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Promoting mental health with programs for social and emotional learning: children's experiences according to a qualitative evidence synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is a challenge for many children globally. Universal programs for social and emotional learning (SEL) have convincing evidence for improving mental well-being and academic achievement. In a recent qualitative evidence synthesis, teachers showed appreciation of these programs. This study explores the children's experiences through a qualitative synthesis consisting of five studies. Riks for bias and confidence in the findings were assessed. The results showed that children experienced that SEL programs improved their self-esteem and self-confidence, fostered their close relationships and enhanced their socialisation and conflict management skills, which in turn improved the school environment. Although most participants had positive experiences of the SEL-programs, some of the participants perceived the programs as rigid, boring and repetitive. It is thus important to involve the students, making them co-creators when implementing a SEL-program, to minimize risks of negative experiences. In all, there are scientific evidence from both quantitative and qualitative research supporting the dissemination of universal school-based SEL interventions.

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Background

Mental health is central to a good life, from the cradle to the grave. The World Health Organization (WHO) has described it as 'a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and can contribute to his or her community' (WHO, 2023). However, mental health is increasingly challenging for many children globally, which threatens their potential to live a productive life during childhood and throughout the life course. Globally, one in seven 10 to 19 year olds experience a mental disorder, which accounts for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group (WHO, 2021). Not only is this a drawback for affected individuals and their families, but it also undermines the society as a whole.

Children's needs are complex and varying. The Nurturing Care Framework, a roadmap for action, has been developed to help children 0–5 years to reach their full potential (WHO, 2018). The five interrelated and indivisible components include: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, response caregiving and opportunities for playful learning. Preschools and schools are important arenas not only for learning academic subjects, but also for promoting mental health and personal development, such as social and emotional competences (Svensson & Warne, 2024; Kostenius & Warne, 2020). According to Tamminen et al. (2016), positive mental health and mental well-being are closely related. Mental well-being can be further explained as perceived mental well-being, with outcomes which include overall

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wellness, health-related quality of life and sense of connection. It can also include the ability to improve outcomes, such as social and emotional skills, resilience, coping strategies and self-confidence according to the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU) (SBU, 2022).

Recent research by Liu et al. (2023) suggests that strengthening social support and increasing psychological resilience can reduce suicidal ideation in teenagers, and reducing peer aggression and increasing psychological resilience can be effective in reducing the level of suicidal ideation in adolescents with socially avoidant behaviours. From a pedagogical perspective it could be suggested that teenagers' socialemotional skills can be enhanced through SEL in order to reduce suicidal ideation and behavior (Liu & Li, 2025). According to Durlak et al. (2022) and Cipriano et al. (2023) the universal school-based social and emotional learning interventions, also called social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, can strengthen these aspects of mental well-being. Integrating SEL within the school curricula has become increasingly common throughout the world (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2022). A recent review of 12 meta-analyses, involving approximately one million children from kindergarten through Grade 12, showed that SEL programs had consistent and positive impacts on a broad range of outcomes including improved SEL skills and academic achievements and decreased conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2022). These positive findings were evident despite a vast variability in SEL agendas in regard to content and elements of implementation (Cipriano et al., 2023). Thus, convincing evidence has been accumulated, which indicates the beneficial effects of SEL curricula on a wide range of children's outcomes that are important for school success in relationships with peers and teachers, as well as academic achievements.

Despite its effectiveness, SEL programs will only become widely disseminated globally provided that both teachers and children appreciate the locally employed agenda (SBU, 2022). To date, this aspect has only been considered in a few studies, but to our knowledge no published overview is available, which is why this current qualitative synthesis is needed. The authors have recently conducted a qualitative evidence synthesis to describe and understand teachers' experiences of delivering SEL programs, which in summary shows that the programs were appreciated and would benefit from being culturally adapted (Mangrio et al., 2024). In the present article, the children are in focus with the aim to describe and understand their experiences of participating in SEL programs and the perceived effect on their mental well-being.

Method

This qualitative evidence synthesis (QES) was conducted in accordance with the Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research (ENTREQ) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. It was part of a larger assessment of universal programs to promote mental well-being in children and adolescents up to 18 years, including both quantitative and qualitative studies, carried out by the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU). The full report is available in Swedish, with a summary in English, at the SBU website (SBU, 2022). The research protocol was registered in the International prospective register of systematic reviews (PROSPERO) database, no. CRD42021291503. The present article focuses on the five qualitative studies found in the SBU assessment, that explore children's experiences of participating in a SEL program.

Inclusion criteria

One inclusion criteria was that studies had to be conducted in school settings from preschool to high school. Another inclusion criteria was that the studies were covering experiences and perceptions of the SEL programs and on perceived changes in children's behaviour. In addition, one inclusion criteria was that children acted as the informants. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals in either English or Scandinavian languages were included.

Literature search

The literature search for qualitative studies was part of the comprehensive search conducted for the full SBU-report. The last search was conducted in March 2022, by a librarian/information specialist in dialogue with the researchers. Peer-reviewed journals published from 1990 to March 2022 were searched, more specifically Medline, PsycInfo, Educational Source, Scopus, Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, ERIC, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection and SocINDEX databases. Free text, medical subject headings (MeSH) and thesaurus terms were used. The full search strategy is available in the published report (SBU, 2022).

