

The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning Programs on Middle School Student Mental Health: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract:

Middle school represents a pivotal developmental stage marked by rapid cognitive, social, and emotional changes, which can increase vulnerability to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral difficulties. This systematic literature review examines the effectiveness of universal Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in promoting mental health, resiliency, and adaptive coping among middle school students. Guided by the IMRAD framework, the review synthesizes recent empirical studies to explore how SEL core competencies self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making function as protective factors against psychological distress. Findings from multiple studies indicate that evidence-based SEL interventions consistently reduce internalizing and externalizing symptoms, enhance emotional regulation, and foster prosocial behavior. Programs incorporating explicit instruction, active skill practice, and sustained implementation demonstrate the strongest outcomes. Additionally, culturally responsive and developmentally tailored SEL programs further support students' socio-emotional growth. The review concludes that systematic integration of SEL into middle school curricula is a critical strategy for promoting mental well-being, building resilience, and creating positive learning environments. Future research should continue to investigate long-term effects and culturally adaptive SEL models to ensure all students benefit equitably.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning; Middle School Students; Mental Health; Resiliency; Emotional Distress

Introduction:

Early adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by rapid biological, cognitive, and social changes. During the middle school years, students encounter increasing academic demands alongside heightened sensitivity to peer relationships and social evaluation. These overlapping pressures place early adolescents at greater risk for mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral difficulties.

Despite these realities, many school systems have traditionally prioritized academic achievement over students' social and emotional development, often overlooking the role of emotional well-being in sustaining long-term educational success. In recent years, a growing body of research has emphasized the importance of holistic education that addresses both academic and psychosocial needs.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a central framework for supporting students' mental health within school settings. Defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL refers to the process through which individuals develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. For middle school students, these competencies are essential for managing emotional stressors, navigating peer dynamics, and adapting to increasing academic rigor.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that SEL programs are particularly effective during early adolescence, a period when social-cognitive skills are still forming. Classroom-based SEL interventions have been shown to reduce emotional distress and improve students' social-emotional functioning (Green et al., 2021).

Earlier program evaluations, such as Strong Kids and Strong Teens, similarly found improvements in students' social-emotional knowledge and reductions in internalizing symptoms, suggesting that structured SEL instruction can function as a preventive mental health strategy (Merrell et al., 2008).

Beyond mental health outcomes, SEL has also been linked to broader academic and behavioral benefits. A recent meta-analytic review by Zhao and Sang (2025) found that SEL programs contribute not only to improved emotional regulation but also to gains in academic achievement across elementary and middle school populations.

Longitudinal research further indicates that multiyear, universal SEL interventions produce sustained benefits, with program effectiveness influenced by both student characteristics and school context (Bierman et al., 2010). These findings highlight the interconnected nature of emotional well-being, behavior, and learning during early adolescence.

Given the expanding implementation of SEL initiatives, there is a need for systematic synthesis of evidence focusing specifically on middle school mental health outcomes. While assessment tools for evaluating SEL competencies and psychological well-being continue to evolve (Haggerty et al., 2011), existing research varies widely in design, scope, and reported outcomes. This systematic literature review responds to this gap by examining the effectiveness of universal SEL programs in promoting mental health and resiliency among middle school students, thereby contributing to a clearer understanding of SEL's role in school-based mental health support.

Literature Review:

Social-Emotional Learning and Early Adolescence

Early adolescence represents a pivotal developmental period marked by rapid physical maturation, expanding cognitive capacities, and heightened sensitivity to social contexts. Middle school students experience increasing academic expectations alongside intensified peer influence, identity exploration, and emotional reactivity.

These converging developmental demands contribute to elevated risks for internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression, as well as externalizing behaviors including aggression and disengagement from school. Contemporary educational research increasingly recognizes that academic success during this stage is inseparable from students' social and emotional well-being.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a comprehensive framework designed to address these developmental needs within school environments. SEL emphasizes the cultivation of competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Rather than functioning as peripheral or "soft" skills, these competencies support students' ability to cope with stress, regulate emotions, and navigate complex social interactions. Research suggests that early adolescence is a particularly opportune period for SEL intervention, as social-cognitive skills remain malleable and responsive to structured instruction.

