



Embedding Social Emotional Learning Core Content into Life-Skills Instruction for Vietnamese Primary Students

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ABSTRACT Social-emotional education plays an important role in helping students develop essential life-skills that go beyond academics. Over the last decade, research literature on social-emotional learning and life-skills in Vietnam has begun to develop. This paper provides an overview of the major trends in studying, solving and evaluating the relationship between social-emotional learning and life-skills education in Vietnam. In addition, the paper also evaluates the challenges of linking this relationship. The researcher also created models that embed each of the five competencies of social and emotional learning into living skills programs for Vietnamese primary students. The results suggested that the teachers were all aware of the challenges when embedding SEL in classrooms in primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process in which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and necessary skills in order to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Elias et al. 1997). SEL programs focus on the development of a whole set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL 2005). These skills mediate better academic performance, healthy behaviors, positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and citizenship (Greenberg 2004; Greenberg et al. 2001; Greenberg et al. 2003). At the primary-school level, SEL enables students to understand themselves and control their emotions, set goals in life as well as study and find their way to accomplish them, have respect and sympathy for others, form and keep positive relationships, and make responsible and ethical decisions (CASEL 2013). Huang et al. (2018) found that Vietnamese children's self-control (self-management) ability of fourth graders had higher scores than the second and the sixth graders. A meta-analysis consisting of 213 rigorous studies and over 270,000 students proved that students who experienced SEL programs had a better performance than those who did not. A total of 120 of the 213 stud-

ies (56%) in the meta-analysis were carried out particularly at the primary (k-5) level. There was an increase of eleven percent in academic achievement, and similar significant improvements in conduct and discipline, prosocially behavior, and/or emotional hardship (Durlak et al. 2011). However, there has been only one study published in this field in Vietnam. These results indicate that students and teachers have recognized the importance and usefulness of social-emotional learning taught in school settings (Hoang and Vu 2016).

There is a direct correlation between integrating SEL and "life-skills" into the existing curriculum and improving student outcomes. SEL is a planned approach to life-skills development (Elias 1997a). Integrating SEL into school-wide teaching and learning practices enables the students to learn, practice and model essential personal life-skills that contribute to academic, vocational, and personal success (Elias 1997b). Elias and Weissberg (2000) found that curriculum-based teaching promotes students' social competence and life-skills with the aim of preventing violence, substance abuse, and behavior-related problem. SEL is a natural extension of efforts within the fields of education to promote effective life-skills training (Merrell 2002).

Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the challenges of linking the relationship between social-emotional learning and life-skills

education in Vietnam and also provide an overview of the major trends in studying, solving and evaluating this relationship.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Social and Emotional Learning

In order to perform well in school as well as higher education and succeed in their careers, children need to have social, emotional, and academic abilities. SEL competencies of students are formed through policies, programs, and practices that enhance children's and adults' capacities to understand themselves and control their emotions, set goals in life as well as study and find their way to accomplish them, have respect and sympathy for others, form and keep positive relationships, and make responsible and ethical decisions (Durlak 2015; Weissberg et al. 2015).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five inter-connected factors of cognitive, active, and behavioral competencies that make up social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL 2005). Through thorough guidance, SEL skills may be taught, demonstrated, practiced, and applied to diverse situations so that students practice and use them on a daily basis as part of their repertoire of behaviors (Weissberg et al. 1989). SEL curricula can not only be integrated into daily school programs but also in after-school programs.

According to Hoang and Vu (2016), semi-structured interviews were carried out with middle school students and teachers participated in the Ephrata Summer Program in Ho Chi Minh city. The purpose of the Ephrata education program was to promote SEL, life-skills and STEM competence in primary and secondary school students. The 7-week program for social and emotional learning included 35-40 lessons per grade. Each lesson lasted 40 minutes. Lessons followed a common structure - 5E model (Engage, Explore, Explain, Extend and Evaluate). The "explain and extend" steps had the "define, personalize and challenge" format. There were "define questions", "personalize questions", and "challenging questions". Lessons were divided into five units. The first unit was about freedom, choice, and responsibility. The second unit