Selection of studies

The selection of studies from searches through title, abstract and full-text screening can be seen in Figure 1. Abstracts were assessed by the first and the last authors independently, followed by a consensus discussion together with the second author, after which it was decided which references should be read in their entirety. Full text studies were reviewed in the same way.

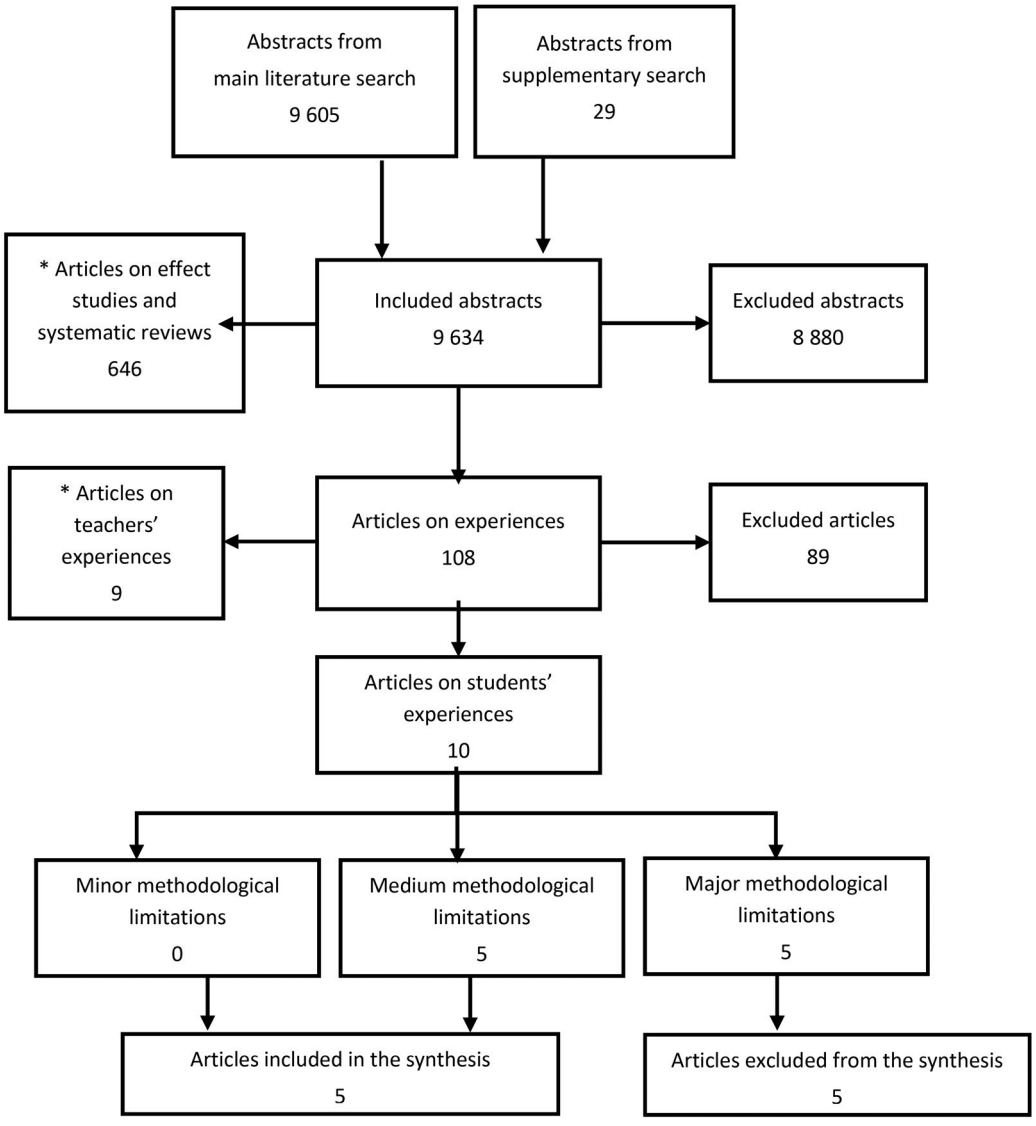

Figure 1. Flow chart of the literature search including assessment for relevance and quality.
*These studies were included in the SBU-project as a whole (SBU, 2022) but were not included in the present study.

The first and last authors are senior researchers with experience in the field of health promotion, nursing, public health and migration research (CK, EM), and the third author is employed by SBU and has experience with qualitative studies and conducting QES (AP). Studies that fulfilled the inclusion criteria were assessed for their degree of methodological limitations. A checklist earlier developed by SBU was used to facilitate assessment with Confidence in the Evidence from Reviews of Qualitative Research (GRADE-CERQual) (SBU, 2022). Figure 1 shows the process from database searches until the final QES with its included studies. In total 9634 studies were found and all abstracts were read and 108 studies were selected as they were focused on experiences of SEL programs. All 108 studies were read in full-texts, 89 studies were excluded for not focusing on experiences of SEL programs. 9 studies focused on teachers experiences of SEL programs and these were included in another article (Mangrio et al., 2024). A total number of 10 studies focused on students' experiences of SEL programs answering the aim of this study. Of these 10 studies 5 studies were excluded after assessment for methodological limitations. Studies with a high risk of flawed findings resulting from methodological limitations were excluded from the synthesis. A total of 5 studies were included in the current QES (Figure 1).

