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Impact of Socio-Emotional Learning on Academic Success and Behavioral Outcomes at the Higher Education Level in District Skardu

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ABSTRACT

Formal socio-emotional learning (SEL) programs and structured counseling services are uncommon in higher education institutions in District Skardu. Nevertheless, students must manage demanding coursework, navigate new social environments, and cope with the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigated whether students' social and emotional skills influence their academic performance and behavior. A survey was conducted with 151 students and 74 faculty members from major institutions, utilizing a five-point questionnaire based on the CASEL framework. The instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.795$). Data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson chi-square tests, and basic linear regression. SEL, academic success, and behavioral outcomes all received high average scores (4.12, 4.24, and 4.16 out of 5, respectively). Statistically, SEL accounted for 12.1% of the variance in academic success ($R^2 = 0.121$, $\beta = 0.348$, $p < .001$) and 7.5% in behavioral outcomes ($R^2 = 0.075$, $\beta = 0.274$, $p = .001$). Emotional awareness was associated with academic grades, focus under distraction correlated with motivation, and emotional control supported stress management. However, some anticipated associations were not statistically significant. Faculty members recognized the importance of SEL but faced challenges such as large class sizes, limited time, and insufficient training, which hindered consistent implementation. Overall, while SEL did not account for all aspects of student outcomes, its influence in Skardu is notable, even in the absence of formal programming.



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Introduction

Academic achievement depends on more than content knowledge. Students must recognize and regulate their emotions, demonstrate empathy, build relationships, and make thoughtful decisions. These abilities are encompassed by socio-emotional learning (SEL). Research with school-age children indicates that strong SEL skills are frequently associated with higher academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems, highlighting the importance of emotional and social competencies alongside cognitive skills.

However, most existing research on SEL focuses on primary and secondary education, often in high-income countries. University students encounter distinct challenges, including increased academic demands, unfamiliar social environments, and significant decisions regarding their future. These pressures may influence both academic performance and well-being, yet the role of SEL at the higher education level remains insufficiently understood.

This research gap is particularly pronounced in remote or resource-limited regions. District Skardu in Gilgit-Baltistan, for example, is geographically isolated and has limited educational resources, challenges that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the absence of formal counseling or structured SEL programs, students have largely been required to navigate these challenges independently.

In light of these circumstances, this study examines whether students' social and emotional skills are associated with academic performance and behavioral outcomes. Guided by the five CASEL competencies, data were collected from students and faculty in Skardu to provide a comprehensive analysis.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the indicators of academic success among higher education students.
2. To identify behavioural outcomes among higher education students.
3. To examine the effect of socio-emotional learning on academic success at the higher education level.

Research Questions

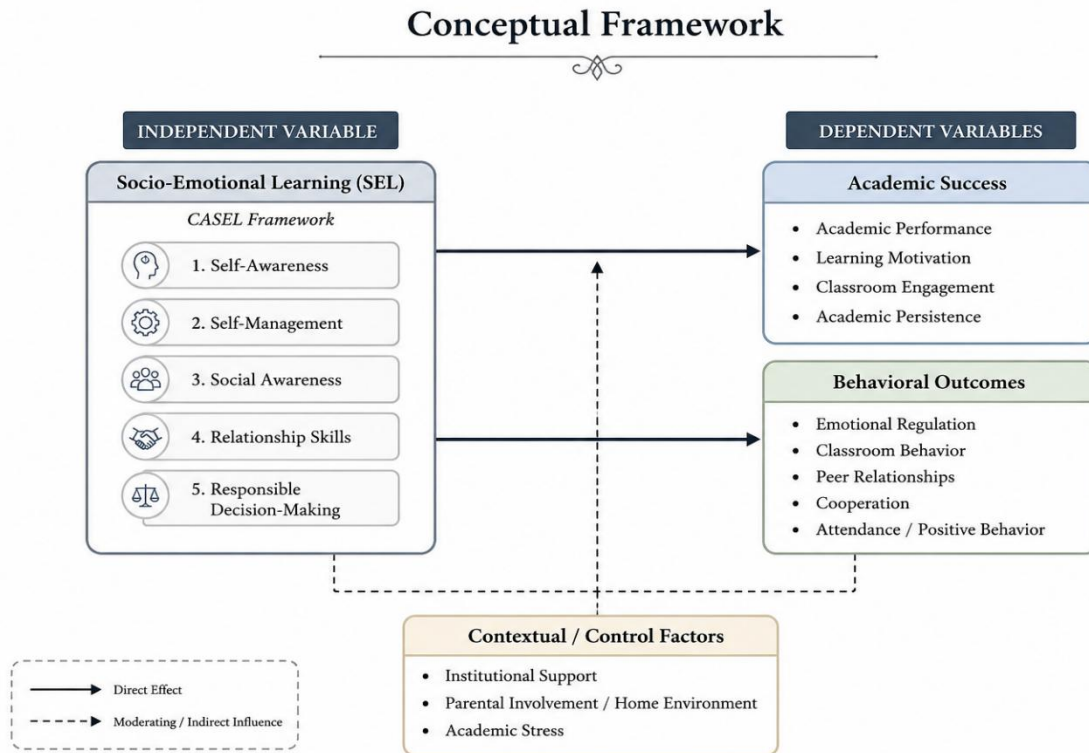
1. Which indicators describe academic success among higher education students?
2. Which behavioural outcomes are observed among higher education students?
3. How is socio-emotional learning related to students' academic performance?
4. What relationship exists between socio-emotional learning and students' behavioural outcomes?

