



Integration of Social Emotional Learning Competencies in Teaching and Learning: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

The integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies into teaching and learning practices holds significant promise for fostering holistic student development, particularly within the unique socio-cultural context of Nepali schools. This narrative inquiry delves into the lived experiences of educators in Nepal as they navigate the complexities of embedding SEL competencies into their daily classroom routines. Through in-depth interviews and reflective journal, this study aims to capture the authentic voices and professional journeys of basic level teachers. It explores how these educators interpret, adapt, and implement SEL frameworks, considering local cultural values, pedagogical traditions, and resource availability. The research has illuminated the successes achieved in promoting students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The findings posit that effective SEL integration in Nepal is a dynamic, iterative process requiring context-specific professional development, collaborative support networks among educators, and a broader systemic commitment to valuing emotional intelligence alongside academic achievement. The narratives generated has offer invaluable insights for Nepali educators, policymakers, and educational researchers striving to cultivate more empathetic, resilient, and socially competent future generations.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Lived Experiences, Student Well-being, Empathy, School Climate

Setting the Scene

In Nepal, where traditional education has historically prioritized academic achievement, the holistic development of students through Social Emotional Learning (SEL)



is gaining increasing recognition. Integrating SEL competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making into the Nepali school curriculum presents a vital opportunity to address students' evolving needs. This narrative inquiry aims to explore the lived experiences of Nepali educators as they navigate the practicalities, challenges, and successes of embedding SEL into their teaching and learning. There is a growing consensus that alongside cognitive development, social and emotional skills are crucial for individual well-being, healthy relationships, and meaningful participation in society (Durlak et al., 2011). This recognition has led to a significant emphasis on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), defined as the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2020). While SEL has gained considerable traction in Western educational discourse, its integration into diverse cultural and educational landscapes, such as that of Nepal, warrants specific attention. Nepal's education system has historically been characterized by a strong emphasis on rote learning, examination-centric approaches, and the acquisition of factual knowledge (Sharma, 2008). This traditional paradigm, while instrumental in expanding access to education, has often overlooked the development of crucial non-cognitive skills, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal competencies that are vital for navigating personal and professional challenges in the 21st century (Gurung, 2017). The National Curriculum Framework of Nepal (2005) briefly mentions the importance of personality development and moral education, but a systematic and comprehensive integration of SEL competencies has remained largely nascent.

The socio-cultural context of Nepal further underscores the importance of SEL. The country's diverse ethnic groups, languages, and belief systems necessitate the development of empathy, cultural understanding, and conflict resolution skills among students from an early age (Acharya, 2019). Moreover, Nepal has experienced significant socio-political transformations, including a decade-long conflict and ongoing political transitions, which have undoubtedly impacted the mental health and well-being of its youth (UNICEF Nepal, 2014). Students often grapple with stressors related to poverty, migration, and the lingering effects of the 2015 earthquakes, making the cultivation of resilience, self-regulation, and supportive relationships more critical than ever before (Shrestha & Subedi, 2016). While there is a burgeoning global body of research affirming the positive impact of SEL on academic achievement, prosocial behavior, and reduced emotional distress (Payton et al., 2008), the empirical evidence within the Nepali context is limited. Existing studies largely focus on broad educational reforms or specific interventions, rather than a deep exploration of how SEL is practically integrated into daily teaching and learning (Bhattarai, 2020). Teachers are the frontline implementers of any educational reform, and their understanding, belief, and capacity are paramount for successful integration (Fullan, 2016). In Nepal, teachers often operate in challenging environments with limited professional development opportunities tailored to modern pedagogical approaches (Nepal Ministry of Education, 2015).



Therefore, understanding their narratives regarding SEL integration is crucial for developing contextually relevant and effective professional development programs and policy recommendations. This narrative inquiry aims to fill this critical gap by exploring the nuanced experiences of Nepali teachers, providing a rich, qualitative understanding of how SEL competencies are perceived, interpreted, and integrated into the teaching-learning process within the unique realities of Nepali schools.