All the included studies are presented with its characteristics including methodological assessment in Table 1.

Synthesis

An inductive thematic synthesis modified from Thomas and Harden (2008) was employed. First, relevant meaning units were extracted, line by line in all studies (first-level themes), and each unit was coded. Subsequently, codes across all studies were organised in descriptive themes (second-level themes). Finally, the second-level themes were condensed into main themes (third-level themes). To keep close to the original findings, the main themes were also descriptive, which was a modification of the original method. The synthesis was conducted by the first and the last authors, first individually and then together. The second author validated all stages. Alternative themes and findings that contradicted our themes were actively explored. All data was handled in Word Office 365. See Table 2 with the themes and sub-themes for the synthesis.

Assessment of confidence in the evidence

Finally, level of confidence in the themes was assessed according to GRADE-CERQual (SBU, 2022). The following domains were assessed: coherence (Colvin et al., 2018), adequacy of data (Glenton et al., 2018), methodological limitations (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2018) and relevance of data (Noyes et al., 2018). A decision was made that themes based on fewer than 100 informants should be considered to have a limitation in data adequacy. The confidence in the evidence can be seen in Table 2. All sub-themes had methodological limitations and were assessed with moderate evidence.

The CASEL framework

SEL programs come in many different forms, but with similar content and outcomes (SBU, 2022). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an interdisciplinary organization that works to build knowledge about SEL and engages researchers, educators, and other practitioners (Advancing Social and Emotional Learning - CASEL). The CASEL framework addresses five broad, interrelated areas of competence and examples for each: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2026). These areas were used as outcome categories in the SBU HTA-report on which this article is based (SBU, 2022). CASEL has two overarching goals: to advance the science of SEL and to use science to develop effective methods that can be used in schools (Frye et al., 2024). CASEL shares criteria and best practices to support schools in implementing SEL programs in classrooms and throughout the school. These criteria are then used to evaluate and identify well-designed, empirically supported SEL programs with the potential for widespread dissemination to schools and classrooms.

Table 1. Overview of the five scientific studies with children sharing their experiences of participating in an SEL programme.