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 shows the model used in this study. Socio-emotional learning is the independent variable; academic success and behavioural outcomes are the dependent variables. The SEL side of the model includes self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. School environment and parental involvement are also included.

The proposed outcomes are scholastic achievement and motivation, together with classroom behaviour, affective regulation, peer relationships, and attendance.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



Importance of the Study

Most research on SEL in higher education has overlooked remote, low-resource districts such as Skardu. Evidence from the district may help policymakers, curriculum developers, and university administrators decide what kind of social and emotional support students need. It also brings a local case into work on accessible and fair education. For researchers, the findings supply a starting point for longitudinal studies, comparisons with other districts, and intervention research.

Literature Review

Concept and theoretical foundations of SEL

CASEL (2020) groups SEL into five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (see also "SEL competencies," 2024). The present study reads these competencies through three theoretical perspectives. Goleman (1995) links the recognition and management of emotion with success in education and life. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory is concerned with what students learn by watching teachers, peers, and other significant people. Bronfenbrenner (1979) takes a wider view. His ecological systems theory places the learner within a family, an institution, and a community, each of which affects development.

SEL consists of the cultivation of emotional awareness, self-regulation, resilience, interpersonal competence, and responsible decision-making. Fatima et al. (2025) demonstrated the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, which has a meaningful link to academic success, and thus bears relevance to SEL.

SEL and academic success

Durlak et al. (2011) reported better achievement and fewer behavioural problems among students who took part in school-based SEL programmes. The later meta-analysis by Taylor et al. (2017) found that these benefits continued over time. Evidence at university level is less extensive. Maguire et al. (2016), for example, connected emotional skills with cognitive and affective engagement. Their work suggests that managing emotion may help students make better use of their academic ability. EI helps students cope with stress, stay focused and motivated, and handle school challenges. Fatima et al. (2025) and Ameer et al. (2026) linked psychological well-being, emotional competence and academic resilience to better learning outcomes. Generation Z students need social-emotional and digital skills to be successful in technology-based learning. Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al. (2026a) related digital literacy and innovation to learner well-being, and Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Malik (2025) pointed out the behavioural and academic impacts of social media usage.

SEL and behavioural outcomes

Behaviour is another part of the SEL literature. Wentzel (2015) linked emotional and social processes with classroom conduct and students' relationships with other people. Bandura's account of modelling helps explain how students learn to regulate their responses. During examinations or presentations, that regulation may make stress easier to manage and behaviour more stable. SE competencies can promote self-control, appropriate behaviour, emotional stability and positive relationships with others. Students' behavioural health and academic performance can be influenced by social media usage, as stated by Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Malik (2025), this is why it is important to monitor emotional and digital self-regulation.

