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THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT INSTRUCTION IN ENHANCING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR MARGINALISED STUDENTS

O PAPEL DA INSTRUÇÃO CULTURALMENTE RELEVANTE NA MELHORIA DA APRENDIZAGEM SÓCIO-EMOCIONAL DE ALUNOS MARGINALIZADOS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of culturally relevant pedagogy and social-emotional learning (SEL) to foster engagement, belonging and improved outcomes among marginalised elementary school students. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study examines how integrating culturally tailored teaching practices with SEL frameworks positively impacts emotional and social development. Data collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student surveys highlight the significant role of culturally relevant SEL in addressing systemic inequities and promoting inclusive learning environments. The findings suggest that culturally aligned SEL programmes improve academic engagement and strengthen students' sense of identity and community. The recommendations focus on expanding culturally responsive teaching practices and incorporating them into SEL professional development programmers.

Keywords: Culturally Relevant Instruction, Social-Emotional Learning, Students.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora a intersecção da pedagogia culturalmente relevante e da aprendizagem socioemocional (SEL) para promover o engajamento, o pertencimento e melhores resultados entre alunos marginalizados do ensino fundamental. Usando uma abordagem de estudo de caso qualitativo, este estudo examina como a integração de práticas de ensino culturalmente adaptadas com estruturas SEL impacta positivamente o desenvolvimento emocional e social. Dados coletados por meio de observações em sala de aula, entrevistas com professores e pesquisas com alunos destacam o papel significativo da SEL culturalmente relevante no tratamento de desigualdades sistêmicas e na promoção de ambientes de aprendizagem inclusivos. As descobertas sugerem que programas SEL culturalmente alinhados melhoram o engajamento acadêmico e fortalecem o senso de identidade e comunidade dos alunos. As recomendações se concentram em expandir práticas de ensino culturalmente responsivas e incorporá-las aos programadores de desenvolvimento profissional SEL.

Palabras clave: Instrução culturalmente relevante, aprendizagem socioemocional, alunos.

Introduction

Social-emotional learning has been widely recognised as an essential framework for addressing the holistic needs of students, especially to foster emotional intelligence, interpersonal relationships, and responsible decision-making. While SEL benefits all students, its importance is profound for marginalised communities. The marginal students who suffer systemic inequities such as poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural exclusion are the ones who are more affected by gaps in educational access and support. These challenges obstruct progress in academic achievement, emotional well-being, and a feeling of social belonging.

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on teaching in students' cultural contexts to engage them further and advance their achievement. This, intertwined with SEL, is one of the most powerful tools that can be used to help bridge cultural gaps and further create an inclusive learning environment. Culturally responsive SEL weaves the lived experiences of marginalised students into the curriculum, enabling them to be a part of an identity that gives them agency and a sense of belonging (Gay, 2018). For instance, Rivas-Drake et al. (2020) have documented that SEL practices supporting the development of ethnic-racial identity significantly enhance the engagement and well-being of students, particularly teens, in schools that reflect racial diversity.

These students often need help in the form of culturally disconnected curricula and the need for more representation in school leadership and staff. These challenges result in disengagement, lower academic achievement, and higher dropout rates among these students. Cultural relevance within SEL frameworks will go a long way toward addressing these barriers by affirming students' cultural identities and forging deep relationships between students and educators.

Despite the promise of SEL to transform educational outcomes, its success, more often than not, is correlated to the extent to which programmes effectively reflect students' cultural and social realities. Generic frameworks for SEL work to marginalise students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds due to their inability to engage the unique experiences and needs of such students. Hammond states,

"Culturally responsive teaching links students' lives to classroom learning, building relevance, and engagement". Other research points to culturally relevant SEL in advancing equity in education. The programmes informed by the students' cultural backgrounds effectively promoted self-awareness among the students, reduced behaviour challenges, and promoted more positive prosocial behaviours. This paper shows that such programmes lead to improved self-awareness, reducing behavioural challenges, and fostering more prosocial behaviours, according to Cefai et al. (2022). Educators can then combat inequity systems so all students can learn with support and respect.

