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# Teaching Social and Emotional Skills to Students in Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities

**Khanh M. Hoang**

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, HCM VNU

**Tuyen Q. Vu**

University of Natural Sciences, HCM VNU

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the challenges and opportunities of teaching social-emotional skills in classroom settings in Vietnam. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with middle school students and teachers involved in the Ephata Summer Program in Ho Chi Minh city. This program promotes on social-emotional learning in primary and secondary school students. In this study, we focus on learning about emotion and empathy, important aspects of social-emotional learning (SEL). The results indicate that students and teachers have been recognized the importance and helpfulness of social-emotional learning taught in school settings. However, student's assessment of their empathy was relatively low. They realized that there were difficulties and obstacles from themselves and others, and proposed their own ways to overcome it. The findings add to the growing empirical evidence regarding the critical role of SEL in student's social life and academics in non-occidental social and cultural country, and the needs to implement it in school curricula.

## **Keywords:**

Social-emotional learning (SEL), Emotion identification, Empathy.

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## **Authors' Notes**

Correspondences regarding this paper should be directed to Khanh M. Hoang, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, @ maikhanhhoang@hcmussh.edu.vn or to Tuyen Q. Vu, University of Natural Sciences @ vqtuyen@hcmus.edu.vn

## Introduction

Research findings showed that socio – emotional competence and academic achievement played the significant role in maximizing students’ potential to succeed in school and further in their lives (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997; Elias et al., 1997). SEL thus promotes personal traits like responsibility, grit, honesty, integrity, self- regulation, optimism, empathy, compassion, and cooperation. One needs these characters to survive and flourish in a complex and competitive world. Today’s students face an even more challenging, competitive and rapidly changing world

Most recently, SEL has gained increasing attention because it has a positive impact on students’ personal, social and academic lives (Payton et al., 2008). SEL influences classroom management, teacher-student relationships, and effective instructions. Payton et al. find out that “SEL programs are among the most successful interventions ever offered to school-aged youth”. The role of so-called noncognitive factors is in detail analysed in a review of the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (Farrington et al., 2012). Self-discipline/self- regulation plays an important role in the classroom/ academic performance (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Duckworth & Carlson, 2013).

Therefore, it is very important for young people to develop the character traits that will help them learn and achieve better in school, perform successfully in the workplace, and build and maintain positive, trusting relationships.

Unfortunately, Vietnamese education has based heavily on academic standards. The human aspect with which schools are primarily concerned is that of the intellect. Yet it is not enough to focus only on student’s academic and intellectual competence while ignoring all other aspects of their development. It is necessary to address the education of the whole child. Education must be concerned with the development of every person’s physical, intellectual, emotional, social, creative and spiritual potentials. Social and emotional education has been integrated into the curriculum of Early Childhood Education in Vietnam. However, at primary, secondary and high school, students “have to” learn social and emotional skills by themselves through the problematic situation in which they may success or not to solve the problems.

## Social-Emotional Learning

Psychologists explain that “social-emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development.” (Elias M et al. 1997. p. 2). This definition implicates the self-awareness and other’s relationships. The emotional aspect of this competency relates to self-knowledge, focusing on the emotion and feelings, but also including thoughts and perception, which are linked to emotion. In the other hand, the social aspect refers to the dimension of interpersonal relationship. In the initial book of Daniel Goleman (1995), *Emotional Intelligence*, social and emotional intelligence was described as the complex and multifaceted ability to be effective in all the critical domains of life, including school. Emotional competency is described as having the knowledge and skills to direct “behaviors toward a positive end . . . whether it be in controlling impulse and putting off gratification, regulating our moods [and emotions] so they facilitate rather than impede thinking, motivating ourselves to persist and try, try again in the face of set-backs, or finding ways to . . . perform more effectively” (p. 95). So that, he insisted that it cannot be separated from social intelligence, as all emotions are embedded in social relationships: “You can’t separate the cause of an emotion from the world of relationships—our social interactions are what drive our emotions” (Goleman, 2006, p. 83). Social competency helps us to navigate in the world of relationships, whereas emotional competency enables us to regulate our feelings and behaviors evoked by social interactions, to obtain positive results.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning as the process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills to:

- Recognize and manage their emotions
- Set and achieve positive goals
- Demonstrate caring and concern for others
- Establish and maintain positive relationships

- Make responsible decisions
- Handle interpersonal situations effectively (Payton et al., 2008, p.6)

Research on social and emotional competencies found that these skills enable children to calm themselves when angry, initiate friendships and resolve conflicts effectively and respectfully, make smart choices and contribute fruitfully to their community (Zins & Elias, 2006).

Educators argue that emotional and social skills can be taught and learned through instruction, practice and feedback. Therefore, this learning involves school or other educational settings, and by implication, the notion that specific instructional activities, assessment tools and curricula may be used to promote these aims. Social and emotional learning can be defined as follows: “Through developmentally and culturally appropriate classroom instruction and application of learning to everyday situations, SEL programming builds children’s skills to recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations” (Greenberg et al., 2003, p. 468).

### ***Evidence-Based Research***

Since the publication of *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, 1995) and *Multiple Intelligence* (Gardner, 1993), SEL largely evolve from research on prevention and resilience (Zins and Elias, 2006). A high level of interest continue today, with research finding an increasing positive outcomes of SEL, not only on academic issue, but on several principal domains of life (Payton et al., 2008; Durlak et al., 2011).

Research evaluate impact of SEL programs across different school times and setting (during school day and after-school) and for two different types of student populations those without any identified problems (Durlak et al., 2010; 2011) and those with early signs of social, emotional, behavioral, or learning problems (Payton et al., 2008). The results indicated strong and consistent positive impact of SEL programs. Students in SEL programs demonstrated improvement in their personal, social, and academic lives. Comparing with students of the control groups, students involving in the

SEL programs showed significantly enhanced social-emotional skills, attitudes and behaviors, reduced misconducted behaviors and emotional distress, and specially improved their academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Besides the universal SEL program, some programs focus on students with special needs. Students participating in such programs usually display conduct problems such as aggression or bullying; accompanied by emotional distress like anxiety or depression. The study showed positive results. Students improved significantly in five out of six categories evaluated: social & emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behaviors, conduct problems and emotional distress, except academic performance (Payton et al., 2008).

In addition, the quality SEL programs provide students with opportunities to contribute to their class, school, and community and gain satisfaction, sense of belonging, and enhanced motivation (Hawkins, Smith, & Catalano, 2004).

### ***Teaching Social-Emotional Skills***

Within school contexts, social and emotional skills are processed, integrated and applied in the curricula in contextually and culturally appropriate ways. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (2005) defined five key components of effective SEL as follows:

- *Self-awareness*: Identification and recognition of one’s own emotions, of strengths in self and others, sense of self-efficacy, and self-confidence.
- *Social awareness*: Empathy, perception taking and respect for others.
- *Self-management*: Impulse control, stress management, persistence, goal setting, and intrinsic motivation.
- *Relationship skills*: Cooperation, communication
- *Responsible decision-making*: Making smart decision based on responsibility, respect of others.

Through systematic instruction, SEL skills may be taught, modeled, practiced, and applied to diverse situations so that students practice and use them as part of their daily repertoire of behaviors (Weissberg, Caplan, & Sivo, 1989). SEL curricula can be integrated into daily school programs, but also in after-school programs.

Schools adopting the SEL programs were recommended to follow four practices for teaching skills (Payton et al., 2008):

- *Sequenced*: the program applies a planned set of activities to develop skills sequentially in a step-by-step way.
- *Active*: lessons delivered with active method such as role-plays, class discussion, behavioral rehearsal with feedback.
- *Focused*: sufficient time for developing social and emotional skills.
- *Explicit*: targeting specific social and emotional skills.