The theoretical underpinnings of SEL draw from developmental psychology, social learning theory, and ecological systems theory. From a developmental perspective, SEL aligns with models emphasizing the progressive acquisition of emotional regulation and interpersonal competence across childhood and adolescence. Social learning theory highlights the role of modeling, reinforcement, and guided practice in shaping prosocial behavior, all of which are central mechanisms within SEL programs.

Ecological systems theory further situates SEL within the broader school context, recognizing that students' mental health is influenced by interactions among individual, classroom, school, and community factors. Universal, school-based SEL programs aim to create supportive learning environments that promote positive norms and relationships, thereby functioning as protective systems against psychological distress. Bierman et al. (2010) emphasize that the effectiveness of SEL interventions is shaped not only by program design but also by student characteristics and school-level factors, underscoring the importance of contextual fit in implementation.

Evidence from Universal SEL Programs in Middle School

A substantial body of empirical research supports the effectiveness of universal SEL programs in middle school settings. Early program evaluations, such as the Strong Kids and Strong Teens curricula, demonstrated significant gains in students' social-emotional knowledge and reductions in emotional symptoms (Merrell et al., 2008). These findings provided early evidence that structured SEL instruction could serve as a preventive mental health intervention rather than solely a remedial approach.

More recent studies have reinforced and extended these findings. Green et al. (2021) examined the effectiveness of a classroom-based SEL program for middle school students and reported significant improvements in emotional regulation and reductions in psychological distress. Their results highlight the value of embedding SEL instruction within regular classroom practice, allowing skills to be reinforced consistently across academic contexts.

Longitudinal research further supports the sustained benefits of SEL. Bierman et al. (2010) investigated a multiyear universal SEL program and found enduring positive effects on behavioral and emotional outcomes, particularly when programs were implemented with high fidelity. Importantly, their study demonstrated that SEL benefits were evident across diverse student populations, suggesting broad applicability of universal approaches.

A central contribution of SEL programs lies in their role in fostering resiliency among early adolescents. Resiliency refers to the capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity, stress, or risk. SEL programs promote resiliency by explicitly teaching coping strategies, emotional awareness, and problem-solving skills. Through repeated practice, students develop internal resources that buffer against stressors commonly encountered during middle school.

Empirical studies consistently link SEL participation with increased resilience and adaptive functioning. Programs that emphasize self-regulation and cognitive reappraisal enable students to manage emotional challenges more effectively. Green et al. (2021) found that students exposed to SEL instruction demonstrated improved coping skills and emotional control, which are key components of resilience. These outcomes are particularly significant given the rising prevalence of mental health concerns among adolescents.

Mental Health Outcomes: Internalizing and Externalizing Symptoms

SEL interventions have demonstrated consistent effects on both internalizing and externalizing mental health outcomes. Internalizing symptoms, including anxiety and depressive feelings, are common during early adolescence and often remain undetected in school settings. Multiple evaluations of SEL programs report reductions in emotional distress and improved psychological well-being among participating students (Merrell et al., 2008; Green et al., 2021).

Externalizing behaviors such as aggression, bullying, and classroom disruption also decline following SEL implementation. Bierman et al. (2010) reported decreases in conduct problems, particularly in schools that adopted a whole-school SEL approach. Similarly, Espelage et al. (2016) found that SEL programs promoting prosocial behavior were effective in reducing problem behaviors among middle school students with disabilities, highlighting the inclusivity and adaptability of SEL frameworks.

Although the primary focus of SEL is social and emotional development, growing evidence demonstrates its positive association with academic achievement. Zhao and Sang (2025), in their meta-analytic review, concluded that SEL programs yield modest but significant gains in academic performance across elementary and middle school populations. These findings suggest that improvements in emotional regulation, motivation, and classroom engagement indirectly support academic learning.

The relationship between SEL and academic outcomes is particularly relevant in middle school, where declines in motivation and engagement are common. By fostering positive attitudes toward learning and strengthening student–teacher relationships, SEL programs create conditions conducive to academic success. This dual impact underscores the value of SEL as an integrated educational strategy rather than a competing priority.

Cultural Responsiveness and Diverse Learners

The effectiveness of SEL programs is influenced by cultural relevance and responsiveness. Cramer and Castro-Olivo (2016) demonstrated that culturally adapted SEL interventions produced stronger mental health outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds compared to non-adapted programs. These findings emphasize the importance of aligning SEL content with students' cultural values, communication styles, and lived experiences.

