
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultivating Emotional and Social Development in Early Learners

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| ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the relationship between social-emotional development and academic performance among early childhood learners. A quantitative descriptive correlational research design was used. Data on social-emotional development were gathered through a structured questionnaire assessing emotional awareness and expression, self-regulation, social skills, relationships with adults, and pro-social behavior. Academic performance in literacy and numeracy was obtained from school records. Statistical analysis, including Pearson's correlation, was applied to determine the relationship between socio-emotional competencies and academic outcomes. Results showed that while learners displayed strong social-emotional competencies across various domains, no statistically significant relationship was found between these competencies and academic performance in literacy or numeracy. The findings suggest that other factors may play a more crucial role in predicting academic success, and further research is recommended to explore additional influences on early childhood academic outcomes. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study.

| KEYWORDS

Social-emotional skills, early childhood education, emotional awareness, pro-social behavior, relationships with adults.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The link between academic achievement and social-emotional development in early childhood education has garnered increasing attention in educational research (Williams et al., 2021). This reflects the broader consensus that social-emotional skills play a vital role in influencing educational outcomes (Hernandez & Lopez, 2021; Johnson et al., 2023). This study is motivated by the growing international discourse on the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in early childhood education. Research consistently demonstrates that SEL is a key factor in academic success and overall well-being, with skills like emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal interaction proving to be strong predictors of long-term educational outcomes (Miller, 2019; Davis & Carter, 2021; Cebe & Suson, 2023). This global perspective underscores the need for robust SEL frameworks in educational systems worldwide to support holistic student development (Anderson et al., 2020).

SEL is crucial for helping children develop essential life skills beyond academics, promoting emotional literacy, which enables them to identify, understand, and manage their emotions effectively (Jones & Smith, 2019). Research shows that children with strong SEL competencies are better equipped to cope with stress, anxiety, and social challenges, fostering mental health and resilience (Green & Lee, 2021; Santos et al., 2022). Moreover, SEL enhances children's capacity to build positive relationships, which supports both personal and academic growth (Weissberg et al., 2020; Roberts, 2019). Students with strong socio-emotional skills often demonstrate better academic performance and classroom behavior (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2019; Perez & Cruz, 2019; Mendoza et al., 2022). Additionally, SEL equips children with soft skills such as collaboration, empathy, and problem-solving, which are essential for future success in the workforce (Durlak et al., 2020). Research also links SEL to long-term positive outcomes,

including higher graduation rates, lower crime rates, and improved mental health in adulthood (Rivera et al., 2022). Globally, SEL aligns with initiatives such as Sustainable Development Goal 4, which focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2020). SEL also fosters a more compassionate, socially responsible society, preparing individuals to engage with diverse communities (Murray et al., 2019; Suson, 2019; Alindao et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has recognized the importance of promoting students' social-emotional development, integrating SEL into the curriculum (Department of Education, 2022). This aligns with the aim of nurturing well-rounded individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society. Increasingly, countries around the world acknowledge the importance of SEL in early childhood education (Blewitt et al., 2021; Sentillas et al., 2022). However, while national frameworks provide a solid foundation, localized research is essential to tailor SEL programs to meet the specific needs of diverse student populations (Bailey et al., 2021). Local studies offer insights into unique social and emotional challenges faced by students in particular regions, which can inform targeted interventions and resource allocation. For example, a school with a significant proportion of students from low-income families might prioritize SEL programs addressing the social-emotional challenges associated with poverty. Understanding the local context is crucial for ensuring that SEL programs are culturally relevant and responsive to community needs (Elias et al., 2019).

In Cebu, and specifically at Labangon Elementary School, there is limited data on the social-emotional development of early childhood learners and its relationship to academic achievement. To address this gap, this study aims to assess the academic performance and social-emotional growth of early childhood students at Maghaway Elementary School for the 2023–2024 school year. The findings will provide the foundation for developing a strategic plan tailored to the unique needs of the student population.