Research Questions

1. How do Nepali Basic school teachers perceive and make meaning of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies within their daily teaching and learning practices?
2. What strategies and approaches do Nepali Basic school teachers employ to integrate SEL competencies into their existing curriculum and classroom activities, and what challenges do they encounter in this process?

Literature Review

The global educational landscape has increasingly recognized the pivotal role of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in fostering holistic student development (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL encompasses the acquisition of competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which are deemed essential for navigating life's complexities and contributing positively to society (CASEL, 2020). In Nepal, the traditional education system has historically prioritized cognitive and academic achievement, often through rote memorization and examination-centric approaches (Sharma, 2008). Despite this conventional focus, there is a growing awareness within the Nepali educational discourse regarding the importance of broader life skills and values education.

The National Curriculum Framework of Nepal (2005) alludes to the development of personal and social qualities, and more recent initiatives by organizations like UNICEF Nepal have begun piloting SEL programs in some schools, demonstrating a nascent shift towards a more holistic educational paradigm (UNICEF Nepal, 2023). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in basic level schools in Nepal is increasingly being recognized as a vital part of holistic education rather than a separate subject. Teachers, like the Basic implementers of curriculum, face numerous challenges. These include a lack of specific training in SEL pedagogy, limited resources, and the persistent pressure to adhere to a content-heavy curriculum (Giri, 2024). This lived experiences, perceptions, and the meaning they ascribe to their efforts in fostering social and emotional skills in their classrooms. The prevailing traditional pedagogical approaches in many Nepali schools may not inherently support the interactive and experiential methods crucial for effective SEL development (Subedi, 2025). By capturing these personal stories, this study aims to provide rich, context-specific insights that can inform more effective and culturally responsive SEL policies and professional development initiatives in Nepal.

Conceptual/Thematic Review

The integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Nepali Basic schools presents several thematic areas of concern and investigation. Firstly, there is a clear global imperative for SEL, with extensive research highlighting its benefits for student well-being and academic



success (Durlak et al., 2011). However, this global push meets the Nepali educational reality, which has historically emphasized academic achievement and rote learning, often sidelining holistic development (Sharma, 2008). While national frameworks acknowledge broader skills, systematic SEL integration is often rudimentary.

Finally, the contextual relevance and pedagogical fit of SEL remain crucial. The effectiveness of SEL in Nepali Basic schools depends on adapting universal principles to local socio-cultural nuances and finding innovative ways to blend SEL within existing classroom practices, moving beyond traditional didactic approaches.

Theoretical Review

The integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies in Nepali Basic schools can be understood through key developmental and learning theories. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) provides a foundational lens, positing that children acquire social and emotional skills largely through observation, imitation, and modeling. In the Basic school context, this theory highlights the critical role of teachers as significant role models and the importance of a classroom environment that fosters positive peer interactions.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) offers a comprehensive framework to understand the multi-layered influences on a child's social and emotional development. In Nepal, this theory underscores how factors beyond the classroom, such as family dynamics, community support, and broader socio-cultural norms, profoundly impact the effectiveness of SEL integration. This narrative inquiry aims to explore how these theoretical constructs manifest in the lived experiences of Nepali Basic teachers.

Empirical Review

Empirical research specifically detailing the lived experiences and integration strategies of Basic level teachers regarding Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies in Nepal remains nascent. While international studies consistently demonstrate positive outcomes of SEL interventions on academic performance, prosocial behavior, and mental well-being (Durlak et al., 2011), direct empirical evidence from the Nepali Basic school context is limited. Existing empirical insights often highlight the challenges and initial stages of SEL integration. Studies on broader value-based education in Nepal, such as Subedi (2025), reveal that educators face practical difficulties in integrating non-cognitive skills due to traditional pedagogical approaches and resource constraints. This narrative inquiry aims to contribute empirical data by providing rich, qualitative accounts from teachers themselves, offering a direct perspective often missing in the current literature.

Policies Review

While the explicit integration of comprehensive Social Emotional Learning (SEL) policies in Nepali Basic education is still evolving, existing national frameworks offer some foundational, albeit often implicit, support. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of Nepal (2005) emphasizes the development of personality, moral values, and life skills, which indirectly align with SEL competencies.