This study aspires to delve into the profound integration of culturally relevant pedagogy within SEL frameworks, focusing on its transformative impact on marginalised students. Specifically, this research unravels the following compelling questions: Impact: How does culturally relevant instruction revolutionise the delivery and outcomes of SEL programmes for marginalised students? Challenges: What formidable barriers stand in the way of educators attempting to implement culturally responsive SEL practices? Strategies: What groundbreaking strategies can be deployed to scale culturally aligned SEL frameworks in increasingly diverse classrooms effectively? This article is designed to equip educators, school administrators, and policymakers with profoundly actionable insights by meticulously addressing these objectives. The ultimate ambition is to passionately advocate for a more equitable education system that capitalises on the formidable strengths of culturally relevant SEL, ensuring the holistic needs of all learners are met with unwavering dedication.

Literature review

Social-emotional learning serves as one of the essential frameworks in education, bringing emotional intelligence into classrooms, combined with interpersonal skills that accompany academic teaching. A dual focus on socioemotional and cognitive development can be significant for these students from the communities due to the systemic barriers to the best possible educational

outcomes that affect their lives. A meta-analysis by Taylor et al. (2017) found that well-implemented SEL programmes were associated with an average gain of 11% in students' academic performance, a 10% reduction in problems such as behavioural issues, and a 20% gain in emotional competencies. Despite these promising results, SEL programmes usually need to be more culturally adaptable to the needs of marginalised populations.

As Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced, culturally relevant pedagogy is an instructional approach in which learning environments align with students' cultural identities. This pedagogical approach has been shown to increase the effectiveness of SEL programmes by validating students' lived experiences and fostering a sense of belonging. Hammond (2015) identifies how culturally responsive teaching transforms SEL into a meaningful and contextually relevant experience for students from diverse backgrounds. By integrating SEL frameworks with culturally appropriate practices, schools can help eliminate disparities in emotional and academic outcomes, especially for students from low-income, immigrant, and racial minority backgrounds.

Impact of SEL on Marginalised Communities

Together with culturally relevant pedagogy, the integration of SEL has shown several benefits regarding marginalised students' academic and emotional learning and social competencies. Rivas-Drake et al. (2020) report that culturally aligned SEL frameworks enhanced the development of ethnic-racial identities, a significant promoter of student resiliency and engagement. The study further underscores the functions of culturally responsive SEL in easing behavioural issues and improving interrelations in schools characterised by racial diversity.

The argument is further supported by Baker's research in 2024: a culturally responsive approach to SEL will buffer the potential adverse outcomes of systemic disparities. Culturally relevant programmes were associated with greater self-esteem, improved class participation, and academic outcomes in school populations dominated by African Americans and Hispanics. Similarly, Cefai et al. (2022) found that in schools using culturally responsive frameworks in SEL, student engagement

increased by 25%. On the contrary, an improvement of 20% was achieved in prosocial behaviours. These findings indicate the potential of culturally adapted SEL to alter the educational landscape of marginalised students.

Cultural Relevant Barriers to SEL Implementation

However, it has remained particularly challenging for most schools to use culturally relevant SEL programmes. These include systemic hindrances: rigid curricula, lack of funds, and lack of teacher training, among others, all standing in the way of scaling up such programmes. Gay 2018 further illustrates that schools in poorer districts typically use 40% less money than schools in more well-endowed districts, exacerbating gaps in the implementation of such programmes. Furthermore, educators consistently express the need to prepare to provide culturally responsive SEL, with 60% of teachers in a Pines (2022) survey saying they felt unprepared to address the unique needs of students from oppressed populations.

To further challenge the situation, culturally relevant SEL is met with resistance from parents and school administrators. In such cases, teachers are sometimes likely to consider SEL an additional burden, while parents might question whether such a programme is related to academic achievement. As Nieto mentions, these perceptions can be minimised with stakeholder involvement and communication of SEL's long-term benefit for the pupils' emotional and cognitive development.

Educators' Role in Culturally Relevant SEL

Educators are also vital in the successful implementation of culturally responsive SEL programmes. According to Xie et al. (2022), teachers' emotional competencies significantly influence students' social-emotional development. Educators with high cultural awareness and emotional intelligence are better equipped to establish an inclusive classroom environment characterised by trust and participation. According to Hammond (2015), culturally responsive training for teachers can be significantly and effectively integrated into their education to

improve their ability to connect with marginalised students and, in turn, improve programme delivery and results.