Author	*Clarke*
Year	*2015*
Country	*Ireland*
Ref	*[53]*
Study design	*Participatory approaches, part of an RCT*
Aim of study	*Evaluate the implementation of Zippy's Friends*
Setting for the intervention	*44 primary schools in a disadvantaged part of Ireland (n = 717)*
Population of children Characteristics	*children from 9 classes,* *Age: 7–9 years*
Program	*Zippy's Friends*
Program class	*SEL*
Program deliverer	*Classroom teachers*
Sampling method	*Random*
Respondents (n)	*N = 161 children*
Dropout from study (n)	*NR*
Characteristics	*Mean age: 7 years 2 months*
Theoretical perspective of the study	*Not described*
Method for data collection	*Group brainstorming as part of a semi-structured workshop conducted by the researcher*
Method for analysis	*Inductive thematic analysis [54]*
Method for validation	*Cross-checking of codes with a second researcher*
Researchers (n)	*3*
Researcher background	*Health promotion researchers*
Risk for bias	*Moderate*
Author	*Clarke*
Year	*2010*
Country	*Ireland*
Ref	*[55]*
Study design	*Case study/* Interviews and group discussions
Aim of study	*Evaluate the implementation of Zippy's Friends*
Setting for the intervention	*2 primary schools, one rural, state school under protestant management, close to the border with Northern Ireland (170 pupils) and one large, urban Catholic state school in the west of Ireland (482 pupils)*
Population of children Characteristics	*Children in first class (urban school) and first and second class (rural school)* *Age: six years and nine months to nine years* *Sex;(Percent girls): NR* *Socioeconomic/educations: disadvantaged areas*
Program	*Zippy's Friends*
Program class	*SEL*
Program deliverer	*Classroom teachers*
Sampling method	*Open request and self- selection*
Respondents (n)	*42 pupils, 16 school staff, 7 parents, 12 other staff and community members*
Dropout from study (n)	*NR*
Characteristics	*NR*
Theoretical perspective of the study	*Not described*
Method for data collection	*Participatory workshops for the children, questionnaires for the teachers, interviews with teachers, parents and other stake holders*
Method for analysis	*Thematic analysis*
Method for validation	*Not described*
Researchers (n)	*3*
Researcher background	*One primary school teacher with MA degree, one researcher in Health Promotion and one Professor of Health Promotion and Public Health*
Risk for bias	*Moderate*
Author	*Drolet*
Year	*2013*
Country	*Canada*
Ref	*[56]*
Study design	*Qualitative*
Aim of study	*Explore how actors involved in Lions Quest perceive the program and its implementation*
Setting for the intervention	*3 schools in Eastern Ontario*
Population of children Characteristics	*School children, 12–14 years* *See below*
Program	*Lions Quest*
Program class	*SEL*
Program deliverer	*Classroom teachers*
Sampling method	A voluntary sample, first 26 students participating in the program
Respondents (n)	*26 students and 5 teachers*
Dropout from study (n)	*Not described*
Characteristics	*Students in general came from two-parent families with both parents in paid employment. Parent's level of education ranged from high school to a master's degree. All were residing in equal proportion of countryside, suburbs, village or city. Students self-identified as Caucasian.* *The participating teachers* overviewed the implementation.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Theoretical perspective of the study	*Not described*
Method for data collection	*Semi-structured interviews*
Method for analysis	Coding into themes and categories with the N-Vivo 8 program
Method for validation	*Inter-judge method where several researchers created the grid of categories and the grid was agreed upon by consensus*
Researchers (n)	*7*
Researcher background	*Three researchers,three graduated students from diverse disciplines and one additional author not described further*
Risk for bias	*Moderate*
Author	*Haymowitz*
Year	*2017*
Country	*USA*
Ref	*[59]*
Study design	*Mixed methods with concept mapping including brainstorming*
Aim of study	*Explore the impact of a SEL-program*
Setting for the intervention	*One small, independent, secular school guided by the Waldorf philosophy. The school had 150 students.*
Population of children Characteristics	*Children from birth through 8th grade*
	Not described
Program	*Social Harmony*
Program class	*SEL*
Program deliverer	*School staff and 10 rotating parents*
Sampling method	*Invitation to the entire school community*
Respondents (n)	*32 students, alumni, faculty members, parents, colleagues and administrators*
Dropout from study (n)	*Not relevant*
Characteristics	*Not described*
Theoretical perspective of the study	*Not described*
Method for data collection	*Ideas were generated anonymously on the internet in response to a prompt*
Method for analysis	*Concept mapping*
Method for validation	*Not described*
Researchers (n)	*4*
Researcher background	*Two doctoral candidates, one independent educator and one assistant professor in social work*
Risk for bias	*Moderate*
Author	*Medin*
Year	*2020*
Country	*Sweden*
Ref	*[63]*
Study design	*Qualitative/Focus groups*
Aim of study	*Explore children's perspectives on knowledge about and experience of participation in the program*
Setting for the intervention	*One urban elementary school in south-western Sweden*
Population of children Characteristics	*All students in grades 2 and 3 (n = 132)*
	Not described
Program	*Livskunskap Förskoleklass till åk 3 (eng. Life Skills Training from Kindergarten to 3rd grade)*
Program class	*SEL*
Program deliverer	*Two social workers (bachelor's level, Swe: socionom) with decades of experience in leading group- based SEL programs*
Sampling method	*Randomly nominated by their teaches by selecting the first five to six children in each class list*
Respondents (n)	*23 students*
Dropout from study (n)	*Not described*
Characteristics	*11 girls and 12 boys, ages between 8 and 10 years; 85 % born in Sweden; 60 % had one or both parents born in another country. All were fluent in Swedish*
Theoretical perspective of the study	*Not described*
Method for data collection	*Four focus groups*
Method for analysis	*Thematic analyses* [54]
Method for validation	*Not described*
Researchers (n)	*2*
Researcher background	*One associate professor and one MA working as a coordinator at the university*
Risk for bias	*Moderate*

[53] Clarke, A. M., Sixsmith, J., Barry, M. M. (2015). Evaluating the implementation of an emotional wellbeing programme for primary school children using participatory approaches. *Health Education Journal*, *74*(5), pp. 578–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0017896914553133.
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[56] Drolet, M., Arcand, I., Ducharme, D., & Leblanc, R. (2013). The sense of school belonging and implementation of a prevention program: Toward healthier interpersonal relationships among early adolescents. *Child and Adolescent Social Work*, *30*, 535–551. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-013-0305-5.
[59] Haymovitz, E., Houseal-Allport, P., Lee, R. S., & Svistova, J. Exploring the perceived benefits and limitations of a school-based social–emotional learning program: A concept map evaluation. *Children & Schools*, *40*(1), 45–54. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdx029.
[63] Medin, E., & Jutengren, G. (2020). Children's perspectives on a school-based social and emotional learning program. *Children & Schools*, *42*(2), 121–130. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdaa007.

Table 2. A qualitative evidence synthesis of children's experiences of participating in an SEL program with its confidence in the evidence for the sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes	Confidence in the evidence for sub-themes
SEL programs enriched and developed the children and others in the school, which improved their social context.	The SEL program promoted close relationships, conflict management skills and social interaction	Moderate[1] (4 articles/232 children)
	The SEL program improved self-esteem and self-confidence	Moderate[1] (4 articles/261 children)
	The school environment improved when children and teachers made positive behavioural changes during the SEL program	Moderate[1] (3 articles/100 children)
Large variations in children's experiences of SEL programs are challenging.	The lessons in the SEL programs were fun and rewarding (3 articles/210 children)	Moderate[1] (3 articles/210 children)
	Problems with the SEL programs were experienced (3 articles/216 children)	Moderate[1] (3 articles/216 children)

The number of articles and children supporting the findings are in parentheses.

