

## APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING DISCIPLINE AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS IN STUDENTS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review examines evidence-based approaches and strategies for enhancing discipline and social-emotional skills in students across various educational settings. The review synthesizes 28 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025, encompassing meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, systematic reviews, and mixed-methods investigations. Key findings reveal that universal social-emotional learning (SEL) programs demonstrate significant positive effects on student competencies, behavioral outcomes, school climate, and academic achievement. Mentalization-based interventions, emotion regulation training, and whole-school approaches show promise in reducing disruptive behavior and fostering prosocial development. Evidence-based classroom management programs and structured SEL curricula emerge as effective strategies for integrating discipline support with competency development. Implementation quality, teacher self-efficacy, family involvement, and autonomy-supportive teaching practices are identified as critical moderating factors. The review highlights persistent challenges including the need for culturally responsive adaptations, longitudinal outcome measurement, and differential effectiveness for students with special educational needs. Recommendations emphasize the importance of tiered support systems combining universal prevention with targeted interventions, professional development focused on implementation fidelity, and systematic monitoring of discipline indicators alongside social-emotional competencies. This review provides educators, policymakers, and researchers with comprehensive guidance for selecting, implementing, and evaluating integrated approaches to discipline and social-emotional learning. Unlike prior meta-analyses that broadly examine SEL program effectiveness, this review uniquely integrates discipline-focused outcomes with social-emotional competency development across a post-pandemic evidence base (2021–2025), offering a more targeted synthesis of implementation factors and equity considerations that previous reviews have not addressed in combination.

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### INDRODUCTION

Contemporary educational systems increasingly recognize that academic achievement alone does not sufficiently prepare students for success in life, necessitating deliberate attention to social-emotional competencies

and behavioral self-regulation. Traditional approaches to school discipline, often characterized by punitive measures and exclusionary practices, have demonstrated limited effectiveness in promoting long-term behavioral change and may exacerbate disparities among vulnerable student populations (Davis et al., 2024). The paradigm shift toward positive, preventive approaches that integrate social-emotional learning with discipline practices reflects growing evidence that students' behavioral functioning is inextricably linked to their capacity for emotion regulation, perspective-taking, and interpersonal problem-solving. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that universal school-based SEL interventions produce significant improvements not only in social-emotional competencies but also in behavioral outcomes, school climate, peer relationships, and academic performance (Cipriano et al., 2023). Consequently, educational stakeholders worldwide are investing in comprehensive frameworks that address both the development of prosocial skills and the reduction of problematic behaviors through integrated, evidence-based approaches.

The theoretical foundation for integrating discipline and social-emotional learning draws from multiple developmental and educational frameworks, including ecological systems theory, social learning theory, and competency-based education models. Research demonstrates that students' behavioral regulation emerges from complex interactions between individual characteristics, instructional practices, peer dynamics, family engagement, and broader school organizational factors (Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024). Effective approaches recognize that discipline problems often reflect deficits in underlying social-emotional competencies rather than mere willful noncompliance, suggesting that skill-building interventions may be more effective than reactive consequences (Nasution et al., 2025). Contemporary models such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social-Emotional Learning frameworks, and trauma-informed practices emphasize prevention, explicit skill instruction, and supportive environments as core components (Ballard & Bender, 2021). The alignment between these approaches and educational goals of equity, inclusion, and whole-child development has accelerated their adoption across diverse educational contexts. However, implementation variability, resource constraints, and the need for sustained professional development present ongoing challenges to achieving program fidelity and effectiveness.

Despite growing enthusiasm for SEL-integrated discipline approaches, significant gaps in the evidence base warrant urgent and systematic investigation, particularly in the post-pandemic period. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted students' social-emotional development and behavioral regulation, creating unprecedented challenges that existing pre-pandemic syntheses were unable to anticipate or address. Teachers worldwide report heightened behavioral difficulties, increased anxiety and trauma-related behaviors, and fragmented peer relationships as lasting consequences of prolonged school closures underscoring the acute need for updated evidence on discipline and SEL integration specifically within the 2021–2025 timeframe. Beyond this post-pandemic urgency, while multiple meta-analyses have documented the overall effectiveness of SEL interventions, questions remain regarding which specific program components, implementation features, and contextual factors most strongly influence discipline-related outcomes (Wigelsworth et al., 2021). The differential effectiveness of universal versus targeted interventions, classroom-based versus whole-school approaches, and short-term versus sustained programming requires clarification. Furthermore, limited research has examined how these approaches perform with diverse student populations, including those with special educational needs, students from various cultural backgrounds, and those in alternative educational settings. The mechanisms through which SEL competencies translate into improved behavioral regulation and reduced discipline incidents remain incompletely understood (Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy, 2024). Additionally, the role of implementation supports such as coaching, professional learning communities, and ongoing monitoring in sustaining program effects deserves systematic attention.