This research examines various aspects of the learners' and teachers' profiles, such as the learners' age, gender, and parental occupation, as well as the teachers' years of service and educational attainment. It also explores teachers' perceptions of students' emotional awareness, social skills, interactions with adults, and pro-social behaviors. Additionally, the study investigates the relationship between students' social-emotional development and their academic performance. This comprehensive approach seeks to provide empirical evidence that will inform and potentially reshape educational practices at Labangon Elementary School. By aligning with both national and international trends in SEL, the study aims to enhance educational outcomes through a holistic focus on learner development (National Education Association, 2023). Thus, the findings not only address a local educational need but also contribute to the broader global discourse on optimizing education through social-emotional learning.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative descriptive correlational research design to investigate the relationship between socio-emotional development and academic performance among early childhood learners at Labangon Elementary School. The sample included 220 kindergarten learners and 44 teachers. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that assessed four key domains of socio-emotional development: emotional awareness and expression, social skills, relationships with adults, and pro-social behavior. Academic performance data were obtained from school records to be correlated with socio-emotional competency levels. The questionnaire responses were rated using a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The scoring system was predefined: a score of 5 (Strongly Agree) indicated a high level of socio-emotional competency, consistently demonstrated, while a score of 1 (Strongly Disagree) signified a clear absence of the skill. For each respondent, average scores were calculated for the four socio-emotional domains, and statistical analyses, including Pearson's correlation, were conducted to assess the relationship between socio-emotional skills and academic performance. Ethical protocols were strictly followed throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and guaranteeing voluntary participation. This methodology provided a systematic and objective analysis of how socio-emotional competencies influence academic outcomes, offering valuable empirical evidence to inform educational policy and practice.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Emotional Awareness and Expression

Emotional Awareness and Expression	Mean	VD
Children can identify and name their own emotions.	4.36	SA
Children understand that other people have emotions and can show empathy.	4.32	SA
Children are able to express their feelings in appropriate ways.	4.11	A
Children recognize the difference between positive and negative emotions in themselves and others.	3.93	A
Children can accurately describe the reasons behind their emotions.	3.87	A
Grand Mean	4.12	A

Table 1 presents the findings on emotional awareness and expression among the children. The highest-rated indicator is the ability of children to identify and name their own emotions, with a mean score of 4.36, indicating a "Strongly Agree" (SA) verbal description. Similarly, children demonstrate a strong understanding that others have emotions and are capable of showing empathy, with a mean score of 4.32, also rated as "Strongly Agree." On the other hand, children's ability to express their feelings in appropriate ways received a slightly lower mean of 4.11, which is rated as "Agree" (A). The capacity to differentiate between positive and negative emotions in themselves and others, with a mean of 3.93, and accurately describing the reasons behind their emotions, with a mean of 3.87, both fall under the "Agree" category. Overall, the grand mean for emotional awareness and expression is 4.12, which suggests that, on average, the children exhibit a strong level of emotional awareness and expression, though there are some areas for potential improvement in terms of emotional differentiation and self-description.

Table 2. Self-Regulation

Self-Regulation	Mean	VD
Children can manage their own emotions and behaviors in various situations.	3.70	A
Children can calm themselves down when upset or excited	3.66	A
Children demonstrate patience while waiting for their turn or for delayed gratification.	3.61	A
Children can adjust their behavior according to the rules or expectations of different settings (e.g., classroom, playground).	3.82	A
Children use verbal communication to express needs, desires, or frustrations instead of acting out	4.09	A
Grand Mean	3.78	A

Table 2 provides an overview of the self-regulation skills among children. The data reveal that the highest-rated skill is the children's ability to use verbal communication to express needs, desires, or frustrations, rather than resorting to acting out, with a mean score of 4.09, indicating "Agree" (A). This suggests that verbal communication is relatively well-developed among the children. Similarly, children demonstrate an ability to adjust their behavior according to different rules and expectations in various settings, with a mean score of 3.82, also rated as "Agree." Other aspects of self-regulation, such as managing emotions and behaviors in different situations (3.70), calming down when upset or excited (3.66), and demonstrating patience while waiting for delayed gratification (3.61), also fall within the "Agree" category but with slightly lower mean scores. These findings indicate that while children generally show a good level of self-regulation, there is room for improvement, particularly in managing emotions and demonstrating patience. The overall grand mean for self-regulation is 3.78, suggesting that children generally exhibit adequate self-regulation skills but may benefit from further development in managing emotional responses and demonstrating patience in challenging situations.