Results

Overview of the included studies

Five scientific studies with children sharing their experiences of participating in an SEL program were included and analysed (Clarke et al., 2010; Haymovitz et al., 2018; Medin & Jutengren, 2020, Clarke et al., 2015 Drolet et al., 2013). A total of 284 children were included, with the individual studies contributing between 23 and 161 participants each. The studies focused on different, and partly overlapping age groups, 6–9 years (Clarke et al., 2010; 2015), 8–10 years (Medin & Jutengren, 2020) and 12–14 years (Haymovitz et al., 2018, Drolet et al., 2013), respectively. The studies were carried out in Sweden (Medin & Jutengren, 2020), the USA (Haymovitz et al., 2018), Ireland (Clarke et al., 2010; 2015) and Canada (Drolet et al., 2013), and examined schools from different settings. In one study, the SEL program was delivered to schools in disadvantaged areas (Clarke et al., 2015) and in another, two contrasting schools participated, one in a metropolitan environment and one in a rural disadvantaged area with a multicultural profile (Clarke et al., 2010). One study was conducted in a large city school (Medin & Jutengren, 2020) and another in a smaller private school (Haymovitzet al., 2018). In the fifth study, the children were equally divided in rural, suburban, village and city locations (Drolet et al., 2013). Different SEL courses were used: Zippy's Friends (Clarke et al., 2010; 2015), Social Harmony (Haymovitzet al., 2018), Lions Quest (Drolet et al., 2013) and Life Skills (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). The studies lacked a theoretical connection. Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews (Drolet et al., 2013), interviews and group discussions (Clarke et al., 2010; 2015), so-called concept mapping where a questionnaire was included (Haymovitz et al., 2018) and focus groups (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). Data were analysed using the inter-judge method (Drolet et al., 2013), thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2010, 2015) as well as cluster analysis and multidimensional scaling (Haymovitz et al., 2018). Study characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

The qualitative evidence synthesis resulted in two main themes with two and three sub-themes, respectively (Table 2). The level of confidence was moderate for all sub-themes, except for one that had low confidence due to methodological limitations. The main reason was the absence of information regarding the position of the researchers and because it was based on only 100 respondents.

SEL programs enriched and developed the children and others in the school, which improved their social context

The first main theme consisted of three sub-themes further explained below:

The SEL programs promoted close relationships, conflict management skills and social interaction

A recurring experience among the children was that SEL taught them to foster close relationships with both peers and adults (Clarke et al., 2015; Drolet et al., 2013; Haymovitz et al., 2018). Children expressed that the program inspired them and developed their emotional capacities (Haymovitz et al., 2018). They reported that they were '*better at talking to each other than we used to be on our own*' and that they

enhanced their '*compassion and understanding (of peers)*' (Haymovitz et al., 2018, p. 50). Children also reported that the program gave them better communication and more compassion (Haymovitz et al., 2018). They further indicated that they learned how to make and keep friends, among other things, by showing respect for differences (Drolet et al., 2013). To quote one 14-year-old boy: '*It's cool because the whole gang's like me, and I'm the same as them. We like everybody a lot; we have fun together; we're all smart the same way I am, and we're really close. We're a family*' (Drolet et al., 2013, p. 546).

Children increased knowledge of conflict management, which fostered their close relationships (Haymovitz et al., 2018). Some comments from the children included '*It's about keeping friends*', '*You learn to play with them*', '*Don't hurt them*', '*Don't bully them*' (Clarke et al., 2010, p.283). Some children reported that the SEL program (Lions Quest) played an important role in improving their ability to resolve conflicts. One child in Grade 7 said, '*I wasn't thinking about what I was saying, so just about anything came out, but now I know how others feel if I let loose like that. I've learned to be nice. I've decided I should think before I speak*' (Drolet et al., 2013, p. 545).

Children gained a deeper understanding of emotional life, became more comfortable expressing their feelings and were no longer afraid to react to conflicts, rather than standing by as observers (Haymovitz et al., 2018). Although many children felt that they improved their conflict management skills, there were those who did not have this positive experience. Some said they would react the same way they did before the SEL course if a similar conflict situation arose (Drolet et al., 2013). Skills such as stepping down, seeking help from adults, compromising and apologising, helped children manage conflicts (Clarke et al., 2010; Drolet et al., 2013; Haymovitz et al.,2018). The children perceived the SEL program as having great potential for them to develop social skills, such as older children helping younger children and their feeling safe talking to each other (Haymovitz et al., 2018; Medin & Jutengren, 2020). Children reported that they benefited from the bonds they made with other children and that in general their efforts to improve relationships improved. As one child in Grade 7 stated, *'I'd never be that social in a classroom, because, like I'm shy and I don't talk to anybody. But you know, by the end [of Lions Quest program], everybody was beginning to say: 'You know what? She really is fun to be with. Let's go and hang out with her'* (Drolet et al., 2013, p.544). When asked what the SEL course (Zippy's Friends) had taught them, one child told her sister *'It's okay to feel angry; I learned this. It's okay, but don't be mean to others'* (Clarke et al., 2010, p.281).