Cross-cultural research further supports the adaptability of SEL. Coelho et al. (2017) evaluated a Portuguese middle school SEL program and found significant improvements in students' social-emotional competencies and well-being. Subsequent work by Coelho and Sousa (2018) revealed that program effectiveness varied by implementation setting, highlighting the need for contextual sensitivity when scaling SEL initiatives across different educational environments.

Accurate assessment of SEL outcomes is essential for evaluating program effectiveness. Haggerty et al. (2011) reviewed a range of assessment tools designed for middle school populations, emphasizing the importance of measuring both competencies and mental health indicators. Reliable and valid measures enable researchers and practitioners to capture changes in emotional regulation, social skills, and psychological well-being.

However, variability in measurement approaches remains a challenge in SEL research. Differences in instruments, reporting practices, and outcome domains complicate cross-study comparisons. This limitation underscores the need for standardized assessment frameworks that align with established SEL competencies and mental health constructs.

Implementation quality consistently emerges as a critical determinant of SEL effectiveness. Studies indicate that programs delivered with fidelity, adequate teacher training, and administrative support yield stronger outcomes. Bierman et al. (2010) noted that inconsistent implementation contributed to null effects in some domains, suggesting that program design alone is insufficient without supportive infrastructure.

Mixed-methods evaluations, such as the study by Neth et al. (2020), provide valuable insights into implementation processes. Their evaluation of the Strong Kids program revealed that teacher perceptions, school climate, and instructional time significantly influenced student outcomes. These findings reinforce the importance of professional development and institutional commitment in sustaining SEL initiatives.

Collectively, the literature provides robust evidence that SEL programs positively influence middle school students' mental health, resiliency, and behavioral adjustment. Universal, school-based interventions demonstrate consistent benefits across diverse populations and contexts. Nevertheless, gaps remain in understanding long-term effects beyond middle school, differential impacts across subgroups, and optimal strategies for culturally responsive implementation.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, standardized assessment practices, and deeper exploration of contextual variables influencing SEL effectiveness. As mental health concerns among adolescents continue to rise, systematic synthesis of SEL research remains essential for informing evidence-based educational policy and practice.

Methodology:

This study employed a systematic literature review design to provide a comprehensive and unbiased synthesis of existing research on the impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs on middle school students' mental health. A systematic approach was adopted to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor in the identification and selection of relevant studies.

Eligible studies were required to examine universal, school-based SEL interventions implemented in middle school settings, such as programs designed to develop students' social-emotional competencies across entire student populations rather than targeting specific clinical groups.

To be included in the review, studies needed to report outcomes related to students' mental health and psychosocial well-being, including indicators such as resiliency, emotional distress, and prosocial behavior. The review focused on peer-reviewed empirical research, including randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, and meta-

analyses published between 2011 and 2025. This time frame was selected to capture contemporary SEL programs and reflect recent developments in school-based mental health research.

A systematic search of the literature was conducted using multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, to ensure broad coverage of education, psychology, and public health research. Search terms were combined using Boolean operators and included variations of “social-emotional learning,” “middle school,” “mental health,” “resilience,” and “early adolescence.” Reference lists of relevant articles were also examined to identify additional studies that may not have appeared in the initial database search.

Study selection followed a two-stage screening process. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess relevance based on the predetermined inclusion criteria. Articles that met these criteria proceeded to the second stage, which involved full-text screening to confirm eligibility.

Data were systematically extracted from each included study using a standardized framework, capturing information on authorship, year of publication, intervention characteristics, sample size, research design, and key findings related to mental health outcomes. This structured extraction process facilitated consistent comparison and synthesis of evidence across studies.

Findings and Discussion:

Study Characteristics

The systematic review identified a wide range of evidence-based Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs implemented in middle school settings, reflecting the diversity of approaches used to support adolescent mental health. Universal SEL interventions varied in scope and emphasis, with some programs prioritizing character education and behavior regulation, while others focused more explicitly on resilience, emotional regulation, and self-concept. Despite these variations, the reviewed studies consistently demonstrated that well-designed SEL programs contribute positively to students’ psychosocial development and mental well-being.

Several prominent programs, such as Positive Action and Strong Kids, emphasized character development, emotional awareness, and the reduction of problem behaviors. Mixed-methods evaluations of these programs revealed improvements in students’ emotional knowledge, coping strategies, and classroom behavior (Neth et al., 2020). In contrast, programs such as HEROES and other resilience-focused interventions explicitly targeted self-esteem, perseverance, and adaptive coping, highlighting SEL’s role as a protective factor against stressors commonly encountered during early adolescence.

