

Research Article

Exploring preschool teachers' perspectives on social and emotional learning in early childhood: A qualitative inquiry

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This study aimed to explore preschool teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and classroom practices regarding social-emotional learning in early childhood education settings. The study was designed as a qualitative research study with a phenomenological approach and focused on the lived experiences of 10 preschool teachers working with children aged 3–6 in Çanakkale. Participants were selected through purposive and maximum variation sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and demographic forms. The interview questions were developed based on a literature review and expert feedback. Data were analyzed using both inductive and deductive content analysis techniques. Themes and sub-themes were formed collaboratively by the researchers. The findings revealed that preschool teachers define SEL mainly through themes such as social-emotional skills, learning methods, and peer education. Communication and empathy were emphasized as key components of SEL. Teachers' responses focused on specific aspects such as social-emotional skills, peer education and learning methods, and reflected a limited understanding of the broader and complex nature of SEL. Play-based learning and learning through role models were the most frequently mentioned methods. Peer education was also identified as a valuable tool in promoting SEL. Teachers expressed the need for more support and training in implementing SEL effectively. Preschool teachers recognize the importance of SEL and apply a variety of strategies in their classrooms. However, their understanding and practices vary depending on their experience and training. This study highlights the need for structured SEL training programs to enhance teachers' skills and promote more consistent and effective SEL practices in early childhood education.

Keywords: Early childhood education; Early childhood teachers; Preschool; Social emotional learning

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1. Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning [SEL], grounded in theories of emotional intelligence, is defined as a set of learned competencies encompassing emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and the ability to manage others' emotions (Goleman, 2005). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] in the United States has delineated five interconnected core competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,

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relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2024a). SEL is a multifaceted process through which individuals acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop a healthy self-concept, demonstrate empathy, regulate emotions effectively, make responsible decisions, and establish enduring, supportive relationships (CASEL, 2013). These competencies from the theoretical foundation for implementing SEL skills in the updated preschool education curriculum were introduced Türkiye in 2024. As an integral component of early intervention and education, SEL has been widely recognized for its positive impacts on children's academic and social outcomes (Mondi et al., 2021).

Early childhood represents the most critical developmental period, during which the foundation of social, emotional, and cognitive skills is established. Supporting children's social and emotional development has increasingly been emphasized as a cornerstone of quality early childhood education, and these skills are seen as essential building blocks for future success. SEL skills contribute to enhanced mental health and general well-being, improved academic performance, and reduced rates of delinquency and substance use (Brackett et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2015; Mahoney et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017). Regardless of variables such as socio-economic status and race, students participating in SEL programs consistently demonstrate better academic achievement compared to their non-participating peers (Panayiotou et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017). Fostering SEL skills in early childhood also promotes social communication, emotional well-being, and positive peer interactions (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Raver et al., 2011). Furthermore, SEL helps children navigate social contexts successfully and contributes to the development of stress management skills (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Numerous studies underscore the short- and long-term positive effects of early SEL interventions on children's development (Durlak et al., 2011; Hawkins et al., 2008; McCormick et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017; Sklad et al., 2012). In this context, the importance of fostering SEL skills during early childhood becomes evident as a means of promoting long-term success and social cohesion. Moreno et al. (2018) emphasize that SEL should be utilized as a tool to strengthen social and emotional skills in early childhood education.

In addition to their positive impact on child development, SEL programs also enhance teacher practices, as well as classroom and school climate (Jones et al., 2012; Sklad et al., 2012). The effective implementation of SEL programmes is closely tied to teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards this subject. Zong et al. (2024), who investigated the pedagogical content knowledge of Chinese preschool teachers and their beliefs about SEL, found that while teachers generally held positive attitudes and knowledge was limited. Similarly, Blewitt et al. (2021) highlighted that Australian preschool teachers employ various strategies to promote SEL but emphasized the need for more effective strategies due to inconsistencies in practice. In Portugal, research revealed that although preschool teachers had high awareness of SEL, they relied on limited methods and strategies in their classrooms (Ferreira et al., 2021). These findings collectively underline the importance of incorporating SEL practices more comprehensively into teacher education and professional development programs.