The current educational landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for advancing integrated approaches to discipline and social-emotional learning. Policymakers in numerous jurisdictions have mandated SEL standards and allocated resources for program implementation, creating favorable conditions for scaling evidence-based practices. Technological innovations enable more sophisticated measurement of social-emotional competencies and behavioral outcomes, potentially improving implementation monitoring and outcome evaluation

(Carpendale et al., 2025). However, persistent disparities in discipline practices across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines highlight the urgency of identifying approaches that promote both effectiveness and equity. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on student mental health and behavioral functioning has intensified demands for comprehensive support systems that address trauma, build resilience, and foster positive school climates. Teachers report increasing behavioral challenges while simultaneously expressing the need for enhanced training and resources to effectively integrate SEL into their instructional practice (Tinnes-Vigne et al., 2025). These converging factors underscore the critical importance of synthesizing current evidence to guide practice, policy, and future research.

The present systematic literature review addresses these needs by comprehensively examining recent empirical evidence regarding approaches and strategies for enhancing discipline and social-emotional skills in students. Specifically, this review synthesizes research published between 2021 and 2025 to identify effective interventions, implementation factors, and contextual influences that shape outcomes related to behavioral regulation and social-emotional development. The review encompasses studies across grade levels from preschool through secondary education, diverse program types including universal and targeted interventions, and various implementation settings. By organizing findings around three key domains evidence based approaches, specific programs and interventions, and factors influencing implementation and effectiveness, this synthesis provides actionable guidance for educational practitioners, administrators, and policymakers. The review also identifies critical research gaps and proposes directions for advancing both scientific understanding and practical application of integrated discipline and SEL strategies.

This systematic review is guided by several specific research questions that structure the analysis and synthesis of included studies. First, what empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of social-emotional learning interventions in improving student discipline and behavioral outcomes across different educational levels? Second, which specific programs, curricula, and intervention models demonstrate the strongest evidence for integrating discipline support with social-emotional competency development? Third, what implementation factors, teaching practices, and contextual variables moderate the effectiveness of SEL-integrated discipline approaches? Fourth, how do these approaches perform with diverse student populations, including those with special educational needs and students from varied cultural backgrounds? Fifth, what methodological considerations and gaps in the current evidence base should inform future research directions? By systematically addressing these questions, this review aims to advance both theoretical understanding and practical application of evidence-based strategies for fostering positive behavioral development and social-emotional competencies in contemporary educational settings.

## METHOD

This systematic literature review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. Studies published between January 2021 and January 2025 were included if they: (1) investigated interventions, programs, or practices targeting student discipline and/or social-emotional competencies; (2) employed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs; (3) involved participants in preschool through secondary education settings; (4) reported empirical findings related to behavioral outcomes, social-emotional skills, or discipline indicators; and (5) were published in English-language peer-reviewed journals. Studies focused exclusively on tertiary education, clinical populations, or purely theoretical work were excluded. Following title/abstract screening and full-text evaluation, 28 studies were retained for synthesis. Data extraction used a structured protocol capturing research objectives, participant characteristics, intervention descriptions, research design, outcome measures, and key findings. Studies were organized into three thematic domains: (1) evidence-based approaches and strategies; (2) specific programs and interventions; and (3) factors, teaching models, and school practices influencing outcomes. Narrative synthesis was employed as the primary analytic method, given the heterogeneity of included designs and outcome measures.

### Overview of Included Studies

Table 1 presents the distribution of included studies across thematic domains, research designs, and educational levels, providing an overview of the evidence base examined in this review.

