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FROM ISOLATION TO RECONNECTION: HOW SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING RESHAPES STUDENTS' SOCIAL SKILLS AND EMOTIONAL ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) on students' social interactions and emotional adaptation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research reveals that the pandemic has exacerbated students' anxiety, loneliness, and emotional regulation issues, while SEL has played a pivotal role in alleviating these emotional struggles and addressing the deficits in social skills. Employing a mixed-methods research design, which includes a literature review and empirical surveys, the study evaluates both the theoretical framework and practical outcomes of SEL. The findings indicate that SEL significantly enhances students' social awareness, interpersonal skills, and self-regulation abilities, making it crucial for the psychological well-being and social skill reconstruction of students in the post-pandemic era. The paper proposes strategies to foster social interactions, emotional support activities, and the active involvement of educators to facilitate students' social reconnection and emotional regulation. Moving forward, SEL is poised to become a key strategy in cultivating resilient, socially responsible, and emotionally intelligent future citizens.
KEYWORDS: *Social-Emotional Learning; Social Skills; Emotional Adaptation*

1.INTRODUCTION

The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to education systems, with the rapid shift to online learning severely limiting students' social interactions and significantly impacting their academic performance, mental health, and social skills. Research indicates that prolonged isolation has exacerbated issues related to anxiety, loneliness, and emotional regulation (Perry et al., 2021). Consequently, educational scholars and policymakers are urgently seeking effective strategies to alleviate emotional distress and bridge the gap in social skills. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), as a holistic educational approach, is widely regarded as a key strategy for restoring students' mental health and social competencies. Durlak et al. (2011) asserted that SEL programs not only significantly improve academic performance but also assist students in managing emotions, building healthy relationships, and enhancing social awareness. In the post-pandemic era, the importance of SEL is further amplified, particularly in helping students navigate psychological challenges (Zinsser et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, students' emotional regulation and social skills faced considerable challenges, with these issues being especially pronounced among adolescents (Belfield et al., 2020). SEL helps students restore emotional trust and social competence through emotional recognition, emotion regulation, and conflict management, thereby enhancing their adaptability in complex social situations. Furthermore, SEL has demonstrated potential in fostering cross-cultural understanding and cultivating a sense of social responsibility. Research shows that SEL supports students in adapting to multicultural environments and strengthens their global responsibility (Payton et al., 2008). UNESCO (2015) emphasizes that integrating SEL with global citizenship education broadens students' global perspectives and contributes to the achievement of sustainable development goals. The transformative SEL approach highlights social justice and culturally responsive teaching, fostering students' critical thinking and social engagement abilities (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2019).

Despite the significant impact of SEL, its implementation faces several challenges. Belfield et al. (2020) note that social isolation may hinder students' ability to rebuild trust and cooperation. Educators need to adopt scientifically grounded SEL strategies to facilitate students' smooth transition into healthy social environments. Overall, SEL is not only an effective tool for addressing mental health crises but also a key pathway for restoring and enhancing students' social competencies. As the educational landscape gradually recovers, the long-term implementation of SEL—especially through policy support and teacher training—will ensure its widespread adoption and quality improvement at all educational stages, ultimately embedding it into the educational system to cultivate future citizens with emotional intelligence and social responsibility.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) on students' social and emotional adaptation in the post-pandemic era. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a more comprehensive perspective. The study consists of three stages: literature review, empirical survey, and case analysis.

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2.1. Literature Review

In the literature review phase, the study systematically searched for and analyzed relevant academic literature to construct the theoretical framework of SEL and assess its application in educational practice. The literature sources included international databases such as Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Keywords such as "Social-Emotional Learning," "Post-Pandemic Era," and "Student Adaptation" were used to identify the theoretical trajectory of SEL, evaluate its historical effectiveness, and identify gaps in existing research.

2.2. Empirical Survey

In the empirical survey phase, a cross-sectional research design was adopted, collecting data through online questionnaires and video interviews. The sample included middle and primary school students from various regions and types of schools to ensure the broad applicability of the findings.

Online Questionnaires

Two online questionnaires were designed—one for students and the other for teachers. The questionnaires addressed topics such as SEL awareness, implementation effectiveness, and personal experiences. The surveys were distributed via email and social media platforms to ensure participant anonymity.

Video Interviews

Semi-structured video interviews were conducted with selected school administrators and teachers to explore their views on SEL programs, challenges encountered during implementation, and suggestions for program improvement. The interview content was transcribed and analyzed for key themes and insights.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using R programming for statistical analysis, including frequency distribution, mean comparisons, and factor analysis. The transcribed interview texts were qualitatively analyzed using MAXQDA software to identify and code key themes.

2.3. Research Ethics

Throughout the research process, strict adherence to ethical guidelines was maintained. All data collection and analysis were conducted with the informed consent of participants, and the data were used solely for academic research purposes.