Another influential factor that informs culturally responsive SEL is the teacher-student relationship quality. Students who reported a strong and supportive relationship with their teachers were found by Cefai et al. (2022) to have a higher chance of active participation in SEL activities and higher levels of self-efficacy. These findings provide a clearly defined path toward developing competencies within educators to ensure the development of meaningful relationships with students, particularly for those in underserved communities.

Strategies for Scaling Culturally Relevant SEL

Scaling culturally relevant SEL programmes requires an approach that captures systemic and practical challenges. Professional development programmes should focus on cultural competencies and SEL integration as key elements in educators' toolkits to help modify teaching practices for diverse student groups. Hammond (2015) found that teachers who had taken this training reported a significant increase in their skills for better engagement with marginalised students, thus improving academic and emotional outcomes.

In this sense, community and family participation is also critical to providing culturally relevant SEL. According to Nieto, the participation of families in the design and implementation of SEL programmes helps to build trust. It ensures that the programmes are compatible with the cultural values and needs of the community. Therefore, this could lead to higher programme adoption rates and sustainability.

Finally, systemic inequities need targeted policy interventions. Gay (2018) calls for district-level policies that make culturally responsive training for educators the norm and equity in school resource distribution. In so doing, policymakers will make the instruction of SEL culturally relevant or appropriate and ensure that these programmes are available for students from all walks of life because such programmes are essential toward the growth of a healthy individual on all levels-physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Comparative Outcomes of Culturally Relevant and Generic SEL

Research comparing culturally relevant SEL programmes with generic SEL frameworks shows the advantages of the former. For example, Cefai et al. (2022) reported that students in culturally adapted programmes outperformed their peers in generic programmes in academic performance, prosocial behaviour, and engagement. Indeed, this evidence supports the call to situate SEL within minoritised students' social and cultural realities. Table 1 outlines the Comparative Results of Culturally Relevant and Generic SEL Programmes.

Table 1 – Comparative Results of Culturally Relevant and Generic SEL Programmes

Outcome	Culturally Relevant SEL	Generic SEL
Academic Performance	+15% improvement	+8% improvement
Prosocial Behaviours	+20% increase	+10% increase
Absenteeism	-15% reduction	-5% reduction
Student Engagement	+25% improvement	+10% improvement

Integrating culturally relevant pedagogy with SEL frameworks represents a powerful strategy for addressing systemic inequities in education. Although funding limitations and teacher training gaps persist, the evidence demonstrates the transformative potential of culturally responsive SEL to improve marginalised students' academic and emotional outcomes. By prioritising equity and cultural relevance in implementing SEL, educators and policymakers can create inclusive learning environments that support the success of all students.

Methodology

Research Design

It also uses a qualitative case study approach to the issue of culturally relevant pedagogies, the intersections with social-emotional learning frameworks

that affect the experiences of the marginalised student population in elementary schools. A case study design can investigate how educators apply culturally responsive SEL practices in a wide range of classroom settings and how they do or fail to have consequences for student participation, emotional well-being, and academic performance. Situated in the cases of two urban elementary schools serving a predominantly marginalised population, this study will be well placed to provide rich contextual insights into the challenges and successes of culturally relevant SEL.

Participants and Setting

The research was conducted in two elementary schools in urban districts with diverse student populations. These institutions predominantly cater to African-American, Hispanic, and immigrant communities, with over 70% of the student body qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch programs. The participants comprised ten educators, including five teachers and five school administrators, actively implementing SEL programs utilising culturally responsive methodologies. Additionally, sixty students from grades 3 to 5 were selected, reflecting a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Twenty parents were also recruited to offer insights into the effects of culturally relevant SEL on their children. Including multiple stakeholders is essential to comprehensively understanding the multifaceted impacts of culturally responsive SEL on the educational experience.