Existing research SEL in Türkiye primarily focuses on primary and secondary education, with limited attention given to early childhood education. An analysis of past and current national preschool education programs in Türkiye highlights a notable lack of explicit emphasis on SEL concepts and practices. However, the most recent preschool education program, introduced under the Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Model and approved by the Ministry of National Education on May 27, 2024, marks a significant step forward in integrating SEL skills into early childhood education. This programme is based on the acquisition of skills, including conceptual skills, domain-specific skills, SEL skills and literacy skills. To ensure the effective implementation of this initiative, it is crucial to revise and expand teacher education programs to better prepare educators with the knowledge and skills required to support SEL in young learners.

Research indicates that while preschool teachers tend to have high awareness of SEL, significant gaps exist in their pedagogical knowledge and practical implementation (Blewitt et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2021; Zong et al., 2024). Similarly, in Türkiye, although awareness of SEL is on the

rise, challenges remain in effectively translating this awareness into practice. For instance, Esen-Aygun and Sahin-Taskin (2016) found that teacher candidates lacked sufficient knowledge of SEL and expressed a need for further information on the subject. They emphasized the importance of increasing pre-service teachers' awareness of SEL, particularly in courses such as Teaching Practicum. In another study examining teacher education programs in the context of SEL, it was found that these programs provide limited information on SEL, failing to meet the training needs of teachers. Similarly, Kilic and Bavli (2021) revealed that secondary school teachers have insufficient knowledge and awareness of SEL. They also stressed that SEL skills should be integrated across all levels of education, with a particular focus on secondary education. A study evaluating the perspectives of teachers from various disciplines on SEL highlighted that teachers frequently mentioned skills such as self-confidence, empathy, and emotional intelligence. However, it also revealed that the teachers did not address key SEL competences such as social awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making (Palic et al., 2024). These studies provide valuable insights into SEL across different educational levels. However, they fall short of addressing the specific challenges faced by preschool teachers in implementing SEL under the framework of Türkiye's new educational program.

In Türkiye, research on SEL with teachers has predominantly focused on primary and secondary education, while studies involving early childhood educators remain limited. Although SEL skills have been integrated into preschool education programs in Türkiye, research on the practical application of these skills in preschool settings is insufficient. The approval of the "*Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Model Preschool Education Program*" by the Ministry of National Education on May 27, 2024, marks an important milestone in the integrating of SEL into early childhood education. However, there is a pressing need to investigate how preschool teachers perceive, implement, and experience SEL in this new context and assess whether current teacher education programs are adequately equipped to meet these expectations. This study aims to contribute to the international literature by providing valuable insights into the implementation of SEL in early childhood education in Türkiye. From a global perspective, it will facilitate cross-cultural comparisons and enhance understanding of SEL practices in diverse educational systems. Additionally, the study will highlight the gaps and challenges in preschool teachers' readiness to effectively implement SEL, contributing to broader global discourse on teacher education and professional development.

This study focused on preschool teachers' awareness, knowledge, and experiences with SEL. It examined how preschool teachers define SEL, how they acquire knowledge about SEL, and how they implement it in their classrooms, analyzing their SEL practices in early childhood education. Additionally, the study provides new insights into SEL within the context of preschool education in Türkiye. This research uniquely addresses preschool teachers' experiences within the newly updated Turkish curriculum. Future research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on SEL by informing teacher education programs and policy initiatives. The interview questions were designed to identify the resources and support preschool teachers need to effectively implement SEL in their classrooms. By highlighting both the successes and challenges experienced by teachers, the study seeks to guide policymakers and educators in Türkiye and internationally with practical strategies for strengthening SEL in early childhood education. Ultimately, this research aims to offer essential guidance for improving teacher training programs, ensuring that SEL is effectively and comprehensively integrated into early childhood curricula.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ 1) How do preschool teachers define the concept of SEL?

RQ 2) How do preschool teachers define the concept of SEL skills?

RQ 3) How do preschool teachers acquire knowledge about SEL?

RQ 4) How do preschool teachers implement SEL in their classrooms?

RQ 5) Based on their experiences, what are preschool teachers' perceptions of the importance of SEL in early childhood education?