Across the reviewed literature, the most effective SEL programs adhered to the “SAFE” framework, characterized by Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit instruction. Programs incorporating structured skill progression, opportunities for active practice, and explicit instruction in social-emotional competencies produced stronger and more consistent outcomes. Bierman et al. (2010) demonstrated that multiyear SEL interventions following these principles resulted in sustained reductions in behavioral problems and improvements in emotional functioning, particularly when implemented with high fidelity and supported by positive school climates.

Findings further indicated that SEL program effectiveness is influenced by contextual and cultural factors. Cross-cultural studies conducted outside the United States, including evaluations of Portuguese middle school SEL programs, showed significant gains in students’ social-emotional competencies and psychological well-being (Coelho et al., 2017). However, subsequent research revealed differential effectiveness based on implementation settings, such as classroom versus whole-school delivery models (Coelho & Sousa, 2018). These results underscore the importance of contextual adaptation when transferring SEL programs across educational systems.

Cultural responsiveness emerged as a critical component of successful SEL implementation, particularly for diverse student populations. Cramer and Castro-Olivo (2016) found that culturally adapted SEL interventions produced stronger mental health outcomes compared to non-adapted programs, including reductions in emotional distress and improved self-regulation. Similarly, Espelage et al. (2016) demonstrated that SEL programs designed to promote

prosocial behavior were effective for middle school students with disabilities, highlighting SEL's capacity to support inclusivity and equity within school-based mental health initiatives.

Beyond traditional classroom-based approaches, alternative SEL strategies also demonstrated promising outcomes. Programs integrating mindfulness and meditation practices showed improvements in emotional regulation, attention, and interpersonal awareness among middle school students (Valosek et al., 2019).

Whole-school initiatives in regions such as British Columbia further illustrated how systemic SEL integration can promote mental well-being by fostering supportive relationships and positive school cultures (Hymel et al., 2018). These findings suggest that SEL effectiveness may be enhanced when embedded within broader mental health and wellness frameworks.

Collectively, the findings align with contemporary theoretical perspectives emphasizing adolescence as a sensitive period for social-emotional intervention (Yeager, 2017). Evidence-based program development continues to evolve, with recent frameworks highlighting the need for developmentally appropriate, contextually grounded, and empirically validated SEL models (Rosen et al., 2022).

Recent international research further confirms SEL's positive impact on students' mental health and well-being in higher education and secondary contexts (Jin et al., 2025), reinforcing the relevance of SEL across developmental stages. Overall, the reviewed studies support the conclusion that SEL programs, when thoughtfully designed and implemented, play a critical role in promoting mental health and resilience among middle school students.

Impact on Mental Health and Emotional Distress

A substantial body of research demonstrates that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions have a significant positive impact on students' mental health, particularly in reducing emotional distress during early adolescence. Evidence from systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicates that universal, school-based SEL programs contribute to improved emotional regulation, lower psychological symptoms, and enhanced overall well-being among middle school students (Van de Sande et al., 2019; Greenberg et al., 2017). These findings position SEL as a preventive mental health strategy rather than merely a complementary educational initiative.

One of the most consistently reported outcomes of SEL participation is the reduction of internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression. Students exposed to structured SEL instruction demonstrate improved emotional awareness and coping skills, enabling them to manage stress more effectively. Studies conducted in diverse contexts, including large-scale school initiatives in British Columbia, have shown that SEL implementation is associated with improved mental well-being and decreased emotional vulnerability among adolescents (Hymel et al., 2018). Similar findings in international settings further confirm SEL's role in promoting psychological resilience across cultural contexts (Jin et al., 2025).

SEL programs also produce notable reductions in externalizing behaviors, including aggression, bullying, and classroom disruption. By fostering self-regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making, SEL interventions help students develop constructive responses to interpersonal conflict. Empirical evidence indicates that schools implementing comprehensive SEL practices experience improvements in student behavior and school climate, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between emotional competence and behavioral regulation (Lawson et al., 2019; Allbright et al., 2019).

In addition to reducing distress and problem behaviors, SEL participation is strongly associated with enhanced student well-being and positive self-perceptions. Students engaged in SEL programs report more favorable attitudes toward themselves, their peers, and their school environment. Whole-school approaches that integrate SEL into daily practices have been shown to foster a sense of belonging and emotional safety, which are critical components of adolescent mental health (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Hymel et al., 2018).