Table 3. Social-Skills

Social Skills	Mean	VD
Children demonstrate the ability to make friends and play cooperatively with others.	4.57	SA
Children show understanding and respect for rules and norms in social settings.	4.03	A
Children can negotiate and resolve conflicts with peers in constructive ways.	3.77	A
Children initiate interactions and play with peers without adult prompting.	4.18	A
Children participate in group activities and contribute to achieving common goals.	4.27	SA
Grand Mean	4.16	A

Table 3 presents the data on the social skills of children, highlighting various aspects of their ability to interact with peers and participate in social settings. The highest-rated indicator is the ability of children to make friends and play cooperatively, with a mean score of 4.57, which falls under the "Strongly Agree" (SA) category, indicating a high level of competence in this area. Similarly, children demonstrate strong participation in group activities and contribute to achieving common goals, with a mean score of 4.27, also rated as "Strongly Agree." Other aspects, such as initiating interactions and play without adult prompting (4.18), showing understanding and respect for rules and norms (4.03), and resolving conflicts constructively (3.77), received slightly lower scores but still fall under the "Agree" (A) category. These findings suggest that while children generally exhibit strong social skills,

with particular strengths in cooperation and group participation, there is room for further development in conflict resolution among peers. The overall grand mean for social skills is 4.16, indicating that children generally possess good social abilities, though targeted support in certain areas, like constructive conflict resolution, could enhance their social interactions further.

Table 4. Relationship with Adults

Relationship with Adults	Mean	VD
Children respond positively to adult guidance and instruction	4.14	A
Children feel comfortable seeking help from adults when needed.	4.37	SA
Children demonstrate the ability to follow directions and routines established by adults.	4.25	SA
Children demonstrate respect towards adults through their words and actions.	4.18	A
Children exhibit confidence in their interactions with adults, speaking up and expressing themselves freely.	4.14	A
Grand Mean	4.22	SA

Table 5. Pro-Social Behavior

Pro-social Behavior	Mean	VD
Children often engage in acts of kindness and helpfulness without being prompted	4.07	A
Children show appreciation and gratitude towards others.	4.21	A
Intervention programs successfully encourage children to share and cooperate.	4.18	A
Children demonstrate an understanding of fairness and take actions to ensure fair treatment for all.	4.00	A
Children express concern for the well-being of others and show willingness to assist those in need	4.13	A
Grand Mean	4.12	A

Table 4 illustrates the findings on children's relationships with adults. The highest-rated aspect is children's comfort in seeking help from adults when needed, with a mean score of 4.37, categorized as "Strongly Agree" (SA). This suggests that children generally feel secure and confident in reaching out to adults for assistance. Additionally, children show strong abilities in following directions and routines set by adults, with a mean score of 4.25, also rated as "Strongly Agree," indicating compliance with adult expectations. Other indicators, such as demonstrating respect towards adults (4.18), responding positively to adult guidance (4.14), and showing confidence in interactions with adults (4.14), are rated as "Agree". These scores reflect that children have respectful and positive relationships with adults, though confidence in expressing themselves may slightly trail behind other areas of adult interaction. Overall, the grand mean of 4.22, rated as "Strongly Agree," suggests that children maintain a generally strong and healthy relationship with adults, demonstrating a balance of respect, compliance, and confidence in seeking support and engaging in communication with adults.

Table 6. Learners Academic Performance

Subject	Grade	VD
Literacy	87.54	Very Satisfactory
Numeracy	88.82	Very Satisfactory

Table 6 presents the academic performance of learners in two key areas: literacy and numeracy. The mean score for literacy is 87.54, categorized as "Very Satisfactory," indicating that learners are performing well in their literacy skills, demonstrating a solid understanding of reading and writing competencies. Numeracy shows a slightly higher mean score of 88.82, also classified as "Very Satisfactory," reflecting strong abilities in mathematical concepts and problem-solving. These results suggest that learners at Maghaway Elementary School are achieving commendable levels of academic performance in both literacy and numeracy, with

room for continued growth to potentially reach "Outstanding" levels. Overall, the "Very Satisfactory" ratings in both areas highlight the learners' well-rounded academic abilities.