RQ 6) What resources and support do preschool teachers need to effectively implement SEL?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

The study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore preschool teachers' existing knowledge, awareness, and experiences related to SEL. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research method, focuses on understanding the essence of individuals' experiences and the meanings they attribute to these experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This approach was employed to provide a rich and in-depth exploration of how teachers experience and interpret SEL within their professional practice (Creswell, 2007). Interviews conducted with preschool teachers under the phenomenological framework offered valuable insight into the perceptions and practices concerning SEL.

2.2. Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 10 preschool teachers working with children aged 3-6 years at a preschool education centre in Çanakkale. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, which aims to identify individuals who can provide the most relevant and informative insights to address the research questions (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria for the study were: (a) voluntary participation, (b) being a preschool teacher, and (c) working with children aged 3-6 years. To ensure diversity, maximum variation sampling was also employed, allowing for a range of teaching experiences and educational backgrounds among participants. To main confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants, labeled as T1, T2, T3, and so on. The demographic details of the participants are presented in Table 1. All participants were female, with 50% holding an associate degree. Half of the teachers had five or more years of professional experience, while the remaining half had 0-4 years of experience. Regarding the age groups of the children they worked with, 50% of the teachers worked with children aged 48-66 months, 40% with those aged 66-72 months, and 10% with children aged 36-48 months (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Participants

<i>Charasteristics</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Education status		
Associate degree	6	%60
Bachelor's degree	4	%40
Professional experience		
0-4 years	8	%80
5 years and above	2	%20
Age group of the class		
66-72 months	4	%40
48-66 months	5	%40
36-48 months	1	%10

2.3. Interviews

The data collection process employed semi-structured interview forms and demographic information forms. The semi-structured interview format provides flexibility by offering a framework of predetermined questions while allowing participants to elaborate on their perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The development of the interview questions was informed by a literature review, and expert opinions. Initially, a literature review was conducted based on the study's' research questions (Blewitt et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2021; Zong et al., 2024). A draft interview form was then prepared by referencing studies similar to the current research. This draft was reviewed by two academicians specializing in early childhood education and special education, and revisions were made to the semi-structured interview form based on their

feedback. The final version of the semi-structured interview form aimed to gather information about preschool teachers' knowledge about SEL, their classroom practices, and the challenges they face when implementing SEL. It consisted of six open-ended questions. Additionally, the demographic information form collected details such as participants' gender, the age group of their students, educational background, and professional experience.

2.4. Procedures

The second researcher met with the participants face-to-face, providing detailed information about the purpose of the study and the recruitment process. Consent forms were distributed to teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate, and individual interviews were conducted. The interviews took place in a designated room at the participants' schools to ensure a comfortable and private environment. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the participants' responses. The interviews were conducted between August and September 2024, with each session lasting approximately 30 minutes. Additionally, demographic information was collected through a separate form, which gathered details on the participants' educational background, professional experience, and the age groups of the children they worked with.

2.5. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using the content analysis method, which systematically identifies themes and patterns within the data (Krippendorff, 2018). The researchers used employed both inductive and deductive coding during the analysis process. Initially, the voice recordings were transcribed, and the data were reviewed and analyzed repeatedly to ensure familiarity. The inductive coding process was then applied, allowing the researchers to code the data without relying on any predefined coding scheme or introducing researcher bias (Thomas, 2003). Each researcher independently analyzed and coded the data. Discrepancies in the coding were discussed until a consensus was reached. Themes and sub-themes were developed by evaluating the significance of the codes and examining relationships between them. To ensure consistency, the researchers reviewed the analyses repeatedly to refine the alignment between themes and sub-themes. Following the inductive analysis, the process continued with deductive coding, aligning the identified themes and data with the study's objectives (Tashakkori et al., 2020). The researchers collaboratively reviewed the themes and sub-themes, incorporating adjustments based on expert feedback. As a result, seventeen main themes and twenty-one sub-themes were identified. In order to triangulate the data, in addition to the teacher interviews, children's activity portfolios and teachers' plans were also analysed. This multi-source approach was used to check the consistency of the findings and to gain a fuller understanding of the research context. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994): $\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{Agreements}}{(\text{Agreements} + \text{Disagreements})}$. Independent coding was performed by the second and third authors. The calculated reliability coefficient was 0.88, indicating a high level of agreement between coders.

