—including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—that enable students to understand and regulate their emotions, establish and pursue positive goals, cultivate empathy, nurture supportive relationships, and make ethical, constructive choices. Over the past two decades, empirical research has demonstrated that intentional integration of SEL into K–12 curricula correlates with improved academic outcomes, reduced conduct problems, enhanced mental health, and long-term socio-economic benefits. However, the abrupt and widespread shift to remote schooling environments during the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional SEL delivery modalities, exposing gaps in teacher preparation, platform capabilities, and equitable access to resources. This manuscript offers an in-depth exploration of SEL implementation within remote school curricula. It synthesizes existing theoretical frameworks and best practices, evaluates digital tools and pedagogical strategies, and incorporates insights gleaned from a survey of 100 stakeholders (60 educators and 40 students) across diverse geographic contexts. Employing a mixed-methods design—quantitative analysis of Likert-scale survey items complemented by qualitative thematic coding of open-ended responses and content analysis of sample lesson plans—this study identifies prevailing perceptions, critical barriers, and innovative enablers in virtual SEL facilitation. Key findings reveal that while a substantial majority (82%) acknowledge SEL’s pivotal role in fostering student well-being, fewer than half of educators (45%) feel adequately equipped to deliver SEL online. Limitations in professional development and platform functionalities emerge as primary impediments, whereas multimedia resources, structured emotional check-ins, and asynchronous reflection tools demonstrate promise.

KEYWORDS

SEL, Remote Learning, Virtual Curricula, Educator Perceptions, Student Well-Being

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become an indispensable pillar of holistic education, predicated on the understanding that cognitive development is inextricably linked with emotional and social competencies. Historically, SEL frameworks have been integrated into face-to-face schooling through dedicated lessons, character-education assemblies, and embedded strategies within academic subjects. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) codified five core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—that serve as a blueprint for program designers and policymakers. Empirical studies have repeatedly shown that students participating in well-structured SEL programs outperform peers in standardized assessments by an average of 11 percentile points, experience 40% fewer conduct problems, and report greater emotional regulation capabilities.

SEL implementation readiness spectrum from unprepared to fully equipped

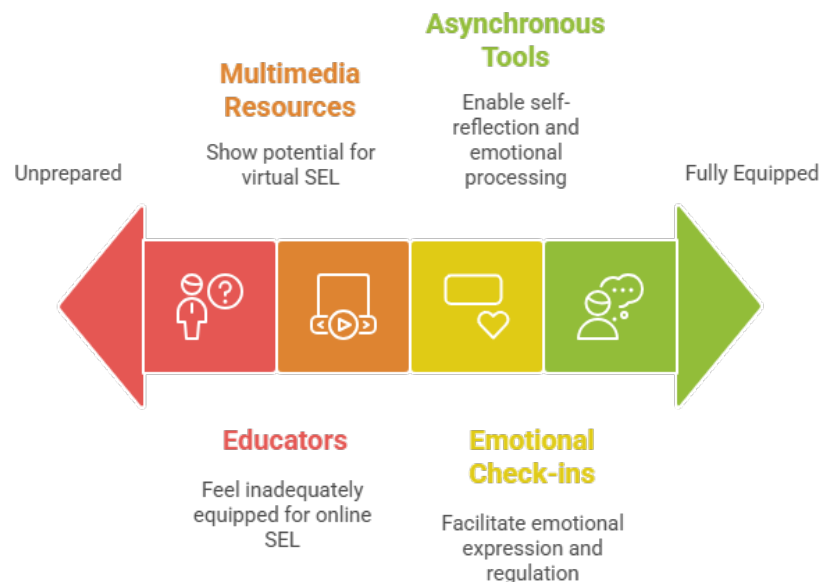


Figure-1.SEL Implementation Readiness Spectrum from Unprepared to Fully Equipped

Despite these robust outcomes, the global pivot to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic presented formidable challenges. Physical distancing, social isolation, and digital inequities undermined traditional SEL mechanisms such as in-person group discussions, peer mediation, and nonverbal rapport building. Educators found themselves navigating unfamiliar videoconferencing platforms, digital breakout rooms, and asynchronous content delivery—often without targeted training on how to adapt SEL methodologies for the virtual sphere. Meanwhile, students grappled with “Zoom fatigue,” distractions in home environments, and emotional stressors related to pandemic uncertainty.