Consequently, teachers often operate without clear policy directives regarding how to embed SEL effectively into their daily teaching and learning. Without such clear and



comprehensive policy directives, SEL implementation in Nepali Basic schools' risks remain fragmented and reliant on individual teacher initiative rather than systemic support.

Research Gap

While global literature affirms SEL's importance and Nepali policies allude to holistic development, a significant research gap exists in understanding the lived experiences and practical strategies of Basic level teachers regarding SEL integration in Nepal. Existing studies often lack in-depth quantitative data and qualitative information from educators' perspectives, failing to capture the nuanced how and why behind their SEL efforts. This study aims to fill this gap by providing rich, narrative accounts of how Nepali Basic teachers perceive, adapt, and implement SEL, highlighting the challenges and successes within their unique classroom contexts.

Methodology

Philosophical Foundation

This narrative inquiry is fundamentally grounded in subjective form which posits that reality is socially co-constructed and understood through lived experiences in qualitative research providing rich, context-specific insights into their subjective realities. This worldview posits that reality is not an objective, singular truth, but rather a subjective and socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by individuals' experiences, perceptions, and interactions (Crotty, 1998). In the context of integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Nepali Basic schools, this means acknowledging that teachers' understanding and implementation of SEL are not universal or predefined. The research is informed by the above analysis by emphasizing that SEL integration is a subjective, socially constructed reality, rooted in educators' personal experiences and beliefs. This approach, driven by narrative inquiry, aims to understand these lived realities and the nuanced ways SEL is integrated, particularly within the Nepali context.

Research Paradigm

The research paper "Integration of Social Emotional Learning Competencies in Teaching and Learning: A Narrative Inquiry" within the Basic level Nepali context is underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, acknowledging that reality concerning SEL integration is subjective and socially constructed through individual experiences, aiming for an in-depth understanding of their lived realities rather than objective truths. Methodologically, narrative inquiry employed, using in-depth semi-structured interviews and observations to gather rich stories.

Selection of Research Site, Participants and data collection process

The research has conducted in two Basic schools located within the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. These schools purposively selected to represent varying contexts, such as a community-managed school and a private school, to capture diverse experiences regarding resource availability, administrative support, and teacher autonomy. Permission sought from school principals and relevant educational authorities prior to initiating the research activities. This strategic selection aims to provide a broader understanding of SEL integration across different Basic school settings in the Nepali context.



Participants included Basic level teachers (grades 1-8) who demonstrated some engagement with or interest in integrating SEL competencies into their teaching. A criterion-based purposive sampling method employed, ensuring participants are heading to share their personal experiences and stories in depth. Initial contact made through school administration, followed by individual invitations and clear explanations of the study's purpose, ethical considerations, and their voluntary participation rights. Emphasis placed on recruiting teachers who can provide rich, reflective narratives.

Data collected through multiple in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews conducted over a period of several months. These interviews encourage teachers to share their personal journeys, reflections, and experiences related to SEL integration. Additionally, reflective journals maintained by participants serve as a supplementary data source, providing ongoing insights into their thoughts, feelings, and classroom practices. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and field notes maintained to capture observational details and contextual information.

Data Analysis, Meaning Making, Findings and Discussion

Data Analysis and Meaning Making:

The narratives of Nepali Basic school teachers revealed three salient themes regarding SEL integration evolving personal understanding, adaptive pedagogical strategies, and perceived shifts in student well-being. Teachers initially perceived SEL broadly as moral education but through practice, developed a nuanced understanding of its role in fostering self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. Despite limited formal training and curriculum rigidity, many teachers ingeniously adapted existing resources, utilizing storytelling, daily routines, and collaborative activities to embed SEL, often driven by a personal commitment to holistic child development. They frequently observed marked improvements in students' conflict resolution, classroom cooperation, and overall emotional expression.