2.6. Research Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Ethics Committee (University, 26.07.2024, E-84026528-050.99-2400198681). Before conducting the interviews, participants were provided with detailed information about the study, including its purpose, scope, the use of audio recordings, and the confidentiality of their data. The study details were communicated to participants both verbally and in writing via an informed consent form. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time, with the understanding that their data would not be used if they chose to discontinue.

3. Results

The findings related to preschool teachers' definitions of the concept of SEL (Table 2), their definitions of SEL skills (Table 3), how they acquire knowledge about SEL (Table 4), their classroom SEL practices (Table 5), their perceptions of the importance of SEL in early childhood (Table 6), and the support they require in the field of SEL (Table 7) are summarized in the following tables.

In reviewing Table 2, the definitions of social-emotional learning (SEL) provided by preschool teachers have been categorised into three main themes based on their perspectives: social-emotional skills, learning methods, and peer education. Their responses reflect a focus on the interpersonal aspects of emotional development, rather than intrapersonal reflection or regulation. Within the social-emotional skills theme, teachers predominantly highlighted communication, describing it as the foundation for children's ability to express themselves, resolve conflicts, and build relationships.

In the learning methods theme, play was frequently mentioned not simply as an activity, but as a natural medium where children learn to negotiate roles, share emotions, and experiment with social rules. Some teachers also pointed to the significance of modelling, suggesting that children observe and imitate emotional expressions and behaviours in daily interactions.

Under the peer education theme, teachers described peer interaction as a central driver of social learning, noting that children often acquire emotional competencies through collaboration, cooperation, and peer feedback. This perspective reflects an emphasis on collective growth rather than individual self-regulation.

Overall, these findings indicate that teachers conceptualise SEL mainly through observable social interactions and group dynamics. However, their definitions remain limited in addressing core intrapersonal components emphasised in international SEL frameworks (e.g., CASEL), such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making.

When analysing Table 3, preschool teachers were asked to define social-emotional learning (SEL) skills. Their responses revealed a strong tendency to describe SEL through visible interpersonal behaviours. Communication was often portrayed as the key skill that enables children to express feelings, articulate needs, and build meaningful relationships with peers and adults. Teachers also highlighted empathy and cooperation as essential for fostering understanding, sharing, and joint problem-solving in classroom contexts. Emotional regulation was mentioned less frequently, typically framed as the ability to calm down, adapt to group norms, or manage frustration in play situations.

These findings suggest that teachers tend to conceptualise SEL mainly through relational and social practices, focusing on how children connect and interact with others. In contrast, intrapersonal competencies such as self-regulation are less developed in their definitions, pointing to a narrower understanding of SEL compared with international frameworks that emphasise both social and individual dimensions.

Examining Table 4 revealed three distinct themes regarding how preschool teachers acquired knowledge about SEL: academic and professional sources of information, and personal experience and observation. Within the academic theme, teachers frequently pointed to their university education, describing formal coursework as the foundation that introduced them to SEL concepts and terminology. This suggests that their initial understanding was largely shaped by structured, theory-oriented learning.

In the professional theme, teachers emphasised classroom experiences as an important source of SEL knowledge. They explained that daily interactions with children, colleagues, and school practices allowed them to refine their understanding and apply theoretical knowledge to real-life contexts.

Table 2

Definitions of Preschool Teachers Regarding the Concept of SEL Frequencies, Categories, and Codes (Question 1: How do you define the concept of SEL?)

Codes	Categories	Frequencies	Example Statement(s)	Theme
Communication, expression, empathy	Communication skills	6	"A setting where children can express themselves and interact with their social environment while playing" (T2)	Social emotional skills
Play, learning through play	Play-based learning	5	"Children can achieve SEL through empathy." (T3) "I can say that children achieve learning in a social environment through play." (T1)	Learning methods
Role models, observation	Learning through role models	3	"Children develop their social skills by taking role models." (T1)	
Peer support, learning	Learning from peers	4	"They gain social skills by interacting with their peers." (T2)	Peer education

Table 3

Frequencies, Categories, and Codes of Preschool Teachers' Definitions of SEL Skills (Question 2: What are SEL skills?)