3. THE ROLE OF THE SEL FRAMEWORK IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ADAPTATION

In recent years, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has been widely adopted as an educational strategy to promote students' mental health, emotional adaptation, and social skills. In the post-pandemic era, the importance of the SEL framework has become even more pronounced. This section explores the critical role of SEL in students' emotional adaptation and the rebuilding of social competencies, illustrating its positive impact on students' overall development through both theoretical perspectives and practical case studies.

3.1. Core Dimensions of SEL

The SEL framework encompasses five core dimensions: social awareness, interpersonal skills, self-regulation, decision-making, and self-awareness. This paper focuses on the roles of social awareness, interpersonal skills, and self-regulation in emotional adaptation and the enhancement of social capabilities.

Social Awareness: This refers to the ability to perceive others' emotions and needs, forming the foundation for empathy. In the post-pandemic era, students need to rebuild emotional connections with others and adapt to diverse social contexts (Payton et al., 2008). Social awareness helps students recognize others' emotions, alleviate social isolation, and strengthen group cohesion (Zinsser et al., 2020).

Interpersonal Skills: These include communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork. The pandemic reduced face-to-face interactions, leading to a regression in students' social abilities (Jones et al., 2017). SEL programs, through group collaboration and emotional support training, help students regain trust and address social challenges (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Self-Regulation: This refers to the ability to manage emotions and behaviors. Emotional fluctuations caused by the pandemic have posed significant challenges for students in terms of self-regulation (Zinsser et al., 2020). Through SEL, students can enhance their emotional regulation skills, cope with emotional fluctuations, and maintain psychological resilience.

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3.2. Theoretical Support: CASEL Framework and Psychological Theories

The effectiveness of SEL is supported by various psychological theories. The CASEL framework proposes that the five dimensions of SEL are crucial to students' long-term success, providing tools to face challenges across academic stages (CASEL, 2020). Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory emphasizes the ability to recognize and manage emotions, aligning with the core objectives of SEL, particularly in helping students cope with complex emotional fluctuations in the post-pandemic era (Goleman, 1995). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters positive emotional and social behaviors, with SEL helping students rebuild a sense of belonging to enhance their emotional adaptation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

3.3. Practical Cases: SEL Assisting Students in Overcoming Social Barriers and Emotional Challenges

In practice, numerous schools and educational programs have successfully applied the SEL framework to help students overcome social barriers and restore emotional adaptation. A prominent example is a middle school in the United States, which implemented a post-pandemic reintegration plan. This plan combined social skills training with emotional regulation courses, helping students adapt quickly to campus life. The course content included group collaboration, emotional support lessons, and social interaction training, which not only facilitated students in regaining trust but also enhanced their collective living abilities. A study by Greenberg et al. (2017) revealed that students participating in the SEL program showed significant improvements in social interaction and emotional regulation, particularly excelling in self-control and emotional recognition.

Another insightful case comes from a school in Finland, where activities such as "emotional diaries" and "emotional role-playing" were used to strengthen students' empathy and collaboration skills. Through these extracurricular activities, students not only improved their self-regulation and emotional recognition abilities but also exhibited stronger empathy and teamwork. Durlak et al. (2011) noted that these activities were particularly effective in helping students cope with feelings of social isolation during the pandemic. Moreover, teachers played a crucial role in this process by providing ongoing guidance and feedback, helping students restore their confidence and rebuild trust and collective consciousness with peers. Research also indicates that this emotional support not only enhanced students' emotional adaptation but also strengthened their sense of social participation in multicultural environments.

These practical cases demonstrate that SEL not only effectively restores students' social skills and emotional adaptation but also helps them regain psychological resilience and emotional stability through carefully designed activities. By combining both in-class and extracurricular approaches, SEL provides comprehensive support, enabling students to better face the emotional and social challenges of the post-pandemic era.

4. SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR MOVING FROM ISOLATION TO RECONNECTION

In the post-pandemic era, students face unprecedented challenges in social and emotional adaptation. Prolonged social isolation and uncertainty have intensified emotional distress, leading to profound social barriers. Educators need to adopt a variety of strategies to help students restore psychological and social balance. This section explores three key strategies: promoting social interaction, conducting emotional support activities, and leveraging the positive role of teachers.

4.1. Promoting Social Interaction: Group Projects, Collaborative Learning, and Social Activities

Social interaction is at the heart of emotional adaptation. In the post-pandemic era, educators must adopt diverse methods to restore students' social trust and sense of belonging.

Group Projects: Collaborative learning provides students with a crucial platform for interaction, especially for those who have experienced prolonged isolation. Research has shown that cooperative learning significantly enhances students' social skills and emotional adaptation (Johnson et al., 2007). For instance, Rohde et al. (2015) found that students involved in group cooperation showed substantial progress in teamwork and emotional regulation.