Findings and Discussion:

These findings underscore the resilience and ingenuity of Nepali educators, in the absence of comprehensive top-down support, are actively shaping their pedagogical approaches. The observed positive impacts on student well-being corroborate global Social Emotional Learning (SEL) research, emphasizing the transformative potential of these competencies even in resource-constrained environments. The reliance on individual teacher initiative also highlights a major need for systemic support, including targeted professional development and contextually relevant curriculum guidelines. The narratives collectively suggest that while teachers are making significant strides, sustained and scalable SEL integration necessitates a policy framework that acknowledges and empowers their lived experiences.

Teacher Identity and Emotional Labor

In Social Emotional Learning (SEL), teachers' identities and emotional labor are deeply intertwined. Teacher identity - their beliefs, values, and sense of self shapes, how they approach SEL, influencing the classroom environment and their relationships with students. The



emotional labor required to teach SEL involves managing their own feelings while simultaneously empathizing with and responding to students' emotional needs.

Hello sir, "What's a simple activity you can do in your classroom to help students understand and label different emotions?"

Ram Adhikari; Basic level teacher of Dhading, "I use an Emotions Check-In Chart which is a quick and effective way to help children identify their feelings at the start of the day. My identity is tied to creating a safe space where children feel valued and eager to learn. It's not just about lessons; it's about building trust."

"That sounds like a lot of emotional labor. Can you give an example of how you manage that, especially with young children?"

Ram Adhikari; "Absolutely. When a child is upset as missing their parents, I can't just ignore it. I sit with them, listen, and validate their feelings. It's emotionally demanding, requiring patience and empathy, even when I am tired. Sometimes, it means putting my own feelings aside to prioritize theirs, so they feel secure enough to engage with learning." In this way students get emotional support in school.

Student Voice and Agency in SEL Development

In school, student voice in SEL refers students to a chance of expressing their thoughts and feelings about what they are learning and how they are feeling. Student agency is the ability for them to act on these feelings. It highlights how students experience, understand, and apply SEL competencies, examining moments where they demonstrate agency in their emotional regulation, relationship building and responsible decision-making.

"How do you incorporate student voice and agency with your Basic level students?"

Nirmala Thapa Magar; Class 5 teacher at Kathmandu, " Instead of the teacher setting all the rules for a peace corner I suggest students discuss and decide together what behaviors and activities are allowed in that space. They have a voice in creating rules and the agency to follow a system they helped build, which promotes a sense of shared responsibility. Mostly I start a story with a problem, like - A little boy lost his favorite toy in the forest, students then take turns suggesting how the boy should solve the problem. This gives each child a voice to contribute their ideas and develop agency by making decisions for the character, which builds responsible decision-making skills. In resolving small conflicts, I guide them to brainstorm solutions, rather than dictating. For instance, if toys are fought over, they propose sharing schedules. It empowers them to own their social-emotional growth."

Navigating Institutional Contexts and Systemic Barriers

Navigating institutional contexts and systemic barriers in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is crucial for successful implementation. It helps to address the requirements of a holistic and systemic approach. It uncovered narratives of teachers or students encountering challenges or successes related to curriculum mandates, administrative support, resource availability or standardized testing pressures that impact the depth and authenticity of SEL practices.

"How do you navigate the institutional contexts and systemic barriers that often arise?"



Seema Sharma; as a basic level teacher of Lalitpur, "It's a constant challenge. Resources are often scarce; sometimes even basic teaching materials are limited. We make and do with what we have local resources, using creativity. Then there are rigid curriculum mandates that don't always align with students' diverse needs. We adapt lessons, using local examples, but it's hard to truly individualize instruction with large class sizes.

"How about administrative support or policy implementation?"

Seema Sharma, "That varies - sometimes policies come top-down without adequate training or understanding of ground realities. We try to provide feedback, but often, the systemic inertia is strong. Collaboration with colleagues is our key through which we share strategies to cope with the limitations and support each other through the daily hurdles. Administrators must create a safe, supportive, and collaborative climate for teachers and students. This includes protecting time for SEL training, encouraging open dialogue and creating a culture of trust. Administrators should ensure that teachers have the necessary resources, including curriculum materials, professional development, time to collaborate and further plans."

Transformative Moments

This theme identifies wow and win-win moments within the narratives where teachers, students, or even parents experienced a significant shift in their understanding or approach to SEL. These moments could be triggered by specific events, interactions, or insights that led to profound changes in teaching methods or learning behaviors.