The SEL program improved self-esteem and self-confidence

The children shared that they gained a new way of dealing with their emotions to better understand themselves (Haymovitz et al., 2018). They felt able to express their feelings more easily and found the stories they heard in the SEL program about how they could share their feelings to be helpful in doing this (Clarke et al., 2010, 2015). According to the children, their confidence and courage to ask for help increased (Drolet et al., 2013). One child talked about learning to *'tell the teacher or talk to an adult if you are being bullied'.* Another child said, *'If someone makes you sad, you have to tell them why you're feeling sad'* (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 588). A 13-year-old boy responded without hesitation: *'We found our class fun, because the teacher was organising lots of activities and we learned by doing fun things. Now we're more confident in ourselves'* (Drolet et al., 2013, p. 544). According to the children, enhanced self-confidence went hand-in-hand with greater self-esteem, and they described that they had more respect for their own opinions. When asked why that was, a 13-year-old student answered, *'Probably because I'm more sure of myself. And I know I have a good idea about what I'm doing'* (Drolet et al., 2013, p. 544). These new abilities inspired the children with an improved self-confidence (Drolet et al., 2013).

The school environment improved when children and teachers made positive behavioural changes during the SEL program

Children described how the school environment improved, as other children and teachers were also affected by the SEL course and changed their behaviours (Clarke et al., 2015; Haymovitz et al., 2018). They felt that the program made the school more inclusive than before (Haymovitz et al., 2018). This was described by the children in terms of heightened well-being and the belief that the conditions for friendships had been enhanced. When asked if he enjoyed school, one 13-year-old boy responded, *'Yeah, because like I have lots*

of friends there; that's what it's all about! There are some good teachers too. I really like it there. We do lots of activities, and I've made so many new friends with some people I met there' (Drolet et al., 2013, p. 546). The children indicated that the SEL course had had a significant influence on their everyday lives and improved the social climate in the school (Drolet et al., 2013). Additional student comments included: *'We're all close in our class, the whole 8th grade. We're all one big family. We don't judge anybody; we're always there for each other. Someone's accepted for who they are'* (Drolet et al., 2013, p. 544). The children felt that the teachers' behaviour was positively affected during the SEL program, and they showed a greater understanding of the children. They said the teachers *'listen to us more and take us seriously', 'understand how we feel'*, and *'send fewer students home'* (Haymovitz et al., 2018, p.50). The children experienced being part of a process where they were confirmed. One child said that the SEL program *'is good for people…it is a safe place to be heard and validated'* (Haymovitz et al., 2018, p.50). The children described their positive school environment as a safe place where they could talk about issues they were having with each other (Haymovitz et al., 2018).

Large variations in children's experiences of SEL programs are challenging

The second main theme consisted of two sub-themes, which are explained below:

The lessons in the SEL programs were fun and rewarding

The children said that they liked the activities during the lessons in the SEL course. One child (girl in Grade 3) said, *'I like Life Skills because we do fun things in it.'* (Medin & Jutengren, 2020, p. 125). The children discussed the stories that were read to them each week. One boy in Grade 3 made a connection between the stories and the SEL agenda's aims to address the children's behaviour *'[They read the stories] so we can maybe do what they did in the story'* (Medin & Jutengren, 2020, p. 125). On the other hand, some children felt that certain themes, topics, and activities were uncomfortable or inappropriate as group activities at school (Medin & Jutengren, 2020, Clarke et al., 2010). Because the SEL program had a structure that was repeated each week, children knew what to expect. One boy in Grade 2 described the lessons as follows: *'We say the best and the worst and then we also talk about something; then they [the SEL staff] read a story, and then we answer questions. Always'* (Medin & Jutengren, 2020, p. 125).

The children felt they learned a lot from the stories they were read in the SEL lessons each week (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). They named characters and explained what happened in the stories. As an example, one child stated*, 'Sometimes they have sad feelings, and they share their feelings and that makes them feel better'* (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 283). Children especially liked stories and activities where positive solutions were described (Clarke et al., 2010).

Problems with the SEL were experienced

Some children did not feel comfortable with the SEL agenda and experienced problems. Some were dissatisfied, describing the lessons as rigid, boring and repetitive. One child said, *'It's boring in Life Skills because in our other classes we can do different kinds of things'*, and another claimed, *'You just learn to sit and listen to the stories'* (Medin & Jutengren, 2020, p.125). Features of the SEL program that were not appreciated, according to the children, involved problem situations (Clarke et al., 2015). The children selected stories that they did not like, for example, 'When Tommy's Mom and Dad were fighting' and 'When Sandy got bullied' (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 588). Some children referred to Zippy's death as an aspect of the course that they did not like (Clarke et al., 2015). The children expressed how they felt uncomfortable talking about sad events and feelings. One child said, *'Talking about when people die made me sad'* (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 588). Some students were concerned that they would have to share private matters and that the SEL program focused too much on social and emotional issues. As one child put it, *'I don't know why we were supposed to talk about private topics so much. It wasn't like a regular class'.* Another child remarked, *'Sometimes I don't want to talk about feelings and problems; I want to learn or play or something'* (Medin & Jutengren, 2020, p. 125).