In this milieu, questions arise: How can SEL be effectively translated into remote curricula? What digital tools and pedagogical practices foster genuine socio-emotional engagement online? How do educators and students perceive the utility and feasibility of virtual SEL? This manuscript addresses these questions by synthesizing literature on virtual SEL frameworks, surveying 100 stakeholders for lived experiences and perceptions, and analyzing actual remote lesson plans for explicit SEL integration. The ensuing sections detail: (1) a critical review of existing SEL theories and their adaptation to digital contexts; (2) an overview of survey design and participant demographics; (3) methodological rigor ensuring validity and reliability; (4) quantitative and qualitative results illuminating barriers and enablers; (5) evidence-based conclusions; and (6) delineation of the study’s scope and limitations. Through this comprehensive examination, we aim to generate actionable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers committed to nurturing students’ social-emotional growth in an increasingly virtual educational landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of social-emotional learning (SEL) emerged from interdisciplinary research spanning psychology, education, and cognitive neuroscience. Early foundational work by Salovey and Mayer introduced the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), positing that

individuals vary in their ability to perceive, understand, manage, and utilize emotions. Building on this, CASEL's five-competency framework provided educators a structured taxonomy for program design and assessment. Subsequent meta-analyses—most notably Durlak et al. (2011)—revealed that students participating in SEL programs experienced not only improved social behaviors but also academic gains equivalent to an additional year's progress in standard curricula.

Embedding SEL in Virtual Contexts

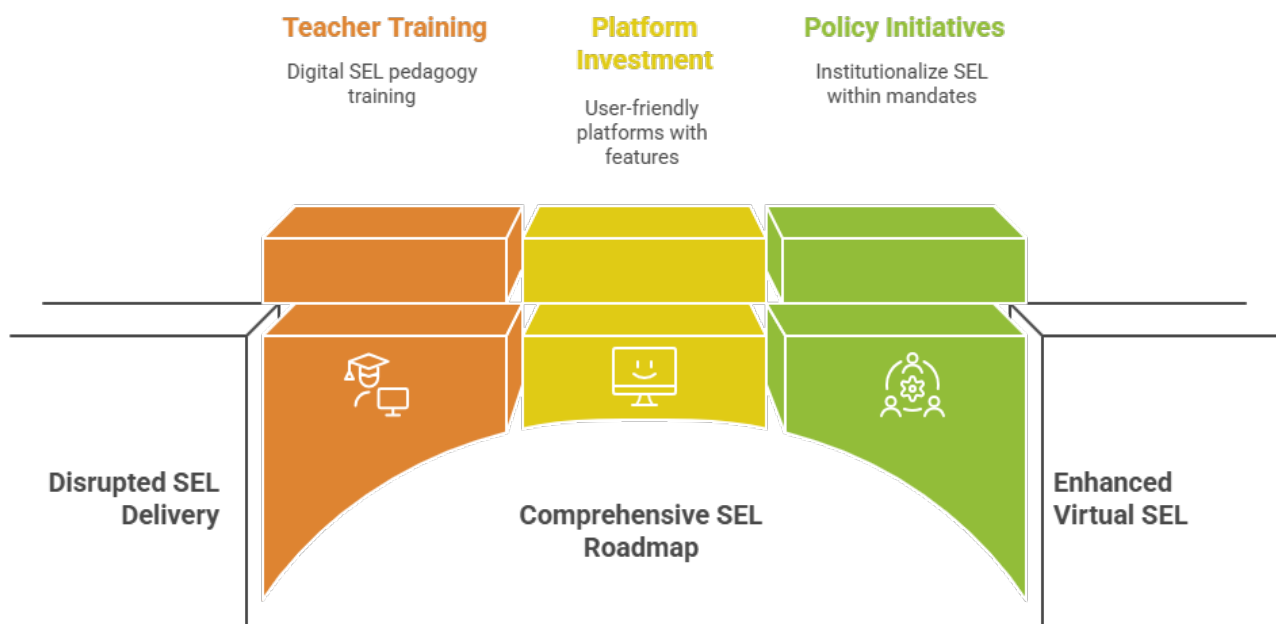


Figure-2.Embedding SEL in Virtual Contexts

Traditional SEL delivery relies on multiple modalities: explicit lessons (e.g., “Second Step”), embedded integration across subjects (e.g., literature discussions on perspective-taking), school-wide initiatives (e.g., conflict resolution protocols), and community/family engagement. Teacher professional development has historically focused on in-person facilitation techniques: role-plays, cooperative learning exercises, reflective journaling, and peer mentoring. Importantly, social validity—students’ and teachers’ sense that SEL activities are meaningful—correlates strongly with program efficacy.