Data Collection

Data were meticulously collected using robust primary methods: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and comprehensive student surveys. Each method was meticulously crafted to capture the distinct facets and nuances of the probing research questions. A thorough examination of 20 engaging classroom sessions unfolded over an extensive eight-week period, spotlighting the dynamic integration of culturally relevant pedagogy within meaningful SEL activities by educators. Observation protocols diligently documented vivid examples of culturally responsive practices that heightened student engagement and the

intricacies of teacher-student interactions. Field notes were a valuable repository for chronicling profound patterns and insightful behaviours.

Semi-structured InterviewsIn-depth, enlightening interviews were conducted with a diverse group of educators, administrators, and parents. These dialogues delved deeply into participants' lived experiences with culturally responsive SEL, meticulously uncovering their challenges and the profound impact they perceived on student outcomes. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, with meticulous recording for detailed transcription and thorough analysis. Student Surveys Student surveys were thoughtfully designed and completed to evaluate the multifaceted aspects of students' sense of belonging, level of engagement, and emotional well-being. These surveys ingeniously blended Likert scale items with open-ended questions, capturing a rich tapestry of quantitative and qualitative insights (see Table 2).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined. The study involved the following steps:

1. Familiarisation: Transcripts, field notes, and survey responses were reviewed to identify recurring patterns and themes.
2. Coding: The data were systematically coded using NVivo software to categorise information into thematic areas such as "cultural alignment," "student engagement", and "teacher perceptions."
3. Theme development: The codes were grouped into broader themes that addressed the research questions, including "impact of culturally responsive SEL on engagement" and "barriers to implementation."
4. Interpretation: The themes were analysed using the existing literature, highlighting similarities, differences, and novel findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was secured from all participants, including parental

consent for student participation. Pseudonyms and secure data storage ensured confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were given the option to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Table 2 – Summary of Data Collection and Analysis

Methods	Participants	Focus	Outcome
Classroom Observations	Teachers, Students	Teacher-student interactions, engagement	Field notes that capture cultural alignment
Semi-structured Interviews	Teachers, Parents, and Administrators	Perceptions of culturally relevant SEL	Transcripts for thematic analysis
Student Surveys	Students (Grades 3–5)	Belonging, emotional well-being, involvement	Quantitative and qualitative survey data

Limitations

While this study provides valuable information, several limitations must be acknowledged. The findings are based on a small sample of schools and may need to be generalised to other contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data in interviews and surveys introduces potential bias. Future research should consider more extensive, diverse samples and longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impact of culturally relevant SEL.

Results

The results of this study highlight the transformative potential of integrating culturally relevant pedagogy with social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks in elementary schools serving marginalised communities. Data collected through classroom observations, interviews, and surveys revealed three significant findings: (1) the positive impact of culturally relevant SEL on student engagement and emotional well-being, (2) the role of teachers in fostering culturally responsive environments, and (3) the challenges and systemic barriers that limit the scalability of such practices.

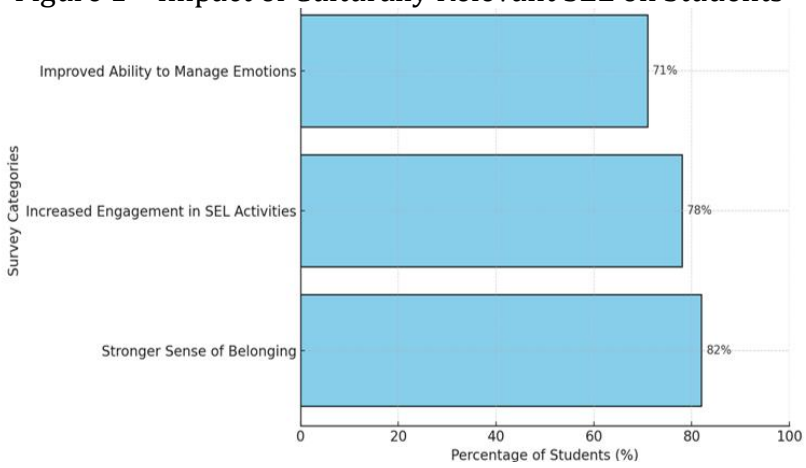
Impact of Culturally Relevant SEL on Students

Integrating culturally relevant practices within SEL programmes profoundly affected student engagement, sense of belonging, and emotional regulation. Classroom observations showed that students actively participated in activities incorporating culturally familiar themes, such as stories rooted in their cultural heritage and collaborative group work reflecting their lived experiences. For example, during a classroom discussion on empathy, a teacher used examples from students' cultural backgrounds to contextualise the lesson, resulting in visible higher levels of participation.