Codes	Categories	Frequencies	Example Statement(s)	Theme
Communication, expression	Communication skills	7	"Being able to express oneself is one of the fundamental skills of SEL." (P2)	Social emotional skills
Empathy, understanding others' emotions	Empathy	5	"Empathy plays a crucial role in developing children's social and emotional skills.." (P10)	
Collaboration, cooperation	Collaboration and teamwork	5	"Children learn to collaborate by helping each other during group work" (P5) "Children should be encouraged to learn sharing through group activities." (P6)	
Anger management, emotion regulation	Emotion control and regulation	3	"Anger management is a social and emotional learning skill I frequently encounter in my classroom" (P10)	

Table 4

The Frequency, Categories, and Codes Related to Preschool Teachers' Processes of Learning the Concept of SEL (Question 3: How did you become informed about SEL?)

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>	<i>Example Statement(s)</i>	<i>Theme</i>
University education	University education	6	"During my university years, I took many courses on these subjects." (T3) "I developed my SEL skills through interactions with children" (T6)	Academic source of information Professional source of information
Work experience, practice	In-class experiences	4	"By working with children, I gained more knowledge about SEL." (T7) "By working at school, I reinforced theoretical knowledge through practice." (T10) "Since my childhood, I have been interested in children and used to act as a big sister to them." (T3)	Personal experience and observation

Table 5

The Frequency, Categories, and Codes of Preschool Teachers' In-Class SEL Practices (Question 4: What methods and techniques do you use in your classroom to develop your children's social and SEL?)

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>	<i>Example Statement(s)</i>	<i>Theme</i>
Drama	Empathy	4	"We develop children's social and emotional skills through empathy games." (T8)	Creative methods
Story	Story completion	1	"Story completion helps children understand their social and emotional worlds." (T7)	
Partnership	Group work	3	"Through group work, they learn to act collaboratively." (T5)	Collaboration and social interaction behavior
Motivation	Positive reinforcement	5	"We motivate children by reinforcing positive behaviors." (T5)	management
Play	Play therapy	2	"We encourage children to develop social skills through play therapy." (T4)	Therapy methods for children

In the personal experience and observation theme, teachers described how observing children in both formal and informal settings shaped their insights into SEL. They often connected this to noticing children's emotional expressions, peer dynamics, and the challenges of managing emotions in early childhood. Taken together, these findings show that teachers do not rely solely on academic preparation but integrate multiple sources of learning. While university courses provide a theoretical base, practical engagement and personal observation are equally significant. This underlines the importance of blended learning models in teacher education that combine academic theory with experiential and reflective practices.

Table 5 shows the results of a survey of preschool teachers about the methods and techniques they use to develop social and emotional learning. Their responses were categorised into four themes: creative methods; collaboration and social interaction; behaviour management; and therapy methods for children. Within the creative methods theme, teachers frequently described using drama activities—often in the form of role play or empathy-based performances—as a way for children to explore emotions and social roles in a safe environment. One teacher also highlighted story completion as a reflective technique, enabling children to think through emotional scenarios and possible outcomes. These responses indicate that teachers rely on imaginative and expressive tools that are often unstructured and flexible.

In the collaboration and social interaction theme, group work was emphasised as a way to encourage cooperation, sharing, and problem-solving among peers. In the behaviour management theme, teachers pointed to positive reinforcement strategies, framing them as essential for guiding children toward socially appropriate behaviours and building emotional confidence. Finally, in the therapy-oriented theme, a few teachers mentioned play therapy, reflecting an attempt to integrate therapeutic approaches into early childhood practice.

Overall, these findings suggest that teachers employ a diverse range of techniques to promote SEL, but many remain informal and loosely structured. This points to a need for further training and professional support to help educators adopt evidence-based SEL practices and integrate them more systematically into classroom routines.

Table 6 presents the preschool teachers' views about the importance of social and emotional learning in early childhood, drawing on their experiences. Their responses consistently emphasised the formative role of SEL in the early years, often framing it as the cornerstone of children's overall growth. Teachers described SEL as essential for shaping personality, guiding children's identity development, and laying the groundwork for their future relationships, attitudes, and academic pathways. They also highlighted its role in fostering emotional resilience and social adaptability, suggesting that skills acquired in these early stages have long-lasting effects.