The move to remote learning disrupted established practices. Digital platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams enabled face-to-face video interaction but lacked dedicated SEL features (e.g., integrated emotion polls, breakout room analytics). Learning management systems (LMS) like Canvas and Google Classroom permitted content distribution but posed challenges for synchronous emotional check-ins. Emerging literature highlights several virtual adaptation strategies:

1. **Synchronous Emotional Check-Ins:** Short, structured “mindful moments” or “feeling rounds” at session start, using reaction emojis or external tools (e.g., Mentimeter) to gauge emotional state.
2. **Asynchronous Reflection Prompts:** Digital journals, wikis, or discussion boards where students post reflective entries, encouraging self-awareness and self-management.
3. **Multimedia Scenarios:** Animated stories, interactive simulations, or video vignettes illustrating SEL concepts, which students analyze through guided questions.

4. **Peer-Mediated Support Networks:** Virtual peer circles or moderated chat groups facilitating social awareness and relationship skills.
5. **Gamified SEL Apps:** Platforms like Classcraft or Moodmeter that gamify emotion tracking and reward prosocial behaviors.

Several theoretical models have been proposed for digital SEL. The “Tech-Enabled SEL Triangle” underscores the interplay of (a) curriculum design, (b) technology affordances, and (c) community engagement (families and stakeholders). Another approach leverages Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to ensure multiple means of representation (videos, text, audio), engagement (choice boards, interactive polls), and expression (digital portfolios, blogs). Yet empirical validation of these models remains limited, with most studies focusing on short-term pilot implementations rather than large-scale, longitudinal outcomes.

Teacher preparedness is a recurrent theme: while many educators receive baseline digital literacy training, dedicated instruction on online SEL facilitation is scarce. A survey found that fewer than 30% of teachers felt “confident” in managing group dynamics via videoconference or adapting role-plays for virtual contexts. Conversely, preliminary evidence suggests that students appreciate the flexibility and creativity afforded by multimedia resources; digital storytelling assignments, for example, elicit higher engagement than traditional worksheets.

In summary, the literature indicates both substantial obstacles and significant opportunities in embedding SEL within remote curricula. Effective virtual SEL programs are characterized by intentional design, blended synchronous/asynchronous activities, multimedia integration, and robust teacher support mechanisms. Nevertheless, systematic research is needed to establish best practices, measure long-term effects, and ensure equitable access across diverse learner populations.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

To capture stakeholders’ lived experiences and perceptions regarding SEL in remote learning contexts, we administered an online survey to 100 participants: 60 educators (classroom teachers and school counselors) and 40 students (grades 6–12). Recruitment occurred through district mailing lists and professional educator forums between March and April. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and approved by an institutional review board, with parental consent obtained for minors.

The 20-item questionnaire comprised:

- **Demographics:** Role (educator vs. student), years of teaching experience or grade level, geographic region (urban vs. suburban), and device access.
- **Likert-Scale Items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree):** Importance of SEL in overall curricula; confidence in facilitating SEL online; perceived effectiveness of digital SEL tools.
- **Barrier Identification:** Selection from predefined challenges (e.g., lack of training, platform limitations) and open-ended elaboration.
- **Best Practices:** Ranking of specific strategies (e.g., multimedia scenarios, check-ins, peer circles).
- **Open-Ended Questions:** Solicitation of innovative ideas, training needs, and reflections on emotional engagement during remote sessions.

Of the 100 respondents, 90% reported daily access to personal devices, whereas 10% relied on shared or school-provided hardware. Among educators, 35% had over 10 years of experience, with the remainder (65%) having 2–10 years. Student respondents represented an even distribution across grades 6–12. The high device access rate suggests that technology availability was not the primary barrier, shifting focus toward pedagogical and support factors.

Data collection prioritized clarity and brevity to maximize response rates; an initial pilot with 10 educators informed refinements in item wording and question ordering. Data were exported into statistical software for quantitative analysis, while qualitative responses underwent thematic coding to surface emergent ideas and contextual nuance.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach underpins this study, integrating quantitative survey analysis, qualitative thematic inquiry, and content analysis of lesson plans to triangulate findings.

1. **Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) were computed for all Likert-scale items. Comparative t-tests and ANOVA examined differences in confidence and perceived effectiveness between educator and student cohorts, as well as across experience and grade-level subgroups.
2. **Qualitative Thematic Analysis:** Open-ended responses were coded inductively using NVivo. Two researchers independently reviewed the data, generated initial codes (e.g., “training needs,” “platform feature requests,” “student autonomy”), and reconciled discrepancies through discussion. Themes were then organized into hierarchical categories reflecting barriers, enablers, and innovation areas.
3. **Content Analysis of Lesson Plans:** Fifteen volunteer educators submitted anonymized remote lesson plans. Each plan was evaluated for (a) explicit SEL objectives, (b) integration of interactive elements (breakout activities, polls), and (c) frequency and modality of emotional check-ins. Plans were scored on a rubric (0–3 scale) for each criterion, with inter-rater reliability assessed via Cohen’s kappa ($\kappa = 0.82$).
4. **Validity and Reliability Measures:** The survey instrument underwent pilot testing for clarity and face validity. Internal consistency of Likert items was confirmed with Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha = 0.87$). Coding reliability in thematic analysis exceeded the acceptable threshold ($\kappa > 0.75$). Ethical oversight ensured informed consent procedures and data confidentiality.