Emerging evidence also highlights the effectiveness of SEL programs that incorporate mindfulness and meditation practices. Interventions combining mindfulness with SEL instruction have demonstrated improvements in emotional

regulation, attention, and stress management among middle school students (Valosek et al., 2019; Waldemar et al., 2016). These findings suggest that complementary practices may strengthen SEL outcomes by enhancing students' capacity for self-awareness and emotional control.

The literature supports the conceptualization of SEL as a public health approach to education that addresses students' mental health needs at a population level. By targeting core emotional and social competencies, SEL programs create protective environments that promote well-being and reduce risk for psychological distress (Greenberg et al., 2017). Moreover, empirical work linking SEL to broader academic and social outcomes underscores its value as an integrated strategy for fostering healthy development during early adolescence (Panayiotou et al., 2019).

Development of Resiliency

A central finding of this review is the consistent role of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in strengthening protective factors that contribute to student resiliency. Resiliency refers to an individual's capacity to adapt positively in the face of stress, adversity, or developmental challenges. During early adolescence, when students are particularly vulnerable to emotional and social stressors, SEL programs serve as structured mechanisms for building internal resources that buffer against psychological distress (Greenberg et al., 2017).

SEL enhances resiliency primarily through the intentional and systematic teaching of coping skills, emotional regulation, and problem-solving strategies. Universal SEL programs emphasize self-awareness and self-management, enabling students to recognize emotional responses and apply adaptive strategies to manage them. A systematic review by Van de Sande et al. (2019) found that SEL interventions reliably improve the specific competencies they target, including emotional regulation and social problem-solving, which are foundational components of resilience.

Empirical evidence further supports measurable gains in resilience following SEL participation. Studies employing standardized instruments, such as the Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale, report significant increases in resilience scores from pre- to post-intervention among youth samples. These gains suggest that SEL programs not only improve immediate emotional skills but also contribute to students' long-term capacity to cope with academic and social stressors (Lee & Yoo, 2025; Colomeischi et al., 2022).

Program design and instructional quality play a critical role in the development of resiliency. Evidence-based SEL programs share core components, including explicit skill instruction, opportunities for guided practice, and consistent reinforcement across contexts (Lawson et al., 2019). When these elements are implemented with fidelity, students demonstrate stronger emotional control, perseverance, and adaptive coping. Schools identified as "outliers" in SEL implementation further illustrate how intentional practices and leadership support can amplify resiliency outcomes (Allbright et al., 2019).

Teachers are also central to the effectiveness of SEL in fostering resiliency. Schonert-Reichl (2017) emphasizes that educators' own social-emotional competencies influence classroom climate and student outcomes. When teachers model emotional regulation and supportive relationships, students are more likely to internalize resilient behaviors. Service-learning and youth development-oriented SEL models implemented in middle school curricula further strengthen resilience by promoting agency, empathy, and real-world problem-solving (Chung & McBride, 2015).

Resiliency development through SEL has implications beyond emotional well-being, extending to academic engagement and performance. Panayiotou et al. (2019) provide empirical support for the link between social-emotional competencies and academic outcomes, suggesting that resilient students are better equipped to manage academic challenges and remain engaged in learning.

Longitudinal and multilevel analyses of SEL programs, including the Positive Attitude program in Portugal, demonstrate that resiliency gains are influenced by individual student characteristics and school contexts (Coelho et al., 2015; Raimundo et al., 2013).

Recent frameworks position resiliency-focused SEL as a cornerstone of comprehensive school mental health systems. Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) models integrate SEL across universal, targeted, and intensive interventions,

reinforcing resiliency at multiple levels (Vetter et al., 2024). Evidence from secondary and urban school settings further suggests that sustained, developmentally appropriate SEL programming empowers adolescents to navigate adversity and transition successfully into later educational stages (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Collectively, these findings affirm that SEL is a powerful mechanism for cultivating resiliency and promoting positive youth development during early adolescence.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications for Practice

A primary strength of this systematic review is the inclusion of recent large-scale studies and meta-analyses encompassing diverse student populations and educational contexts. By synthesizing evidence from thousands of students across multiple countries and program models, this review provides a comprehensive and contemporary understanding of the effects of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in middle school settings. The breadth of included studies enhances the generalizability of the findings and supports the conclusion that SEL is a viable and effective approach to promoting student mental health (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

Despite these strengths, several limitations should be acknowledged. Many reviewed SEL programs demonstrated significant effects in only one outcome domain, while reporting null or inconsistent effects in others. This variability suggests that program effectiveness is not uniform and is strongly influenced by contextual and implementation factors. Prior research highlights that student characteristics, school climate, and instructional quality can moderate SEL outcomes, underscoring the importance of implementation fidelity and contextual alignment (Raimundo et al., 2013; Coelho et al., 2015).