These findings reinforce the need for the intentional integration of SEL in early learning environments. Teachers perceive it not merely as an additional component of education but as a foundational process that equips children with the emotional and social competencies necessary for lifelong development.

Examining Table 7 shows that preschool teachers were asked about the support resources and materials they needed for social-emotional learning. Their responses highlighted two main needs: ongoing professional training and access to suitable materials. Teachers often described seminars and workshops as essential for strengthening their knowledge base and building confidence in applying SEL strategies. They stressed that without structured professional development, their ability to implement SEL remains limited and inconsistent.

In addition, teachers pointed to the inadequacy of current classroom resources, noting that existing materials often fail to reflect the evolving emotional and social needs of children. They expressed a desire for updated, high-quality, and technology-enhanced tools that would allow them to integrate SEL more effectively into daily practice. Overall, the findings indicate that teachers view pedagogical support and modern educational resources as critical for successfully embedding SEL into early childhood education.

Table 6

The Frequency, Categories, and Codes of Preschool Teachers' Views on the Importance of SEL in Early Childhood (Question 5: Based on your experiences, how important do you think SEL is in early childhood?)

Codes	Categories	Frequencies	Example Statement(s)	Theme
Development, character	Personality	8	"Early childhood is a critical period in which character and personality are formed." (T5)	The critical importance of early age development
Social environment, play, social and emotional skills	Social and emotional development	5	"Play and social environment are very important for children's social and emotional development." (T2) "This period is when the foundations of social and emotional skills are laid." (T8) "Children's social and emotional skills form the foundation for their success in later life." (T10)	Social environment, play, social and emotional skills

Table 7

The Frequency, Categories, and Codes of Preschool Teachers' Needs Regarding SEL (Question 6: What support resources or materials do you need in the area of SEL?)

Codes	Categories	Frequencies	Example Statement(s)	Theme
In-service training, seminars	Training and teacher support	5	"Seminars and in-service training on SEL are very important." (T10)	Need for training and seminars
Technological tools, smart board	Use of technology	4	"Digital resources can contribute to SEL processes." (T1)	Need for materials
Lack of materials, educational resources	Lack of current materials	5	"We need current materials because children change every year." (T6)	Lack of material educational resources

4. Discussion

This study aimed to deeply explore and understand preschool teachers' knowledge, experiences, and perspectives regarding SEL, as well as the process of its implementation and their needs in this domain, using a phenomenological approach. SEL plays a pivotal role in children's emotional and social development, and teachers' perceptions of and ability to integrate SEL into the curriculum significantly influence its effectiveness. This study investigates how teachers define SEL, the skills they associate with it, the sources from which they acquire knowledge about SEL, the methods they employ in the classroom, their views on its importance in early childhood education, and the support they require for effective implementation.

Analysis of preschool teachers' explanations of SEL reveals that most participants struggled to provide a comprehensive, theoretically grounded definition. Instead, their responses focused on specific aspects, such as social-emotional skills, peer education, and learning methods, reflecting a limited understanding of the broader, more complex nature of SEL. In contrast, SEL is widely recognized as a holistic process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for developing healthy identities, making responsible and caring decisions, demonstrating empathy, managing emotions, achieving personal and collective goals, and fostering supportive relationships (CASEL, 2013). Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) similarly describe SEL as a process that equips both children and adults with competencies such as emotional regulation, goal setting, empathy, building healthy relationships, and making responsible decisions. Supporting this perspective, Blewitt et al. (2021) highlight that preschool teacher often associate SEL in early childhood with competencies such as social interaction, emotional regulation, empathy, and self-expression.

The themes of teachers' definitions of SEL skills are grouped as communication, emotional expression, empathy, anger management and cooperation. However, this is insufficient to explain SEL. Because SEL is addressed in five areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2024b; Özdemir Beceren, 2012). In this study, it was observed that preschool teachers primarily emphasized the competencies of social awareness (e.g., empathy) and relationship skills (e.g., cooperation, communication). In contrast, the competencies of self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making were notably underrepresented in teachers' definitions and classroom examples. This suggests that teachers tend to approach SEL mainly within the context of interpersonal relationships, with insufficient attention given to individuals' internal awareness processes and behavior regulation skills. This indicates the need for teacher education programs to address all dimensions of SEL competencies both theoretically and practically (Esen-Aygün & Şahin-Taşkın, 2019; Jennings & Frank, 2015; Kaur & Sharma, 2024; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021).