Collaborative Learning: Blended learning, combining both online and offline methods, has become an effective approach for many schools to restore social competencies (Baines et al., 2008). Through group discussions and online platforms, students establish deeper emotional connections, alleviating feelings of social isolation (Finkelstein et al., 2020).

Social Activities: Outdoor sports, group celebrations, and other activities offer students opportunities for face-to-face interaction, helping to alleviate the loneliness and anxiety caused by the pandemic (Perry et al., 2021). Participation in these activities helps restore students' social capabilities and emotional resilience (Zinsser et al., 2020).

4.2. Emotional Support Activities: Mindfulness Practices, Emotion Journals, and Peer Counseling

Emotional support activities assist students in regulating their emotions and enhancing emotional awareness, providing effective

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coping strategies for post-pandemic challenges.

Mindfulness Practices: Mindfulness meditation reduces anxiety and depression, particularly enhancing students' emotional management in times of social uncertainty (Zenner et al., 2014). Studies show that mindfulness training improves students' self-regulation and emotional stability (González et al., 2016).

Emotion Journals: Emotion journals help students record emotional fluctuations and identify coping strategies, promoting emotional recovery and social adaptation (Harris et al., 2016). By writing, students gain clearer insights into their emotional responses and take effective action (Wilkins & Ginsburg, 2020).

Peer Counseling: Peer counseling strengthens students' emotional support networks, enhancing their social skills and emotional intelligence (Gartner et al., 2018). Research indicates that peer counseling is particularly effective in improving emotional adaptation, especially in areas such as emotional expression and communication skills (Levy et al., 2019).

4.3. The Role of Teachers: Using SEL Tools to Support Social Rebuilding and Emotional Regulation

Teachers play a pivotal role in students' social reconstruction and emotional regulation. Beyond subject teaching, they should also serve as guides and supporters of emotional development.

Designing SEL Curriculum and Activities: Teachers should integrate SEL into daily teaching by using role-play and emotional discussions to enhance students' social awareness and self-regulation skills (CASEL, 2020). For example, organizing activities focused on emotion recognition and management helps students understand and regulate their emotions, promoting emotional recovery and social adaptation.

Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment: Teachers should create a safe and accepting classroom atmosphere. Research indicates that a respectful and inclusive environment helps students build positive social relationships and enhance emotional adaptation (Wentzel, 2016). By setting clear classroom rules and providing emotional support, teachers can help students rebuild trust and restore social abilities.

Through these strategies, educators can effectively promote students' social reconstruction and emotional adaptation, supporting their recovery of healthy psychological and social states in the post-pandemic era.

5. FUTURE PROSPECTS

In recent years, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has gradually become a core element of global educational systems, with its significance further highlighted in the wake of the pandemic. COVID-19 not only transformed the learning environment but also impacted students' emotional health and social abilities, prompting educators to reassess the core needs of student development. In the future, SEL will not only serve as a tool for crisis management but also as a key strategy for fostering future citizens equipped with resilience, social responsibility, and emotional intelligence.

5.1. The Necessity of Long-Term Implementation: Beyond Crisis Management, Shaping Future Citizens

The value of SEL extends far beyond immediate remedial measures. It equips students with the skills needed to face the complex challenges of the future, fostering citizens with emotional intelligence and a sense of social responsibility (Goleman, 1995). In the context of increasing globalization, technological innovation, and societal complexity, SEL helps students navigate change, develop empathy, and enhance teamwork abilities, thereby contributing to social progress (Elias et al., 2015).

5.2. Policy and Resource Support: Ensuring the Widespread and Sustainable Implementation of SEL

The success of SEL relies on systematic policy support and resource allocation. Numerous successful global cases demonstrate that policy backing is critical for the widespread promotion of SEL. For instance, the U.S. "Every Student Succeeds Act" provides a legal framework and action guidelines for SEL implementation (Belfield et al., 2015). Other countries can draw on these experiences, tailoring policies to meet local needs, and ensuring the extensive implementation of SEL in schools. Teacher training plays a pivotal role in SEL programs, with research showing that teachers skilled in SEL can significantly enhance students' emotional and social abilities, as well as improve the classroom atmosphere (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Equitable distribution of educational resources is particularly important, especially in resource-scarce regions, where financial support and technological infrastructure are crucial to the sustainability of SEL programs (Jones et al., 2017).

6.CONCLUSION

The significance of Social-Emotional Learning has transcended the immediate need for post-pandemic recovery, evolving into a central strategy for cultivating future citizens. Through policy support, resource guarantees, and global collaboration, SEL not only

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provides students with tools for emotional regulation and platforms for social development but also injects lasting momentum into global educational reforms. In the future, as education systems continue to evolve, SEL will play an increasingly crucial role in shaping global citizens and building harmonious societies.

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