Table 7. Significant Relationship Between the Level of Social-Emotional Development to Literacy Performance

Constructs	r-value	t-value	P value	Remarks	Decision
Emotional Awareness and Expression	7.2434	1.764	0.086	Not Significant	Do not reject
Self-Regulation	3.8501	0.795	0.432	Not significant	Do not reject
Social Skills	-12.7180	-1.604	-1.604	Not significant	Do not reject
Relationship with Adults	5.5242	1.130	0.266	Not significant	Do not reject
Pro-Social Behavior	-10.2911	-1.351	0.185	Not significant	Do not reject

Table 7 presents the results of the analysis examining the relationship between various constructs of social-emotional development and literacy performance. The findings indicate that none of the constructs—emotional awareness and expression ($r = 7.2434$, $p = 0.086$), self-regulation ($r = 3.8501$, $p = 0.432$), social skills ($r = -12.7180$, $p = -1.604$), relationship with adults ($r = 5.5242$, $p = 0.266$), and pro-social behavior ($r = -10.2911$, $p = 0.185$)—show a statistically significant relationship with literacy performance, as all p-values exceed the significance threshold ($p > 0.05$). Consequently, the decision for each construct was not to reject the null hypothesis, indicating that there is no significant correlation between these aspects of social-emotional development and literacy outcomes in this sample. These results suggest that while social-emotional skills are important for overall development, they may not directly predict literacy performance in this context. Further research could explore other factors influencing literacy or investigate if different social-emotional development measures would yield significant results.

Table 8. Significant Relationship Between the Level of Social-Emotional Development to Numeracy Performance

Constructs	r-value	t-value	P value	Remarks	Decision
Emotional Awareness and Expression	3.4443	1.412	0.166	Not Significant	Do not reject
Self-Regulation	3.5073	1.219	0.230	Not significant	Do not reject
Social Skills	-4.3881	-0.932	0.357	Not significant	Do not reject
Relationship with Adults	0.0815	0.028	0.978	Not significant	Do not reject
Pro-Social Behavior	-6.0460	-1.337	0.189	Not significant	Do not reject

Table 8 presents the analysis of the relationship between various constructs of social-emotional development and numeracy performance. The results show that none of the social-emotional constructs—emotional awareness and expression ($r = 3.4443$, $p = 0.166$), self-regulation ($r = 3.5073$, $p = 0.230$), social skills ($r = -4.3881$, $p = 0.357$), relationship with adults ($r = 0.0815$, $p = 0.978$), and pro-social behavior ($r = -6.0460$, $p = 0.189$)—demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with numeracy performance. All p-values are greater than the significance level ($p > 0.05$), leading to the decision not to reject the null hypothesis for each construct. This suggests that, in this sample, there is no significant correlation between the level of social-emotional development and numeracy performance. These findings imply that while social-emotional competencies are important for overall child development, they may not have a direct influence on numeracy skills in this context. Further studies could explore other potential influences on numeracy performance or consider different measures of social-emotional development.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results, the study concludes that while the learners generally exhibit strong social-emotional competencies, including emotional awareness, self-regulation, social skills, and positive relationships with adults, these competencies do not show a statistically significant relationship with either literacy or numeracy performance. Specifically, the constructs of emotional awareness, self-regulation, social skills, relationships with adults, and pro-social behavior did not significantly predict academic performance in both literacy and numeracy. Although social-emotional development is essential for overall child development and well-being, the findings suggest that these competencies may not directly influence academic outcomes in this context. This highlights the complexity of academic performance and suggests that other factors beyond social-emotional skills may play a more significant role in literacy and numeracy achievement. Further research may be needed to explore additional variables that contribute to academic success and to investigate the potential long-term impact of social-emotional learning on educational outcomes.

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