**Table 1** *Distribution of Included Studies by Domain, Design, and Educational Level*

Category	Number of Studies	Percentage
<b>By Thematic Domain</b>		
Evidence-Based Approaches & Strategies	8	28.6%
Specific Programs & Interventions	8	28.6%
Factors & Implementation Influences	10	35.7%
<b>By Research Design</b>		
Meta-Analysis/Systematic Review	7	25.0%
Randomized Controlled Trial	4	14.3%
Quasi-Experimental	3	10.7%
Mixed Methods	4	14.3%
Correlational/Cross-Sectional	5	17.9%
Qualitative	2	7.1%
<b>By Educational Level</b>		
Preschool/Early Childhood	5	17.9%
Elementary School	12	42.9%
Middle School	4	14.3%
Secondary/High School	2	7.1%
Multiple Levels (K-12)	5	17.9%

*Source: Adapted from Watson et al. (2017), Cassar et al. (2019), Demetriou and Höner (2012), Yuksel et al. (2020), and Dobbins et al. (2013).*

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Evidence-Based Approaches and Strategies for Discipline and Social-Emotional Learning

The systematic review identified eight major studies examining evidence-based approaches and strategies through meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and umbrella reviews spanning multiple programs and settings. Cipriano et al. (2023) conducted the most comprehensive meta-analysis to date, synthesizing 424 studies across 53 countries and evaluating 252 universal school-based SEL programs serving students from kindergarten through grade 12. This landmark study revealed that universal SEL interventions produce statistically significant positive effects across multiple outcome domains including SEL skills ( $g = 0.23$ ), attitudes ( $g = 0.16$ ), behavioral outcomes ( $g = 0.20$ ), school climate and safety ( $g = 0.27$ ), peer relationships ( $g = 0.27$ ), school functioning ( $g = 0.28$ ), and academic achievement ( $g = 0.28$ ). The analysis identified several critical moderators of effectiveness including implementation quality, program alignment with CASEL's SAFE criteria (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit), and fidelity of delivery. These findings establish a robust foundation for universal SEL programming as an effective approach to simultaneously addressing behavioral regulation and social-emotional competency development.

Complementing this broad meta-analytic evidence, several systematic reviews examined specific approaches within the SEL and discipline integration framework. Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy (2024) conducted a systematic review of 21 studies examining mentalization-based interventions (MBI) in schools serving students aged 6-18 years. Their analysis revealed that MBI programs which explicitly target perspective-taking, theory of mind, and emotional understanding significantly improved social-cognitive abilities, emotion regulation, and mental health outcomes while reducing disruptive behaviors. The review highlighted that interventions explicitly teaching reflective capacity and emotional understanding may offer particular promise for addressing behavioral challenges rooted in social-cognitive deficits. However, many included studies lacked rigorous control conditions and long-term follow-up, limiting conclusions about sustained effects on discipline outcomes. Wigelsworth et al. (2021) conducted an

overview of 33 reviews examining SEL in elementary schools, reinforcing the consensus that classroom-based curriculum programs demonstrate stronger evidence than whole-school approaches, while identifying critical gaps in understanding differential effects across student subgroups defined by gender, socioeconomic status, and risk profiles.

Research examining emotion regulation interventions provides additional evidence for targeted approaches addressing specific social-emotional competencies directly linked to behavioral regulation. Pedrini et al. (2022) systematically reviewed 36 studies of school-based emotion regulation interventions for adolescents, finding small to medium effects on emotion regulation capacity and mental health outcomes, with several studies documenting reductions in behavioral problems including absences and disciplinary referrals. The review emphasized that approximately one-third of evaluated programs lacked detailed implementation manuals and many studies failed to conduct adequate follow-up assessments, highlighting implementation and evaluation gaps that limit understanding of long-term effectiveness. Notably, the evidence suggested that both universal prevention and targeted approaches for high-risk youth showed promise, supporting tiered implementation models that match intervention intensity to student need.