helped students to understand thoughts and perceptions. The third unit taught children about emotions, body signals, and actions. The fourth educated students about choosing values, choosing goals and actions, mindful listening, empathy, and being assertive. The fifth unit included lessons for character education such as compassion and acceptance, honesty, grit, self-control, gratitude, curiosity. Those character lessons were distributed among seven weeks. The program also had mindfulness-based activities and visualization. They were integrated throughout the course. Lessons of life-skills, for example, team building or group works, offered students "great" opportunities to practice what they had acquired from SEL. Although this was a 7-week summer program, it could easily be integrated into the standard curriculum. In this study, they focused on studying emotion and empathy, which were the two important factors of SEL. The results indicated that students and teachers had recognized the importance and usefulness of social-emotional learning in school settings. However, the student's evaluation of their empathy was relatively low. They realized that there were both objective and subjective factors causing difficulties and obstacles. However, most students could propose their own ways to overcome it (Hoang and Vu 2016).

According to Addimando et al. (2018), the project Enhancing social and emotional education in Vietnam (SEL-Viet) was developed by a team of researchers and lecturers of the Department of Education and Learning, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (DFA/SUPSI) and the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Education of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMUE) in collaboration with the Youth Development Corporation (YDC), Vietnam. The project was defined as a seed money project and was approved by the Cooperation and Development Center of the École Polytechnique Fédérale of Lausanne (EPFL) and the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) among its program "Bilateral research collaboration with the Asia Pacific region 2013-2016". The SEL-Viet Project started on the 1st of December 2016 for the duration of 8 months after a two year period of informal meetings/contacts and preparation between the parts. The Swiss partner was considered the leading house of the project (Addimando et al. 2018).

Life Skills Instruction in Vietnam

The term “life-skills” has become popular in the fields of health, education and social policy, but remained an incomplete and widely accepted definition. It is a combination of personalities and social skills in real life. However, it is an unpleasant experience because it is quite hard and controversial to determine which skills are suitable and essential for life. As the WHO states: “skills that can be said to be life-skills are innumerable, and the nature and definition of life-skills are likely to differ across cultures and settings (WHO 1997).

According to The Decision No. 2994/QĐ-BGDĐT July 20, 2010, of Ministry of Education and Training on the training plans, life-skills education has been implemented in some subjects and educational activities at all levels, following the general trend like in many countries around the world. In Vietnam, this program is conducted to improve the quality of education for the young generation, to meet the demand of international standard and the need for the development of learners themselves. During the past few years, the demand for life-skills training is increasing at high speed in Vietnam. The term “life-skills” has become more popular and nationwide. Education has been gradually changing the direction from mainly providing students with the knowledge to equipping them with necessary competencies, encouraging active, self-disciplined, initiative and creative learners; enhancing teamwork, enabling students to apply knowledge into real-life situations; creating the joyful and exciting learning environment for students. Vietnamese psychologists say these programs can empower the children’s ability to develop their personalities, recognize the potential in each child, and develop other life-skills such as goal setting, presentation skill, communication skill, or help them learn moral lessons, and even how to use household devices such as computers or telephones. Parents gradually turn their attention from English or music lessons to life-skills classes (Huynh 2009; Tran and Nguyen 2013).

Primary Education has successfully run the training courses in life-skills education in primary schools. Life-skills education is integrated into primary school subjects in order to achieve the goal of equipping students with the knowledge, values, attitudes and appropriate skills and

to create opportunities for students to do the rights and duties of citizens and fully develop physical, intellectual, spiritual and moral abilities. Training courses in life-skills education in primary schools are divided into four classes according to four subjects: Vietnamese, Ethics, Natural Science and Society. After two days of training, the trainers require subject teachers to integrate life-skills education in core subjects at primary school, outdoor activities and other social activities. After training at the provincial level, the core staff of teachers will develop training materials for schools in the cities.

Embedding SEL Core Content into Life-Skills Instruction

Among all CASEL’s program reviews from preschool to high school, and of all the programs they have reviewed, they have found that evidence-based SEL programs use one or more of the following four approaches to promote social and emotional competence across the five core competency clusters (Dusenbury et al. 2015). CASEL has identified four general approaches to SEL instruction in the classroom. Firstly, it is the free-standing lesson which provides step-by-step instructions to teach students’ SEL competencies. Secondly, teaching practices are conducted in the classrooms and schools to design a training program supporting SEL. The third is to integrate SEL skill instruction, general teaching practices, or both of them, as part of a broader academic curriculum. The fourth is to establish school-wide organizational structures and policies, as well as leadership, to support SEL system.