SEL in higher education

Universities have not adopted SEL as systematically as schools. Cipriano et al. (2023) found that much of the social and emotional learning in higher education happens informally, partly because formal programmes and resources are absent. Students still use these skills, but institutions may offer little structure around them. The relevance of SEL in higher education is becoming increasingly evident as students in the university face academic stress, social adaptation, transformation of technology, mental health issues, and more. Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al. (2026b) highlighted the need to incorporate emotional intelligence in higher education to enhance the well-being of students and learning experience.

Role of faculty and institutions

What faculty members do in class can support or hinder SEL. They model emotional management, invite students to reflect, and influence whether a classroom feels safe. Rana et al. (2022) found that university teachers in Pakistan valued SEL but lacked training and institutional backing. Shahab et al. (2025) reported a similar problem in higher education: teacher preparation and formal integration remained limited. Facilitating SEL can be done by faculty and universities with their supportive teaching, mentoring, counselling, inclusive policies, and emotionally responsive learning spaces. Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al. (2026b) emphasized the importance of

embedding emotional intelligence and student wellbeing into HE practices through institutional policies.

SEL in Pakistan and remote regions

Pakistani research on SEL is still limited, particularly outside major urban centres. Mateen et al. (2024) studied SEL and academic outcomes among higher secondary students. For Gilgit-Baltistan, Malhotra et al. (2021) observed that family and community norms strongly influence cooperation and conflict avoidance. Hameed et al. (2024) described setbacks in the social and emotional development of University of Baltistan students during the COVID-19 pandemic, with little institutional help afterwards. None of these studies answers the specific question examined here: how SEL relates to outcomes among higher education students in District Skardu.

Research Methodology

Research design

We used a quantitative descriptive survey. The design allowed us to measure SEL, academic success, and behavioural outcomes across a relatively large group of higher education students and to test the relationships among those variables.

Population and sample

The study population came from four institutions in District Skardu: the University of Baltistan, Government Girls Degree College, Fatima Jinnah Women College, and Government Boys Degree College. We selected students through stratified random sampling, with representation by department, semester, and sex. Faculty members were chosen purposively and had at least two years of relevant experience. The achieved sample was 151 students and 74 faculty members.

Research instrument

We developed the questionnaire from the CASEL framework. Its five-point scale ran from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items covered the five SEL competencies as well as academic success and behavioural outcomes. We used clear language suited to the local setting and provided key items in both languages. A pilot study was used to check clarity plus reliability before the main survey.

Data collection

The researcher obtained permission from each institution before data collection, then visited the sites and distributed the questionnaires to students and faculty members. The researcher collected the completed forms on the same visit. Completing the survey on site helped maintain a high response rate.

Data analysis

We analysed the responses in SPSS. Means and standard deviations described the levels of SEL, academic success, and behavioural outcomes. Pearson chi-square tests examined the associations between individual SEL competencies and specific outcomes. We used simple linear regression to test whether SEL predicted academic success and behaviour.

Ethical issues

Participation was voluntary. Respondents were told why the study was being conducted, and they were assured that their answers would remain anonymous and confidential. The data were used only for research.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis uses responses from 151 students and 74 faculty members. Results are reported for reliability, the main study variables, the chi-square tests, the two regression models, and the faculty questionnaire.

Instrument reliability**Table 1: Reliability Analysis**

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Overall Instrument	0.795	28

The 28 questionnaire items produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.795. Because this is above the accepted threshold of 0.70, the instrument had adequate internal consistency.

Descriptive results**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables**

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL)	151	4.12	0.39
Academic Success	151	4.24	0.45
Behavioral Outcomes	151	4.16	0.59

Students gave high ratings in all three areas. The mean was 4.12 (SD = 0.39) for SEL, 4.24 (SD = 0.45) for academic success, and 4.16 (SD = 0.59) for behavioural outcomes. The scores sit close to the upper end of the five-point scale. That positive clustering may reflect a ceiling effect in the self-report data.