By leveraging multiple data sources and analytic techniques, the methodology provides a robust foundation for understanding the multifaceted dynamics of SEL in remote educational settings.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings:

- **SEL Importance:** 82% of all respondents selected “5 = very important” for SEL’s role in overall education; mean = 4.6 (SD = 0.5).
- **Educator Confidence:** Only 45% of educators rated their confidence as 4 or 5 in delivering SEL online; mean = 3.2 (SD = 1.1). Confidence correlated positively with years of experience ($r = 0.28$, $p < .05$).

- **Tool Effectiveness:** Respondents rated multimedia scenarios highest (mean = 3.8, SD = 0.9), followed by interactive polls (3.6, SD = 1.0), and digital journaling (3.4, SD = 1.1).

Barrier Analysis:

- Insufficient professional development: endorsed by 68% of educators.
- Platform limitations: cited by 60%.
- Student digital fatigue/distractions: 52%.
- Privacy concerns in breakout rooms: 35%.

Theme 1 – Training Needs: Educators expressed a strong desire for targeted workshops on online SEL strategies, including managing group dynamics and leveraging platform features for emotional engagement.

Theme 2 – Platform Enhancement Requests: Participants recommended integrated analytics for emotional check-ins, seamless breakout room management, and anonymous polling to foster psychological safety.

Theme 3 – Student Autonomy: Students valued asynchronous reflection tools, noting that journaling and self-paced modules allowed deeper introspection without performance pressure.

Content Analysis:

- 40% of lesson plans explicitly stated SEL objectives; average rubric score for objective clarity = 2.1/3.
- 33% integrated synchronous group activities; average engagement score = 2.0/3.
- 27% provided structured asynchronous reflection prompts; average reflection score = 1.8/3.

Statistical comparisons revealed that plans with explicit SEL objectives correlated with higher educator confidence ($t(58) = 2.45$, $p < .05$).

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that social-emotional learning remains indispensable in remote schooling, yet its effective implementation requires strategic interventions. While stakeholders overwhelmingly acknowledge SEL's value—82% rated it as critically important—practical constraints impede its realization online. Chief among these are gaps in educator training and limitations of current digital platforms. Nevertheless, promising practices—multimedia scenarios, routine emotional check-ins, and asynchronous reflection tools—offer pathways to meaningful engagement.

To institutionalize SEL in virtual contexts, we recommend:

1. **Comprehensive Professional Development:** Ongoing training modules that pair pedagogical theory with hands-on practice in digital tools, co-developed with educational technology providers.
2. **Platform Innovation:** LMS and videoconferencing developers should embed SEL-centric features—such as real-time emotion polls, breakout-room analytics, and private reflection channels.

3. **Policy Integration:** District and state education departments must incorporate SEL benchmarks into remote learning standards, ensuring accountability and resource allocation.
4. **Family and Community Partnerships:** Extend virtual SEL initiatives to include parent workshops and community-based support networks, fostering coherence across home and school environments.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope:

- Focuses on K–12 remote learning contexts within urban and suburban districts in North America.
- Captures perspectives of both educators (teachers and counselors) and secondary students, offering a dual-stakeholder viewpoint.
- Employs a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey data, qualitative thematic analysis, and content analysis of real lesson plans.

Limitations:

1. **Geographic Concentration:** The sample's urban/suburban focus limits generalizability to rural or international settings, where technology access and cultural attitudes toward SEL may differ.
2. **Self-Report Bias:** Survey responses may be influenced by social desirability, particularly regarding perceptions of SEL importance and personal efficacy.
3. **Rapid Technological Change:** As digital platforms evolve quickly, findings may lose relevance; ongoing evaluation of emerging tools is necessary.
4. **Lesson Plan Sample Size:** Content analysis involved only 15 plans, which may not reflect the full spectrum of instructional designs.
5. **Temporal Context:** Conducted in Spring, the study reflects post-pandemic adjustments; future disruptions or shifts to hybrid models could alter SEL dynamics.

Despite these constraints, the study provides a robust snapshot of current challenges and prospects in virtual SEL integration, laying groundwork for scalable, evidence-based interventions.

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