An analysis of the findings related to how preschool teachers acquire information about SEL reveals that teachers rely on academic sources, professional experiences, and personal observations. While practical experience plays a significant role in understanding SEL, the lack of a strong theoretical foundation raises concerns about the depth of their knowledge. University education provides the necessary theoretical basis for SEL, whereas classroom experiences and personal observations help teachers adapt SEL to the individual needs of children. Esen-Aygün and Sahin-Taskin (2016) reported that SEL education for pre-service teachers is insufficient. Similarly, Kilic and Bavli (2021) highlighted deficiencies in secondary school teachers' knowledge of SEL. Supporting these findings, Zong et al. (2024) noted that preschool teachers' pedagogical content knowledge related to SEL remains limited.

The findings related to classroom practices reveal that preschool teachers employ strategies that promote cooperation, social interaction, and behaviour management, alongside creative methods such as drama, story completion, and play therapy. However, these strategies and methods alone are not regarded as evidence-based practices in SEL teaching. Ferreira et al. (2021) note that teachers often have a limited repertoire of strategies and emphasize the need for more practical and evidence-based approaches to enhance SEL practices. Evidence-based teaching programs in

school settings aim to develop SEL skills by incorporating diverse methods such as puppets, books, games, storytelling, group discussions, movement, or combinations of these approaches. In this context, regulatory measures and additional support are essential to guide teachers in adopting evidence-based methods and interventions for SEL (Gregory et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2021). In this study, it was found that teachers employed practices such as story completion, drama, and play-based methods to support children's social-emotional skills; however, these strategies were often implemented without being grounded in a structured educational planning process. As a result, they appeared to lack alignment with structured and evidence-based SEL programs. In contrast, internationally recognized programs such as PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), I Can Problem Solve [ICPS], Tools of the Mind, The Incredible Years, and Second Step incorporate techniques grounded in developmental theory and supported by evidence, including the use of puppetry, structured storytelling, visual materials, role-play, and mindfulness activities (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Diamond et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021; Shure, 2001). For example, the Second Step program provides scripted lessons and sequenced activities designed to help children develop skills such as emotion recognition, impulse control, and problem-solving (Jones et al., 2021). In contrast, the classroom practices described by participants in this study were more fragmented and lacked a cohesive curriculum or developmental progression. This discrepancy underscores the need to integrate evidence-based SEL programs or their core principles into early childhood teacher education and in-service training processes. Such integration could enhance teachers' ability to consistently implement developmentally appropriate SEL strategies that effectively promote children's well-being and prosocial behavior (Dolzhenko, 2017; Sugishita & Dresser, 2019).

In the present study, preschool teachers emphasized that SEL in early childhood is particularly important for personality, social, and emotional development. The development of SEL skills during early childhood forms the foundation for long-term success, both personally and academically (Ozdemir Beceren, 2012). Moreover, research has demonstrated that SEL reduces behavioural problems and has a positive impact on communication, academic performance, and mental health (Clark et al., 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Jagers et al., 2019; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor, 2017).

The findings revealed that preschool teachers expressed a need for additional training, seminars, and materials related to SEL. Teachers indicated that they require support to better develop children's SEL skills and integrate these skills more effectively into the classroom environment. Similarly, studies emphasize the importance of prioritizing SEL practices in teacher education and professional development programs (Corcoran & O'Flaherty, 2022; Ferreira et al., 2021). Considering these findings, this study makes a unique contribution to the literature by revealing the conceptual and practical limitations of preschool teachers in Türkiye regarding SEL. It also underscores the need for more structured and comprehensive teacher education models. International studies such as those by Dolzhenko (2017), Katz et al. (2020), and Sugishita and Dresser (2019) have emphasized the transformative impact of integrating SEL into teacher preparation programs. Similarly, this study shows that fundamental competencies such as self-awareness and responsible decision-making are not sufficiently developed in teachers' knowledge and practices. Paliç et al. (2024) also found that while teachers tend to focus on SEL-related skills such as self-confidence, empathy, and emotional intelligence, they pay limited attention to key SEL competencies like self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. Furthermore, studies by Masry-Herzallah (2024) and Cochran and Peters (2023) demonstrated significant improvements in SEL competencies among teacher candidates who participated in structured training programs. In our study, participants reported a lack of both practical guidance and materials to support SEL implementation. This highlights the necessity for teacher education programs to integrate SEL not only theoretically but also through interdisciplinary and contextually adaptable instructional models that include areas such as mindfulness, special education, cultural awareness, and artificial intelligence applications.