Associations between SEL and outcomes**Table 3: Chi-Square Tests between SEL Competencies and Outcomes**

Association tested	χ^2	df	p	Result
Emotional awareness × academic grades	42.17	16	.000	Significant
Focus under distraction × motivation	54.18	12	.000	Significant
Emotional control × stress management	31.47	12	.002	Significant
Decision-making × goal setting	6.05	6	.418	Not significant
Teamwork × peer relationships	8.96	9	.441	Not significant
Consequential thinking × conflict	19.25	12	.083	Not significant

Three associations were statistically significant. Emotional awareness was related to students' assessment of their grades ($\chi^2(16) = 42.17$, $p < .001$). Focus under distraction was related to academic motivation ($\chi^2(12) = 54.18$, $p < .001$), and emotional control was related to stress management during examinations and presentations ($\chi^2(12) = 31.47$, $p = .002$). The remaining tests did not reach significance. These covered decision-making and goal setting, teamwork and peer relationships, and consequential thinking and conflict avoidance. Individual SEL scores may therefore be only one part of the explanation for these social behaviours.

Regression results

Table 4: Regression of Academic Success and Behavioral Outcomes on SEL

Predictor → Outcome	R	R ²	B	F	p
SEL → Academic Success	0.348	0.121	0.348	20.56	.000
SEL → Behavioral Outcomes	0.274	0.075	0.274	12.05	.001

SEL accounted for 12.1% of the variance in academic success ($R^2 = 0.121$, $\beta = 0.348$, $p < .001$). It accounted for less of the variance in behavioural outcomes: 7.5% ($R^2 = 0.075$, $\beta = 0.274$, $p = .001$). Both relationships were positive and statistically significant, so both null hypotheses were rejected. The academic relationship was the larger of the two.

Faculty responses

Faculty members reported that they often asked students to reflect on learning and emotional responses ($M = 4.68$). They also tried to make the classroom safe for emotional expression ($M = 4.64$). Their answers about implementation were less encouraging. Large classes limited individual attention ($M = 4.59$), curricular time was short ($M = 4.57$), and many lacked training in SEL principles and practices ($M = 4.55$). Some SEL work was already taking place, but it depended largely on individual faculty members.

Findings of the Study

- Students reported high SEL, academic success, and behavioural outcome scores.
- The 28-item questionnaire had acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.795).
- SEL explained 12.1% of the variance in academic success ($R^2 = 0.121$, $\beta = 0.348$, $p < .001$).
- SEL explained 7.5% of the variance in behavioural outcomes ($R^2 = 0.075$, $\beta = 0.274$, $p = .001$).
- Emotional awareness, focus under distraction, and emotional control were associated with academic or stress-related outcomes.
- The tests involving teamwork and consequential thinking were not significant. Context and culture may have more influence on those behaviours.
- Faculty members used some SEL practices, although large classes, limited time, and little training restricted what they could do.

Discussion of the Study

The relationship with academic success was larger than the relationship with behaviour. SEL explained 12.1% of the variance in academic success, a result that is consistent with Durlak et al. (2011) and with Goleman's (1995) account of emotional intelligence and achievement. The behavioural model explained 7.5% of the variance. This smaller result still fits Bandura's (1977) view that conduct develops through modelling and practice, as well as Taylor et al.'s (2017) evidence that behavioural effects can continue over time. The figures are statistically significant, but much of the variation in both results remains unexplained.

Not every proposed association appeared in the data. Decision-making was not related to goal setting, teamwork was not related to peer relationships, and consequential thinking was not related to conflict avoidance. A ceiling effect is possible because students gave high self-ratings across the scales. The local setting may matter as well. Malhotra et al. (2021) found that family and community norms shape cooperation and conflict avoidance in Gilgit-Baltistan. Faculty responses point to a separate institutional problem: teachers encouraged reflection and emotional safety, but large classes, limited time, and weak training restricted their efforts. Rana et al. (2022) and Shahab et al. (2025) reported similar constraints. Hameed et al. (2024) also documented pandemic-related disruption at the University of Baltistan. The evidence supports practical SEL provision in the region, but it does not suggest that SEL alone determines student outcomes.

Recommendations

- Institutions should include SEL in counselling, orientation, and student wellbeing services.
- Universities and colleges in Skardu should appoint trained counsellors because most do not have formal emotional support systems.
- Where resources allow, smaller classes or discussion groups would give faculty members more time with individual students.
- Faculty members should receive regular training in SEL and student emotional support.
- Education authorities in Gilgit-Baltistan should include SEL in higher education policy and fund counsellor posts in remote districts.
- Parents and families should be encouraged to discuss stress and emotions openly. Support at home can strengthen academic success.
- Future studies should include larger samples from several districts and use qualitative methods to document students' experiences.

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