"Good morning, maam. Could you share a transformative moment you have witnessed in social-emotional learning with your class 4 students?"

Kajal Jha, A teacher of class 4, Lalitpur, "Namaste! Sir Absolutely, there is a girl with very shy in nature. During our kindness circle activity, where a student shared compliments, specifically mentioned her beautiful drawings. Her eyes lit up. The next day, she voluntarily answers confidently for the first time."

"That's wonderful! What made that moment transformative for her?"

Kajal Jha, "It was the validation. She saw her peers valuing her contribution, even a quiet one. That single moment of recognition built her confidence significantly, breaking through her shyness. It showed how much a small act of social connection can truly empower a child's emotional well-being."

Relational Dynamics

This emphasizes the central role of relationships in fostering SEL. It would explore narratives illustrating how strong teacher-student bonds, peer interactions, and connections with the wider community, families and local organizations facilitate or hinder the development and application of social-emotional competencies in various learning environments.

"Good morning, sir. How do relational dynamics play out in your classroom, and why are they important to you?"

Sabadik Rai, class 7 basic level teacher of Kathmandu, "Good morning too sir, Relational dynamic is very important for teachers and students with my students, it's about building trust. If they don't feel a strong, caring connection with me, they won't open or feel



safe to make mistakes. I try to listen genuinely, celebrate their small victories, and show empathy when they're struggling, even with personal issues."

"And what about the dynamics among the students themselves?"

Sabadik Rai, "That's equally vital. We foster peer support through group activities and by explicitly teaching kindness and respect. For instance, if someone is left out during a game, we gently guide others to include them. It's not just about academics; it's about helping them learn to navigate friendships, resolve minor conflicts, and understand each other's feelings. When those relationships are positive, the whole classroom climate transforms – it becomes a supportive, joyful space where real learning happens."

Conclusion

This narrative inquiry into the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies in teaching and learning reveals a profound truth; effective SEL is not merely about implementing a curriculum, but about the deep personal and relational experiences of educators and students. Major insights underscore that successful integration stems from teachers' authentic belief in SEL's transformative power, their capacity to model these competencies, and their commitment to fostering psychologically safe and inclusive classroom environments. The collected narratives vividly illustrate how individual teachers' journeys, shaped by their personal backgrounds and professional growth, create unique pathways for weaving SEL into the fabric of daily educational practices.

The findings hold particular importance for schools in Nepal, where traditional education often prioritizes academic metrics over holistic development. Integrating SEL can equip Nepali students with crucial life skills like self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making, which are vital for navigating personal challenges, societal expectations, and even the impacts of socio-political and geographical stressors. By valuing and nurturing emotional literacy, empathy, and resilience, schools can contribute significantly to students' overall well-being, academic engagement, and their ability to thrive as compassionate and capable individuals within their communities and beyond.

Implications

The qualitative approach of this narrative inquiry offers significant implications for Basic level education in Nepal. For teachers and school leaders, the study's findings validate the existing, often unrecognized, efforts of educators who are actively integrating SEL despite systemic constraints. By articulating their lived experiences and innovative strategies, the research provides practical, context-specific approaches that can be shared among peers, fostering a sense of collective efficacy. It also highlights specific areas where teachers require additional support, such as targeted professional development and resources, enabling school leadership to implement more effective support systems. Understanding teachers' real-world challenges can inform policies that allocate appropriate resources, facilitate collaborative learning environments, and reduce the burden of rigid academic pressures, thereby ensuring SEL is genuinely embedded rather than being an additional burden.



Hence, the implications extend to teacher training institutions, administrative support and future research. The insights gained from teachers' perspectives can directly inform the design of pre-service and in-service training programs, making them more practical and responsive to the actual needs of educators in Nepali classrooms. For researchers, this qualitative inquiry opens avenues for further investigation, including larger-scale quantitative studies to assess the broader impact of SEL, longitudinal studies, on its long-term effects, policy making and explorations of student perspectives on their social and emotional learning experiences which build high self-esteem and better career.

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