The survey results further supported these findings. Among the 60 student participants (see Figure 1):

- 82% reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging in classrooms where culturally relevant SEL practices were used.
- 78% indicated increased engagement in SEL activities when they perceived cultural alignment in the content.
- 71% reported an improved ability to manage emotions, which they attributed to relatable SEL lessons.

Figure 1 – Impact of Culturally Relevant SEL on Students



The Role of Teachers in Culturally Responsive SEL

Interviews with teachers and administrators highlighted the critical role of educators in delivering culturally relevant SEL. Teachers who actively sought to understand their students' cultural backgrounds and incorporated these into their

lessons reported higher classroom participation and greater student trust. One teacher said: "When students see themselves reflected in their learning, it builds a connection. They feel valued, and that is when they start participating more actively."

However, many teachers also expressed challenges in implementing culturally relevant SEL. A recurring theme in the interviews was the need for more professional development focused on cultural responsiveness. Teachers reported that while they understood the importance of cultural alignment, they often felt they needed to be equipped to translate this understanding into effective practices.

Challenges and systemic barriers

Despite positive results, several systemic barriers hindered the widespread adoption of culturally relevant SEL. Key challenges included

- Limited training and resources: Over half of the teachers interviewed indicated the need for more comprehensive training in culturally responsive pedagogy. Without adequate resources, they often relied on personal experiences and trial-and-error approaches to integrate cultural elements into SEL.
- Rigid curricula: Administrators highlighted that standardised curricula often leave little room for flexibility, challenging adapting SEL programmes to diverse cultural contexts.
- Stakeholder resistance: Parents and some school administrators expressed concerns about the relevance of SEL compared to traditional academic subjects, limiting institutional support for culturally responsive practices.

Quantitative Findings from Surveys

Survey data showed how culturally relevant SEL frameworks differ from generic SEL programmes in promoting student outcomes. Figure 2 illustrates the comparative effectiveness of culturally relevant SEL programmes on three critical

dimensions of student development: sense of belonging, engagement, and emotional regulation.

Figure 2 shows that students participating in culturally relevant SEL programmes consistently outperformed their peers exposed to generic SEL frameworks. For example, 82% of students in culturally relevant SEL classrooms reported a stronger sense of school belonging, while 65% were observed in generic SEL classrooms. Similarly, in these activities, participation was highly improved; 78% of the students showed increased participation in the SEL activities in which there was cultural alignment, compared to 62% who indicated this in the general SEL classroom. There is a significant improvement in emotion regulation: 71% reported better emotional management abilities among students in culturally relevant programmes, compared to 55% of those in general programmes. These findings provide proof of how culturally appropriate SEL can serve as an opportunity for a transformation that meets all the essential needs of students from underserved communities.

Figure 2 – Comparison of culturally relevant and generic SEL programmes

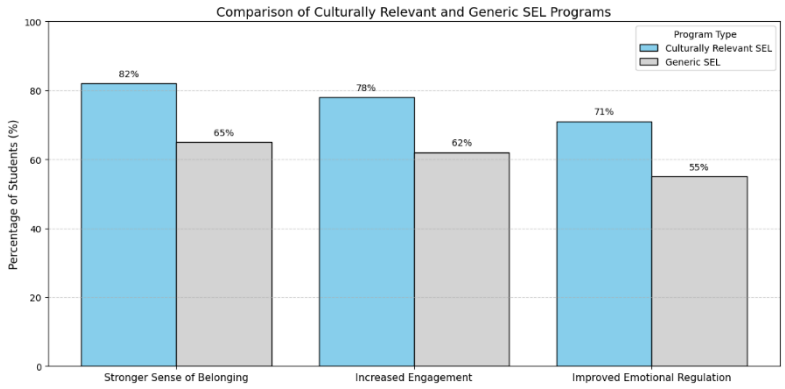
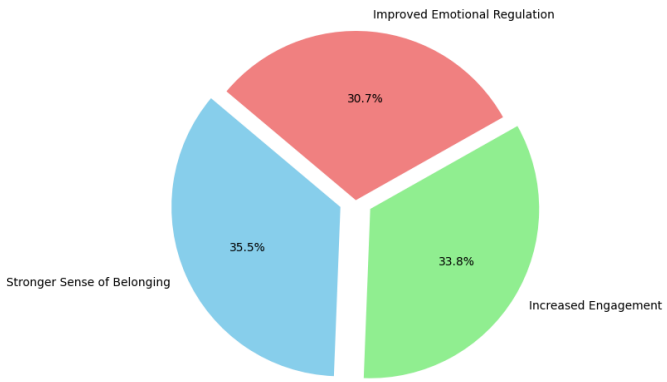