Another limitation concerns the heterogeneity of program designs and outcome measures across studies. Differences in program duration, delivery models, and assessment tools complicate cross-study comparisons and limit the ability to draw definitive conclusions about which program components are most effective. Additionally, many studies relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias and limited sensitivity to long-term change. These methodological constraints highlight the need for more standardized and longitudinal evaluation approaches (Kutash et al., 2011).

The findings of this review carry important implications for educational practice. Rather than treating SEL as a standalone subject, schools are encouraged to integrate social-emotional competencies throughout the academic curriculum. Embedding SEL within daily instruction reinforces skill application across contexts and aligns with evidence suggesting that whole-school approaches yield stronger and more sustainable outcomes (Yang et al., 2018). Service-learning and youth development models further illustrate how SEL integration can promote student agency and meaningful engagement (Chung & McBride, 2015).

Developmental appropriateness is another critical consideration for effective SEL implementation. Middle school students have distinct social needs, including heightened sensitivity to peer relationships and a growing desire for autonomy. SEL programs that align with these developmental characteristics—by incorporating collaborative activities, peer interaction, and real-world relevance—are more likely to foster engagement and resilience (Coelho et al., 2014; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Programs that fail to account for developmental differences may produce weaker or inconsistent outcomes.

Professional development for educators and school mental health professionals is essential to maximize SEL effectiveness. Teachers and school counselors play a pivotal role in modeling emotional regulation and creating supportive classroom environments. Studies examining curricula such as Strong Teens demonstrate that well-trained educators are better equipped to deliver SEL instruction with fidelity and adapt it to student needs (Caldarella et al., 2019). Ongoing professional learning opportunities also support educators' own social-emotional competencies, which are closely linked to student outcomes.

This review highlights the importance of embedding SEL within comprehensive school mental health systems. Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) provide a framework for integrating universal SEL programming with targeted and intensive interventions for students with greater needs (Vetter et al., 2024). When aligned with broader school-based mental health initiatives, SEL can serve as a preventive foundation that promotes well-being, engagement, and

academic success across developmental stages. Future research and policy efforts should continue to focus on scaling evidence-based, developmentally responsive SEL practices that are supported by strong implementation structures.

Conclusion:

This systematic literature review highlights the critical role of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in supporting the mental health and well-being of middle school students during a developmentally sensitive period. The findings consistently demonstrate that well-designed, universal SEL interventions contribute to meaningful reductions in emotional distress, improvements in emotional regulation, and the development of protective factors such as resiliency and prosocial behavior. As early adolescence is marked by heightened vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and behavioral challenges, SEL provides schools with an evidence-based framework for addressing students' mental health needs in a preventive and developmentally appropriate manner.

Across diverse program models and cultural contexts, SEL initiatives that adhere to evidence-based design principles—such as explicit instruction, active skill practice, and sustained implementation—produce the most robust outcomes. The review further underscores that SEL effectiveness is not limited to emotional outcomes alone; improvements in school climate, student engagement, and academic functioning are frequently observed, reinforcing the interconnected nature of social-emotional competence and educational success. These findings position SEL as a foundational component of comprehensive school-based mental health systems rather than a supplementary or optional initiative.

Despite the overall positive evidence, the review also reveals variability in program outcomes, highlighting the importance of implementation quality, contextual fit, and educator preparedness. Programs that are poorly aligned with students' developmental needs or cultural backgrounds may yield limited effects, underscoring the necessity of thoughtful adaptation and professional development. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, standardized outcome measures, and the examination of culturally responsive and inclusive SEL models to better understand differential impacts across student populations.

Thus, SEL programs represent a powerful and scalable strategy for promoting mental health, resiliency, and holistic development among middle school students. When integrated intentionally within school curricula and supported by systemic implementation structures, SEL has the potential to foster healthier learning environments and equip early adolescents with essential skills for lifelong well-being and success.

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