The researcher proposes a strategic approach to SEL for Vietnam’s primary students. SEL programme for primary has adopted the different approach. Such approaches may often move from an out-of-school approach to an approach integrated into whole-school practice, though this path is not necessarily linear. The research is based on previous research (LeVesseur 2015; Lieber et al. 2017; Wood 2017) to combine a life-skills subject with a core competency of SEL in this approach. Wood (2017) created a curriculum that embedded each of the five competencies of SEL into both morning meeting activities and literacy lessons. In the first approach, an integration of all five competencies of SEL into a life-skills subject, such as problem-solv-

ing, negotiation, eloquence. This approach is a mixture of a life-skills subject (for example, problem-solving) with five core competencies of SEL (for example, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making). Thereby, it allows Vietnamese primary students to use all of the five competencies of SEL in a life-skills subject. In the second approach, the five SEL core competencies will be taught with five life-skills subjects with the same name for Vietnamese primary students. This approach mixes a life-skills subject (for example, problem-solving) with a core competency of SEL (for example, responsible decision making), and thereby allows children to practically apply each skill and develop the same core competency of SEL. In the third approach, there will be an integration of social and emotional learning into life-skills subjects, such as problem-solving, negotiation, eloquence. This approach combines life-skills (for example, problem-solving) with one or more core competencies of SEL (for example, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making), which allows children to practically apply skills and develop one or more core competencies of SEL.

Barriers to Embedding SEL in Vietnamese Primary Schools

The convenience sampling method was used to recruit teachers who volunteered to help with the study and administer the survey. They completed questionnaire items related to the Barriers to embedding SEL in Vietnamese primary schools. The scale included ten items measuring barriers, based on the original scale from Buchanan et al. (2009). The survey instrument was distributed to 280 Vietnamese teachers of six primary schools located in two large Vietnam cities (Cần Thơ and Hồ Chí Minh), of which 250 questionnaires were returned, for an 89.29 percent return rate, which exceeded the thirty percent response rate most researchers had required for analysis (Dillman 2011). The sample of this study was drawn from 250 respondents who completed the survey instrument.

All participants were provided informed consent after receiving an explanation of the purpose of the research. The research was approved by the ethics committee of the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. There were more males

(56.8%) than females (43.2%) among the 250 Vietnamese primary teachers who were surveyed. A majority of the teachers had a bachelor's degree (48%), 33.2 percent had a postgraduate degree, and 18.8 percent had an associate's degree. 58.8 percent of respondents had 1-3 years of experience teaching in primary schools, 19.2 percent had 3-5 years of experience teaching in primary schools, 12.8 percent had 5-8 years of experience teaching in primary schools, and 9.2 percent of teachers had over eight years of experience teaching in primary schools. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants in the educational backgrounds by groups of teaching experience.

Table 1: Number of participants in the educational background by groups of teaching experience groups

Educational background	Teaching experience				Total
	1-3 years	3-5 years	5-8 years	Over 8 years	
Associate's degree	12	16	4	15	47
Bachelor's degree	86	22	8	4	120
Postgraduate degree	49	10	20	4	83

Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected. The average item means, average standard deviation were calculated for scale. These analyses were used to explore teachers' perceptions of barriers to embedding SEL in Vietnamese primary schools. Table 2 shows the teachers' perceptions of barriers to embedding SEL in Vietnamese primary schools.

Table 2 includes details of teachers' views on barriers to embedding SEL programs in their classrooms. When being asked to identify the most significant barriers to implementing an SEL program, teachers indicated that there is no school policy of implementing SEL in the classroom ($M=3.74$, $SD=0.66$), lack of facilities and equipment in school ($M=3.58$, $SD=0.75$), time limitations for implementing SEL in the classroom ($M=3.49$, $SD=0.71$), do not know how to embed SEL in teaching life-skills subjects ($M=3.46$, $SD=0.60$), pressure from other academic subjects ($M=3.40$, $SD=0.69$), do not find it essential to embed SEL in the classroom ($M=3.25$, $SD=0.77$), lack of ability to embed SEL in teaching life-skills subjects ($M=3.24$, $SD=0.72$), do not concern