Results of the review showed that program followed these four recommended practices were more effective than those who did not follow these procedures (Payton et al. 2008). Researchers and practitioners examined also the ways to integrate, implement successfully SEL in school curriculum. Brandt (1999) noted that “when instruction is incidental rather than deliberate, it is difficult to determine the effects on students” (p.178). In other words, if schools engage in a planful process of teaching students social and emotional skills, the impact of instructional efforts will be better determine. Aware of Brandt remarks and his own experiences in character education, Jonathan Erwin (2010) added some characteristics of a successful SEL program:

- *Professional development*: teachers need to be sufficient trained to implement the program.
- *Direct instruction*: the program includes direct delivery of the curriculum.
- *Curriculum integration*: the program is integrated into the academic curriculum.

- *Models and mentors*: the program provides to student opportunities to observe and/or work with positive role models and adult or peer mentors.
- *Parent and community involvement*: The initiative involves parents and community members and organizations in a coordinated approach to character development.
- *Intrinsic motivation*: the program appeals to students’ intrinsic motivation to learn, instead of relying on rewards. (p.13)

Erwin (2010) emphasized that the most important factor for success in character education or SEL program is building positive and trusting relationship with students. Ryan and Deci’s (2002) research supports this view: “children who securely connected to, or cared for by... teachers [are] the ones who more fully internalize... positive school related behaviors” (p.19). Having a good relationship with the teacher also makes student have pleasure to do activities with him or her. Class meeting to formulating expectations, rules and procedures, sharing personal interests, team building games, class discussion about students’ interesting topics are tools for building and deepening relationships.

In addition, using active pedagogy and helping students understand the benefits of engaging in learning activities promote intrinsic motivation. Examples from students’ daily lives and role-plays and discussions are strongly suggested as strategies to make the learning relevant and reinforcing (Joseph & Strain, 2003). Taking daily practices to perform skills under a variety circumstances (e.g. talking in front of class, feeling nervous...) is crucial for improving students’ skills and attitudes. These practices also show students the benefits of SEL, which reinforce their intrinsic motivation. Moreover, recognition and positive, specific teacher feedback are important to student motivation (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

Finally, modeling SEL is critical to its success. Teacher naturally becomes a model. Students are always watching their teacher, and what he or she model is what they learn. Perricone’s main message to every educator is that students may not learn any of the lessons’ content, but one thing they are always learning is who the teacher is (Perricone, 2005).

## Methodology

A qualitative approach has been used to explore challenges and opportunities of teaching social skills to middle school student in the Ephata Summer Program in Ho Chi Minh city. In this program, social skills have been taught to primary and secondary students. The last one was chosen for this study because the lessons designed for them explore more deeply their own experiences, challenges their own perception and behaviors.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students and their teachers. Students were asked about their experiences on emotional identification and empathy through the share and discussion in the classroom, about their own situation where they experience or practice emotional identification and empathy. The interest of students in learning social skills was investigated. Also the difficulties and obstacles faced students in practicing empathy were investigated in the interviews. The involvement of teachers in this study deepened an understanding of opportunities and challenges in teaching social skills at school.

## Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews was analyzed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) which considered the participants' perception about emotion identification and empathy. The data were investigated to identify the emerging themes, and then cluster them with descriptive labels.

### *Social Emotional Learning in Ephata Summer Program*

Ephata education program is designed to promote social and emotional learning, life skills and STEM competence in primary and secondary school students. The 7-week program for social and emotional learning includes 35-40 lessons per grade. Each lesson lasts 40 minutes. Lessons follow a common structure - 5E model (Engage, Explore, Explain, Extend and Evaluate). The "explain and extend" steps

have the "define, personalize and challenge" format. There is "define questions", "personalize questions", and "challenging questions".