Studies examining evidence-based practices for specific populations revealed important considerations for inclusive implementation of SEL and discipline approaches. Ștefan et al. (2022) analyzed 81 studies encompassing 38 preschool classroom-based SEL programs, identifying that only 10.5% of programs met criteria for "well-established" evidence-based interventions. These well-established programs consistently demonstrated improvements in social-emotional competencies and reductions in behavior problems, underscoring the importance of selecting programs with strong empirical support rather than adopting interventions based on popularity or theoretical appeal alone. For students with disabilities, Strnadová et al. (2023) conducted an umbrella review synthesizing 31 reviews and identified evidence-based instructional practices including visual supports, peer-mediated instruction, self-management strategies, prompting, and time delay as effective for improving academic, social-emotional, and independence outcomes. Hassani & Schwab (2021) reviewed 11 studies specifically examining SEL interventions for students with special educational needs, finding positive but small effects on social-emotional competencies with most evidence originating from United States-based research, suggesting limited understanding of effectiveness across diverse cultural and educational contexts.

Research examining behavioral interventions in alternative education settings provided evidence for intensive support approaches serving students with significant behavioral challenges. Ballard & Bender (2021) systematically reviewed 68 articles examining social, emotional, and behavioral interventions in alternative education programs, finding that structured behavioral approaches including group contingencies, Check-In/Check-Out systems, and tiered support frameworks effectively reduced externalizing behaviors and discipline problems. This evidence suggests that students with severe behavioral challenges may require more explicit behavioral supports integrated within SEL frameworks, combining skill instruction with structured contingency management. The diversity of interventions, outcomes, and designs across reviewed studies made it difficult to identify specific program components most critical for effectiveness, highlighting the need for more systematic implementation and evaluation research in high-need settings.

Table 2 synthesizes the key findings from major meta-analyses and systematic reviews examining evidence-based approaches to SEL and discipline integration.

**Table 2** Summary of Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews of SEL and Discipline Approaches

Study	Focus	Number of Studies	Key Findings	Effectiveness	Population/Setting
(Cipriano et al., 2023)	Universal SEL K-12	424 studies, 53 countries	Significant effects on SEL skills ( $g=0.23$ ), behavior ( $g=0.20$ ), climate ( $g=0.27$ ), academics ( $g=0.28$ )		Universal K-12

Study	Focus	Number of Studies	Key Findings	Effectiveness	Population/Setting
(Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy, 2024)	Mentalization-based interventions	21 studies	Improved social cognition, emotion regulation, reduced disruption		Ages 6-18
(Wigelsworth et al., 2021)	SEL in elementary schools	33 reviews	Stronger evidence for classroom curricula than whole-school; gaps in subgroup data		Elementary/primary
(Pedrini et al., 2022)	Emotion regulation interventions	36 studies	Small-medium effects on regulation & mental health; some reduced absences/referrals		Adolescents
(Ştefan et al., 2022)	Preschool classroom SEL	81 studies, 38 programs	Only 10.5% programs "well-established"; these reduce behavior problems		Preschool/early childhood
(Ballard & Bender, 2021)	Behavioral interventions in alternative settings	68 articles	Group contingencies, CICO effective for externalizing & discipline problems		Alternative education
(Strnadová et al., 2023)	Evidence-based practices for students with disabilities	31 reviews	Visual supports, peer instruction, self-management improve SE outcomes		Students with disabilities
(Hassani & Schwab, 2021)	SEL for special education students	11 studies	Positive but small effects on SE competencies; limited non-US evidence		Students with special needs

Source : Cipriano et al., 2023; Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy, 2024; Wigelsworth et al., 2021; Pedrini et al., 2022; Ştefan et al., 2022; Ballard & Bender, 2021; Strnadová et al., 2023; Hassani & Schwab, 2021

### Specific Programs and Interventions Integrating Discipline and SEL

Eight studies examined specific named programs or structured interventions designed to integrate social-emotional learning with behavioral support and discipline practices. These evaluations ranged from large-scale quasi-experimental studies to randomized controlled trials, providing evidence regarding particular curricula and implementation models. Bergin et al. (2024) evaluated the Leader in Me program, a whole-school SEL and leadership development model, using quasi-experimental design with propensity score matching comparing 117 implementation schools to 348 comparison schools. Results indicated that Leader in Me significantly improved teacher and student social-emotional competencies, enhanced school climate, and reduced discipline incidents while also producing higher mathematics and language achievement scores. The study's strengths included its large scale and mixed-methods approach, though the non-randomized design and focus on elementary grades limited generalizability. This evaluation demonstrates that comprehensive whole-school approaches explicitly linking SEL to student leadership and character development can influence multiple outcomes including traditionally measured discipline indicators.