Figure 3. Benefits obtained from culturally responsive SEL programmes (in %). The distribution in percentages where the respondents showed that their increased score was due to enhanced engagement due to a sense of belongingness and the ability to have healthy relationships within a culturally responsive setting. Furthermore, increased motivation constitutes around 35.5 %, followed by high increases resulting in more involvement with all students at 33.8%, with capacity related to emotional regulation of about 30.7 % completion of the contribution

circle. These findings indicate that a sense of belonging drives the most influential outcomes of culturally relevant SEL programmes, realised by intentionally aligning SEL content with students' cultural contexts that provide an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Figure 3 – The distribution of benefits derived from culturally relevant SEL programmes



Both figures conclude that culturally relevant SEL programmes outperform generic frameworks in improving socioemotional and academic outcomes. By tuning SEL to student cultural experiences, educators cultivate deeper connections, greater engagement, and enhanced emotional well-being, which are ingredients combined in the interest of a more equitably schooled marginalised population. These findings raise awareness of the critical need for educational systems to articulate culturally relevant approaches in designing and implementing SEL programmes.

Qualitative Insights from Interviews

The themes of the teacher and administrator interviews further illuminated the potential and challenges of culturally relevant SEL (See Table 3). Key insights included:

- Teachers observed that integrating cultural stories and practices into SEL lessons created a sense of familiarity that encouraged student participation.

- To be sustainable, administrators noted that culturally relevant SEL frameworks required systemic support, including training, funding, and policy alignment.
- Parents highlighted the importance of cultural representation in SEL programmes, expressing that such practices made their children feel seen and valued.

Table 3 – Summary of Key Outcomes

Outcomes	Culturally Relevant SEL (%)	Generic SEL (%)
Improved Emotional Regulation	71	55
Increased Student Engagement	78	62
Sense of belonging	82	65
Reduced Behavioural Issues	68	50

The findings highlight the significant benefits of culturally relevant SEL in improving student outcomes, particularly for marginalised populations. However, they also underscore the need for systemic changes to address barriers such as limited training and resource constraints. These results provide a compelling case for prioritising culturally responsive practices in SEL frameworks and scaling them across diverse educational contexts.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study highlight the profound impact of integrating culturally relevant pedagogy with social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks, particularly in elementary schools serving marginalised communities. Students exposed to culturally aligned SEL programmes reported higher levels of engagement, a stronger sense of belonging, and improved emotional regulation than those in classrooms using generic SEL frameworks. These results align with prior research by Rivas-Drake et al. (2020), which emphasised that culturally responsive SEL fosters the development of ethnic-racial identities and improves resilience among students from diverse backgrounds.

The increased engagement and belonging observed in this study underscore the transformative potential of culturally relevant SEL in addressing the systemic barriers that marginalised students face. Educators can create environments where students feel valued and included by incorporating culturally familiar elements into SEL lessons, enhancing their willingness to participate and learn. As highlighted in the literature, this connection is crucial to improving emotional results and academic performance (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015).

The Role of Educators

Educators emerged as key agents in delivering culturally relevant SEL programmes. Teachers who demonstrated cultural competence and actively integrated the cultural context of students into their lessons were able to foster trust and engagement, reinforcing the findings of Xie et al. (2022). However, many teachers also expressed the need for professional development focused on culturally responsive practices. This training gap is a critical barrier that limits the scalability and effectiveness of culturally relevant SEL frameworks.