5. Conclusion

This study, which examines preschool teachers' current knowledge and practices regarding SEL, underscores the fundamental role of teachers in supporting children's academic, social, and emotional development. While preschool teachers recognize the importance of SEL in early childhood, their limited theoretical knowledge in this field poses a significant challenge. The findings indicate that preschool teachers require more comprehensive knowledge of basic SEL skills and competencies. Furthermore, an analysis of their classroom practices highlights the need for evidence-based strategies and methods to effectively integrate SEL into teaching. These findings reinforce the critical importance of combining both theoretical knowledge and practical application to enhance outcomes for SEL in early childhood education. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for more structured and comprehensive SEL training programs for preschool teachers.

6. Limitations

This study examined preschool teachers' awareness of SEL in Türkiye. However, the participants were limited to teachers from a single city, and thus, the findings may not be representative of all preschool teachers in the country. The results of the study should be evaluated in the local context of Çanakkale, taking into account factors such as school and neighbourhood facilities, teachers' access to professional development opportunities or professional experience. Future studies could address this limitation by involving a larger sample group to evaluate the perspectives of teachers from various cities on SEL. All participants were female, which may limit the generalisability of the findings by not representing diverse gender perspectives. The concept and competencies of SEL have been introduced into Türkiye's early childhood education program for the first time. As these competencies are newly implemented in early childhood education institutions, future research could explore how teachers' experiences and practices evolve over time. Expanding the sample group in subsequent studies could provide deeper insights into this process. Additionally, the present study did not include the views and experiences of other stakeholders, such as parents, school administrators, support staff, or pre-service early childhood teachers. This limitation restricts a more comprehensive evaluation of SEL. Including the perspectives of these stakeholders in future research could offer a broader and more holistic understanding of SEL implementation and its impact.

7. Implication for Future Research

Considering the limitations of the current study, future research could involve teachers from different provinces of Türkiye to evaluate SEL awareness on a larger scale. This would allow for an understanding of how geographical and cultural differences influence SEL awareness, leading to more generalizable findings. Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Additionally, as this study focused on short-term results, future research could include longitudinal studies to examine how teachers implement SEL over time. Such studies could provide valuable insights into the integration of SEL skills into teachers' professional development and classroom practices. These results can inform national-level preschool teacher training programs by highlighting the urgent need to incorporate structured and evidence-based SEL content into both pre-service and in-service education curricula. The findings of this study indicate that teachers require more resources and materials to effectively incorporate SEL into their classrooms. In this regard, practical training opportunities for teachers should be increased, and the accessibility of SEL-related materials and guidance services should be expanded. Lastly, future studies could broaden their scope to include other community stakeholders, such as pre-service preschool teachers, parents, school administrators, and school staff. This would provide a more comprehensive perspective on how SEL is perceived and practiced across various contexts.

In the context of Türkiye, additional steps can be taken to strengthen the implementation of SEL in early childhood education. To support teachers in applying SEL effectively, culturally relevant classroom practice guides can be developed, including activity examples such as storytelling, puppetry, and role-play. Integrating SEL-focused modules into in-service teacher training programs may help address existing gaps in classroom implementation. These modules should offer interdisciplinary integration, including applications such as storytelling, puppetry, drama, mindfulness, and the use of digital or AI-based tools. To increase family involvement, awareness seminars can be organized, and resources that support home-based SEL activities can be provided. In order to monitor SEL development during early childhood, valid and reliable assessment tools can be developed and/or adapted. Finally, making both theoretical and practical SEL-focused courses compulsory in early childhood teacher education programs at universities will ensure that teacher candidates graduate with essential competencies in this area.

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