Some children also reported setbacks from the program such as sometimes not wanting to talk to the person they had a fight with, but the teachers insisted they do so (Haymovitz et al., 2018). One risk raised by the children was that participating in SEL could be stigmatising (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). The

students thought the course was offered because they were rowdy and argued a lot. They also felt that the lessons in the SEL curricula were problematic (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). One child stated, *'A little noisy. It's noisy in [the SEL program]'*. Another responded, *'That's the worst. It's not very fun to be there'.* Yet another child stated, *'They run around and cause trouble'* (Medin & Jutengren, 2020, p. 126). Children with behavioural problems were more negative towards the program (Medin & Jutengren, 2020).

Summing up the results, the children experienced that SEL programs improved their self-esteem and self-confidence, fostered their close relationships and improved their socialisation and conflict management skills. Further, they explained that the school environment improved when children and teachers made positive behavioural changes during the SEL program. However, some children found lessons with SEL to be problematic or boring.

Discussion

Since children today are suffering from an increase in mental ill-health (Collishaw, 2015), it is important to investigate how they perceive interventions and programs that focus on improving their mental well-being. In the current synthesis, it was evident that the children felt improvements in their self-esteem and self-confidence, which has also been seen in earlier research (Taylor et al., 2017). In addition, they felt an improvement in their social relationships and conflict management skills. According to earlier research, positive and improved relationships among pupils at school decreased rates of depression and anxiety and improved self-esteem (Sarkova et al., 2014). Better peer relationships result in fewer incidents of bullying behaviour among the children (Sarkova et al., 2014). Earlier research found that pupils who have positive relationships at school are more motivated to participate in class and school life (Kiuru et al., 2020).

Improved relationships among children at school have shown a positive association with job opportunities after school (Brännlund et al., 2017). A recent meta-analysis found an association between better relationships within school, where the children felt respected, accepted, included and supported by others, and improved student performance (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Similar results were seen in a study that also indicated that good mental health is associated with better performance in school (O'Connor et al., 2019). This confirms that programs and interventions that improve children's self-esteem, self-confidence and their peer relationships improve the outcome of academic results. Both parts are necessary, since today we face challenges of youth's mental well-being (Collishaw, 2015). In addition, many children face challenges managing both their interpersonal relationships and academic achievements (Kiuru et al., 2020). Atkins et al. (2023) emphasised the importance of SEL programs in building a climate that promotes both relationship skills and positive academic outcomes.

SEL programs can benefit children's feelings of having improved self-esteem and confidence and can affect how they learn how to talk about their feelings. This was indicated as a perceived benefit by teachers using the SEL agenda (Mangrio et al., 2024). Research found that children who learn to share their emotions with others have a stronger foundation for good mental health (Espenes et al., 2025). According to Liu and Wang (2024) social-emotional learning is regarded as a powerful intervention measure for addressing and preventing adolescent suicide as the five core competencies of the CASEL framework are strengthened: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2026).

Our results also show clear positive connections with the CASEL core components. The children in this study described how their self-esteem and self-confidence improved. Their experiences also point to an improved social awareness as they described how the school environment transformed to the better when both children and teachers made positive behavioral changes during the SEL program. In addition, they shared examples of how the SEL program made it easier to make better choices, improving their relationship skills and responsible decision-making. However, there were areas in the children's experiences of the SEL programs where the results show large variations. Some children found the SEL programs fun and rewarding while some children experienced their participation in the SEL program problematic. These children perceived the programs as rigid, boring, and repetitive. Participating children also voiced that they were feeling uncomfortable when participating in the SEL program. It is of utmost importance to consider these negative emotions, and equally that some of the children were worrying

about stigmatization and being concerned that they would have to share private matters. These negative experiences expressed by the children offer an addition to the positive results of SEL programs, suggesting that implementation must be done with great sensitivity and care. The CASEL framework emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments, coordinating efforts to foster youth voice, agency, and engagement to establish supportive classroom and school climates (CASEL, 2026),

Although the result of this study offers several positive effects according to the CASEL framework this study also clearly reports several negative experiences worthy to reflect on. Firstly, the SEL program seems to have been more positively evaluated by teachers (Mangrio et al., 2024) than by the children in this study. Secondly, it is vital to keep these negative experiences in mind when implementing a SEL program and in order to minimize risks of negative experiences, involve and listen to children making them co-creators of the SEL program. Gerstner (2026) found that the implementation of SEL programs in international schools and other diverse school settings, benefitted of longer teaching time, comprehensive teacher training, and developing SEL programs that are age-appropriate which positively affected their implementation success.

There is a body of research called 'Student Voice' that underlines the importance of children being given the opportunity to speak and be involved in school in order to strengthen their autonomy and provide experience in the co-creative democratic processes (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2020; Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011; Kostenius & Warne, 2020). This can be a challenge for teachers and other school staff, who implement a universal program to promote mental well-being. A balancing act is required between children's participation and faithfulness to the design of the SEL program. However, the results of this study indicate that most children had positive experiences of a flexible implementation where the teachers took the opportunity to adapt the agenda to their needs. The risk of stigmatisation is most pronounced in the case of selective and indicated courses but must also be considered in terms of universal programs. For example, children participating in a Swedish study that examined SEL courses perceived that they were selected for the intervention group because they were rowdy (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). A similar situation could arise, for example, if a municipality chooses to prioritise socio-economically vulnerable residential areas for a universal intervention. Research (Kostenius & Warne, 2020; Van de Kop et al., 2025) shows the importance of co-creative processes in school development and supportive environments that aim to promote health and learning, which is also in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989). Responsible adults be aware of whether children experience problems during the program in order to protect those who are vulnerable and avoid children being pressured to participate in a curriculum with which they are not comfortable. According to Gunawardena and Koivula (2024) a whole-school approach is an attempt to extend learning beyond the classroom to increase children's well-being by adopting a range of strategies and priorities including supporting children's holistic well-being, positive behaviors, relationship building, socially responsible ways of interacting, and establish joint values in school. Although we did not examine the relationships between the variables in the CASAL framework we echo the argument for integrating the SEL program throughout the school's academic curricula and culture, across the broader contexts of schoolwide practices and policies fostering youth voice, agency, and engagement (CASEL, 2026). In addition, there is a need for problematizing SEL implementation with contextual, cultural, and policy-level limitations.