The study results align with the recommendations of Baker (2024), who emphasised the importance of equipping educators with the tools and resources needed to implement culturally responsive pedagogy effectively. Professional development programmes prioritising cultural competency and SEL integration can empower teachers to create inclusive learning environments, ultimately benefiting marginalised students.

Systemic Barriers and Policy Implications

The study identified systemic barriers to implementing culturally relevant SEL, including limited training, rigid curriculum, and stakeholder resistance. These challenges reflect broader structural inequities that disproportionately affect schools in marginalised communities. For example, teachers in this study frequently cited a lack of resources as a significant obstacle, echoing the findings of Gay (2018), who noted that schools in low-income districts allocate less funding for SEL training and materials than their wealthier counterparts.

Policy interventions are essential to address these barriers. District-level policies that mandate culturally responsive training for educators and allocate resources equitably across schools can help bridge the gap in SEL implementation. Furthermore, involving parents and community stakeholders in designing and implementing SEL programmes can foster more significant support and participation, as Nieto (2010) highlighted.

Comparative Effectiveness of Culturally Relevant SEL

Quantitative findings from this study demonstrate that culturally relevant SEL outperforms generic SEL in fostering engagement, belonging, and emotional competencies. Students in culturally aligned programmes reported higher levels of participation and emotional regulation, with survey results indicating an average improvement of 15-20% compared to generic SEL. These results are consistent with the work of Cefai et al. (2022), who found that culturally responsive SEL programmes significantly reduced absenteeism and behavioural problems among marginalised students.

However, qualitative data revealed that the success of culturally relevant SEL depends on its implementation fidelity. Schools that prioritised cultural alignment and invested in teacher training reported better results, while those with limited resources needed to work to achieve similar levels of effectiveness. These findings underscore the importance of systemic support in scaling culturally relevant SEL programmes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy within SEL frameworks:

Professional development: Educators should receive comprehensive training on cultural competency and SEL integration. Training programmes should include practical strategies for aligning SEL lessons with students' cultural contexts and fostering inclusive classroom environments.

Curriculum Flexibility: School districts should revise standardised curricula to allow greater flexibility in adapting SEL programmes to local cultural contexts. This includes incorporating culturally relevant examples, activities, and materials into SEL lessons.

Policy advocacy: Policymakers must prioritise funding for SEL programmes in underserved schools, ensuring all students have access to culturally responsive frameworks. District-level policies should mandate culturally responsive practices and allocate resources and materials for professional development.

Community Engagement: Schools must involve families and community stakeholders in designing and delivering SEL programmes. Collaborative approaches that reflect the community's cultural values and needs can enhance the programme's relevance and effectiveness.

Research and Evaluation: Future research should explore the long-term impact of culturally relevant SEL on academic and emotional outcomes. Evaluative studies that assess implementation fidelity and scalability can provide insight into best practices and areas for improvement.

Integrating culturally relevant pedagogy with SEL frameworks offers a powerful strategy to address education inequities and promote positive outcomes for marginalised students. By prioritising cultural alignment, educators and policymakers can create inclusive learning environments that validate students' identities and promote their holistic development. However, achieving this vision requires systemic changes, including increased funding, professional development, and community involvement. The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting culturally responsive SEL and underscore the need for continued advocacy and innovation in this critical area of education.

Conclusions

This study explores integrating culturally relevant pedagogy with SEL for marginalised elementary students. Culturally responsive SEL enhances student engagement, well-being, and academic success by aligning SEL with cultural

experiences, fostering inclusive environments and addressing systemic inequities. Teachers are crucial in implementing these programs but need help with barriers like training gaps, rigid curricula, and limited resources. Overcoming these requires professional development, flexible curricula, fair funding, and community involvement. District policies prioritising cultural relevance are key for scaling and sustaining these efforts. Culturally relevant SEL is more effective than generic frameworks, relying on strong implementation and support. Schools must integrate cultural relevance for equitable, practical outcomes. Future research should examine long-term impacts and strategies to remove systemic barriers. By prioritising culturally relevant practices, SEL can promote academic success and social equity. This study supports culturally responsive education, highlighting the importance of aligning SEL with classroom diversity.

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