Lessons are divided into five units. The first unit is about freedom, choice, and responsibility. The second unit helps to explore thoughts and perceptions. The third unit is for understanding emotions, body signals and actions. The fourth teaches choosing values, choosing goals and actions, mindful listening, empathy, and being assertive. The fifth unit consist of lessons for character education such as compassion and acceptance, honesty, grit, self-control, gratitude, curiosity. Those character lessons are distributed among seven weeks.

The program also includes mindfulness-based activities and visualization. They are integrated throughout the course.

Lessons of life skills, for example team building, group works, offer students "great" occasions to practice and live what they have learn from SEL.

Although this is a 7-week summer program, it is ready and can easily be integrated into standard curriculum.

### *Student's Experiences in Emotion Identification and Empathy*

Students have been showed their knowledge about feelings. Some of them have been engaged in the program for three or four years, they have already had knowledge about feelings and perception. They didn't talk about what they learned in these lessons but the benefits that SEL provided. One of them reported that:

*Learning about emotion identification and empathy helps me to understand others and to express sympathy towards them.*

Another student said that:

*It helps me to understand, caring, be friendly and close to others. So that, I can help people more easily.*

The lesson helped students realize the benefits of recognizing other people's feelings, taking others' perspectives and showing empathy and sensitivity to others' feelings. Students were interested in exploring their own feelings and the others' ones. Recognizing their own emotion lead them to cope with negative feelings, to control and master their behaviors. One student said that:

*It helps me to realize that I have hurt my friend, and I could stop it.*

Especially, two students demonstrated their interest and concern for others in the discourse. They argued that with these skills, they can help people having positive feelings, or don't do anything hurting others. Their score of empathy (self evaluation) was high: 8.5 and 9 (on a scale of 1 to 10). Whereas, two others students mentioned this social and emotional ability helping them to become nice and to be loved by others. They realize that their social and emotional skills were limited and needed to improve. They rated themselves at 5 and 6.5. All of students showed their willingness to increase their score and they proposed what to do:

*I have to observe people carefully.*

*I should be willing to ask, talking, comforting, and sharing with people.*

*I should sympathize more with people.*

*In my opinion, each student is different and each individual school to Recognize emotions Empathy and help them get a learning environment with good correlation (with teachers, friends,...). The children will understand their own feelings and the feelings of those around them. From there, you understand the differences of each person, said open to receive people, expressed sympathy for others and for their own...*

### **Students' Interest in Learning Social and Emotional Skills**

Active pedagogy has been used in these classes. Students gave definition of empathy according to their own point of view and experiences. They had

opportunities to confront different points of view, to discuss how to take others' perspective, to share their true story. Students appreciated activities of sharing their own story about empathy. One student said:

*I like very much the moment that we shared our stories. It was fun and helped us to understand each other.*

The personalized questions and the true story or real situation mentioned in sessions have really affected students. They were motivated to tell their stories, to show sympathy, and also to seek support from friends. One of teachers talked about her class when she taught empathy:

*The mention of a real situation they are experiencing drew their interest to share thoughts, to make questions. When students put themselves in the shoes of others, they have to understand why people made such action and open heart and mind to accept them by the very specific actions.*

As Erwin (2010) has emphasized in his book titled "Inspiring the Best in Student", positive and trusting relationship with and among students is the critical factor for success in SEL program. Class meetings and sharing circles were used throughout the program to build and improve the sense of community. Classroom with safety and opportunity for expression fosters the growth of respect, empathy and stimulates students sharing thoughts, feelings and experiences. The teacher confirmed this argument when a student in her class talked about her parents' quarrel.