There are several strengths with this article. Comprehensive searches for literature have been conducted in eight databases and an extensive list of both MeSH and thesaurus terms and free text were used, which increases the chance of finding all the data that exists within a certain field of study (SBU, 2022). The first author did the coding of the synthesis, but the second and the last authors checked the coding until agreement was achieved. Among the authors, several have extensive experience in conducting systematic reviews, which is also a strength of this study. Since there were several authors involved in the synthesis, the risk for not being able to read and interpret the voices of the children in the included studies decreases, however, we cannot totally avoid the risk of not staying very close to the analysis in the included studies since this is a secondary analysis.

One limitation of our study is that only studies from high-income countries could be included. However, that could also be a strength that increases the relevance of the current synthesis for schools in such countries. It also shows a lack of studies from low-income countries, where more research into students' experiences thus is needed. Another limitation is that our synthesis only includes five studies;

however, it reflected a total of 284 children, which can, according to Polit and Beck (2004) be considered a fairly large number in a qualitative study. Further, to address trustworthiness in qualitative research, the concepts of credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability have been used to discuss possible shortcomings, based on the research of Graneheim and Lundman (2004) and Polit and Beck (2004). Polit and Beck (2004) suggest that quotes from the children strengthen credibility. In order to avoid one-sided interpretation and bias, each of the five authors contributed to the research based on their different personal and professional experiences. The authors, including a paediatrician, registered nurse, health educator and project managers at the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services, analysed the qualitative data to enhance confirmability. This decreased the risk that preunderstanding within this topic would affect the analysis of data (SBU, 2022). Dependability was also increased by a rigorous method developed by the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU, 2022) regarding that the transferability of findings might present challenges as the five studies included did not include all possible school systems, cultural and economic contexts. The five studies represented a heterogeneous population from four different countries. This can be considered both a strength which increases transferability, since it reflects many different, possible perspectives, but also a limitation, since for example the different age groups of children, or participants from different SEL-programs are not separated in the synthesis, and thus findings related to specific groups may be missed.

Since this is a secondary analysis of primary data, no ethical approval was needed for conducting the qualitative synthesis. However, it is paramount that the primary studies have been ethically sound since children are a vulnerable group. Therefore, ethical considerations were taken into account in the assessment of methodological limitations. There are extensive experiences within the research group to conduct GRADE-Cerqual risk for bias assessment, which strengthens the confidence in our findings, and we also adhered to the methodological recommendations from methodological papers focusing on GRADE Cerqual and its domains (Colvin et al., 2018; Glenton et al., 2018; Munthe-Kaas et al., 2018; Noyes et al., 2018).

Finally, a last limitation of this study is that it does not cover recent practices involving artificial intelligence in the development of social and emotional competencies among adolescents, particularly empirical studies related to risk communication and intervention. Artificial intelligence is an increasingly important and rapidly evolving field of research, that needs to be addressed in future research. For example, Feng et al. (2026) point to the potential of virtual reality (VR) to support social-emotional learning (SEL), which has been widely acknowledged, but design precedents for VR-based SEL interventions are still lacking in the literature.

Conclusions

In this study we determined that the children in general experienced that SEL programs improved their self-esteem and self-confidence, fostered their close relationships, socialisation skills and conflict management skills. Further, they explained that the school environment improved when children and teachers made positive behavioural changes due to the SEL program. However, our results also show several negative experiences, such as children perceiving the programs as rigid, boring, and repetitive. Some participating children also voiced that they were feeling uncomfortable when participating in the SEL program, worrying about stigmatization and being concerned that they would have to share private matters. It is therefore vital to keep these negative experiences in mind when implementing a SEL program and to minimizing risks of negative experiences by involving and listening to the children as part of the SEL program, making them co-creators.

The results from this qualitative evidence synthesis of children's experience of SEL programs adds to our previous largely positive findings from a similar study of the teachers' experiences (Mangrio et al., 2024). Importantly, both these qualitative studies complement the accumulating quantitative evidence of SEL programs' beneficial effects on a wide range of children's outcomes, such as SEL skills, academic achievements and decreased conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2022). However, since the studies in this current synthesis consists of a heterogenous group of children and SEL-programs, there is possible limitations in transferability of the results. Thus, more studies focusing on children's experiences of SEL programs is needed.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that is supporting our findings can be found in all the articles that we have used and that are listed in the reference list.

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