Table 2: Teachers' perceptions of barriers to embedding SEL in Vietnamese primary schools

Barriers	Level												M	SD	Rank
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree						
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%					
Time limitations for embedding SEL in the classroom	7	2.8	3	1.2	108	43.2	124	49.6	8	3.2	3.49	0.71	3		
Pressure from other academic subjects	5	2.0	8	3.2	126	50.4	104	41.6	7	2.8	3.40	0.69	5		
There is no school policy of embedding SEL in the classroom	6	2.4	6	2.4	43	17.2	188	75.2	7	2.8	3.74	0.66	1		
Lack of facilities and equipment in school	9	3.6	6	2.4	74	29.6	153	61.2	8	3.2	3.58	0.75	2		
Students have no demand for acquiring SEL core content into life-skills subjects	9	3.6	128	51.2	102	40.8	0	0	11	4.4	2.50	0.76	10		
Students' parents think it is not necessary for their children to learn SEL	7	2.8	122	48.8	108	43.2	0	0	13	5.2	2.56	0.78	9		
They have no idea about SEL	4	1.6	143	57.2	77	30.8	23	9.2	3	1.2	2.51	0.73			
Do not know how to embed SEL in teaching life-skills subjects	1	0.4	4	1.6	132	52.8	106	42.4	7	2.8	3.46	0.60	4		
Lack of ability to embed SEL in teaching life-skills subjects	6	2.4	24	9.6	124	49.6	95	38.0	1	0.4	3.24	0.72	7		
Do not find it essential to embed SEL in the classroom	6	2.4	26	10.4	124	49.6	87	34.8	7	2.8	3.25	0.77	6		
Do not concern about embedding SEL in classroom	2	.8	118	47.2	106	42.4	17	6.8	7	2.8	2.64	0.74	8		

Note: M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation; n: Number in a sample

about embedding SEL in classroom ($M=2.64$, $SD=0.74$), students' parents think it is not necessary for their children to learn SEL ($M=2.56$, $SD=0.78$), and students have no demand for acquiring SEL core content into life-skills subjects ($M=2.50$, $SD=0.76$) were barriers.

Vietnamese education is based heavily on academic standards. At the individual aspect, schools pay attention to teaching intellectual knowledge. However, it is considered a shortcoming of education that only focuses only on student's academic and intellectual competencies but ignores all other aspects of their development. It is of great importance to encourage the full development of children. Education must be concerned with the development of every person's physical, intellectual, emotional, social,

creative and spiritual potential. Social and emotional education has been integrated into the curriculum of Early Childhood Education in Vietnam (Addimando et al. 2016). However, at the primary, secondary and high school, students only acquire social and emotional skills by themselves through the problematic situation in which they may manage or not solve the problems (Hoang and Vu 2016).

This paper proposes a strategic approach to social and emotional learning for Vietnam's primary students. These approaches are far more aligned with the aims of life-skills education. However, in terms of curriculum design and delivery, it is challenging, especially for developing countries with limited resources and professional capacity of teachers and school leaders.

As an example, in India, after years of promoting the integration of social and emotional learning and life-skills into core subjects, UNICEF found that many teachers were still not using training manuals in classrooms as they were too complex for the average teacher to use (UNICEF 2005). The main findings indicated that there are ten barriers to embedding SEL in Vietnamese primary schools. These findings showed that a lack of school policy of embedding SEL in the classroom is the biggest barrier to implementing SEL. Nearly half of the teachers agreed that time limitation is one barrier to implement SEL because there is no time available for lesson preparation and teaching SEL in the classroom. Encouragingly, over half of the teachers reported that their students are willing to use SEL in their classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study has reviewed the history of teaching SEL and life-skills recognized very recently in Vietnam. The researcher proposes strategic approach to SEL in Vietnam by integrating SEL core content into life-skills instruction. The teachers were all aware of the challenges when embedding SEL core content into life-skills instruction for Vietnamese primary students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this research are necessary for Vietnamese teachers to have a better understanding of Social Emotional Learning education. The researcher is hopeful that this research will stimulate similar investigations in an effort to rigorously continue to bridge the gap between research and practicing life-skills in Vietnam primary schools.

LIMITATIONS

There was limited research in this aspect in Vietnam and the results were based on descriptive statistics.

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