*She said that she felt be safe and trusted teacher and classmates, and decided to share her situation.*

### **Challenges Facing Students and Teachers in Teaching and Learning Social Skills**

Students realized theirs difficulties and obstacles when they practice these skills. Some of them mentioned external obstacles; others talked about the internal ones. They said:

*People don't want to share thoughts and feelings.*

*It's difficult to empathize or sympathize if this is a person that you hate.*

*I want to be friend with them, but they teased me.*

*Stubborn! I know that if I do that, I will hurt them, but I want to follow my desire.*

Teachers recognized the students' difficulties in the developmental perspective:

*They have not yet taken the initiative to put themselves in the shoes of other to think and act.*

*Sometimes, they have difficulty to find solutions.*

In the other hand, teachers also faced difficulties in teaching SEL. They mentioned the time limited, lack of follow up after 7-weeks program, lack of cooperation and support from parents.

Besides the obstacles, school setting has shown conditions facilitating the implementation of SEL program. Real-life situations during the school day provide many opportunities to exhibit self-control, express feelings, or engage in problem solving. By exploiting teachable moments, teachers provide support when it is actually needed, enabling students to make considered choices about their behavior and making it less likely they will be overrun by strong feelings.

## **Discussion**

This study explored the challenges and opportunities of teaching social and emotional skills in the context of the summer program. The findings showed that i) Even in the 7-weeks summer program, school setting presented convenient opportunities to SEL intervention; ii) While implementing SEL, students and teachers identified difficulties and obstacles in teaching, learning and practicing social and emotional skills.

Teachers and students recognized the importance and benefits of social and emotional learning taught in school, especially for the middle school students.

Adolescence is the time that the individual moves from the state of childhood to enter the state of adulthood. This is the period that prepares a transition from a child who has to live in a family to the adult living in society (Grazzini, 1996). Social and emotional competences must be stimulated, developed and improved. Another characteristic of this stage is a growing capacity for reflectiveness. The ability to articulate "Who am I?" in terms of strengths and weaknesses is also included in this capacity. There is an interest in learning about one's own and other's thoughts and feelings.

Students had opportunities to share thoughts, express feelings, sympathy with peers. In school daily life, students were embedded in all social relationships. The daily situations are extremely challenging emotionally. How students could cope with peers' tease about their appearance, physical talent or mental competence? When one feel anxious, angry, or sad, his or her ability to solve problems or to control his/herself diminishes (Forgas, 1994 cited in Elias, 1997). This is good chance of social and emotional skills' practices guided and supported by teachers. Social and emotional skills must be strengthened through practice in the wide range of contexts. The results are consistent with research's findings that indicated the effectiveness of SEL incorporated into routine educational practice (Payton et al. 2008).

While students were convinced that social-emotional skills are important and helpful. They knew what they must act in the frustrated moment, but they could not choose the appropriate behaviors. Students who have shown improvements in their behavior may revert to earlier, more dominant habits when emotions are strong (Elias, 1997). Practicing SEL is most important; the skills will improve and become more fluent and polished. Encouraging this process within the confines of a summer program is challenging. Seven weeks for learning and practicing SEL were relatively short. The best way to increase and sustain SEL that students continue to practice these skills in other situations including families. Involving parents in the process of social and emotional learning is important. They need information about SEL to help their children practice at home and in the community: create "link letters" that highlight the content of SEL lessons and send them home, send reports, feedbacks on students' progress. A positive relationship with school motivates parents supporting education.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has expressed the challenges and opportunities experienced by students and teachers in social and emotional learning. This study was limited to the case of Ephata summer program. However, from the in-depth examination of this case, three recommendations were made for implementing SEL program in such summer program, or universal school setting:

- *Teacher training is key.* Training teachers about new concepts on SEL, familiarizing teachers with the materials by working with them ahead of time. Teacher training is the key element for SEL success. This process will help polish their skills and show areas that they should improve. They become, consciously or not, role models for students in social and emotional practices.
- *Practice, Practice and Practice.* Social and emotional competences are formed by daily practices. Finding frequent and regular opportunities and encouraging students practicing skills across settings and over time.
- *Family involvement is key for sustainable SEL success.* Finding ways of including families in SEL programming. Providing information related to the content of SEL lessons, sending feedbacks on students' performance, creating activities to involve families.

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