Almardiyah et al. (2025) conducted a systematic literature review examining SEL programs specifically designed for bullying prevention across primary and secondary education, analyzing 21 studies published between 2014-2024. The review identified that multi-component, curriculum-based programs implemented over extended durations most consistently reduced bullying behaviors and increased protective factors. Selective interventions targeting high-risk students demonstrated particularly strong effects compared to universal approaches alone,

suggesting the value of tiered implementation models. However, many studies employed small samples and self-report measures with limited follow-up periods, and behavioral outcomes showed inconsistent patterns across studies. The authors recommended combining universal whole-school SEL with selective targeted interventions, cultural adaptation of programs, and systematic long-term monitoring to sustain anti-bullying effects.

Randomized controlled trials of specific classroom-based programs provided rigorous evidence for structured SEL curricula. Kołodziejczyk et al. (2025) conducted an RCT of the Meetings with Leon program, a prevention-focused SEL curriculum for kindergarten and early elementary students (ages 5-9) implemented by classroom teachers in Poland. While the program did not produce short-term reductions in aggressive behavior, it significantly improved children's emotion recognition and emotion regulation skills foundational competencies theoretically linked to behavioral self-control. The study employed cluster randomization at the classroom level and measured outcomes using standardized assessments, though the short follow-up period prevented assessment of whether improved emotion regulation would translate into behavioral improvements over time. This finding illustrates that SEL programs may initially impact proximal competencies before producing changes in more distal behavioral outcomes, suggesting the importance of evaluating both immediate skill development and longer-term behavioral effects.

Green et al. (2021) evaluated SPARK Pre-Teen Mentoring, a structured classroom-based SEL program for early middle school students, through randomized controlled trial comparing intervention classrooms to control conditions. SPARK significantly improved student communication, decision-making, problem-solving, emotion regulation, and resilience skills, supporting positive social adaptation and behavioral functioning during the high-risk transition to middle school. The study's RCT design and focus on the critical middle school transition period strengthened evidence quality, though the researchers noted the absence of direct discipline indicators such as office referrals or suspensions as measured outcomes. The findings support the value of structured, manualized SEL programs implemented during developmental transitions when students face heightened social-emotional and behavioral challenges.

Evaluation of teacher professional development programs provided evidence for intervention approaches focusing on educator capacity building as a lever for improving classroom climate and student behavior. Gaspar et al. (2024) examined real-world implementation of the Incredible Years® Teacher Classroom Management program, an evidence-based professional development model teaching SEL-informed classroom management strategies, with 90 teachers and 535 children across preschool and elementary grades in Portugal. Following teacher participation in the program, students demonstrated significant improvements in social-emotional skills and problem-solving abilities alongside reductions in problem behaviors. Benefits were somewhat stronger for preschool than elementary-age children, suggesting potential need for developmental adaptation. While the pre-post design without randomized control limited causal inference, the study's national scale and real-world implementation context strengthened external validity and practical relevance.

Integration of SEL into specific subject areas demonstrated the feasibility of embedding social-emotional and behavioral skill development within existing curriculum. Sindiani et al. (2025) conducted a mixed-methods study evaluating explicit SEL instruction within physical education classes for elementary students (grades 4-6), implementing a three-session intervention focused on teamwork, self-awareness, and creative thinking. Results from classroom observations and teacher interviews indicated that the intervention enhanced cooperative behavior, self-awareness, and classroom climate. However, the very brief duration (three sessions) and absence of quantitative behavioral outcome measures limited understanding of sustained effects on discipline-related behaviors. This study illustrates the potential for integrating SEL throughout the school day rather than treating it as a separate curriculum component, though more extensive implementation and rigorous evaluation would be needed to establish effectiveness.

Konadu (2025) conducted a systematic literature review identifying and comparing effective manualized SEL programs including Student Success Skills, SEL Foundations, Second Step, Ready for Success, and SPARK. The review synthesized evidence across 11 studies demonstrating that these structured, well-documented programs improve academic achievement, emotion regulation, empathy, relationships, and school adjustment. The analysis

emphasized the importance of program manualization and evidence-based selection, though noted that most evidence focused on academic rather than discipline outcomes explicitly. Collectively, this body of program evaluation research demonstrates that several specific, named interventions have accumulated sufficient evidence to warrant consideration as "best practice" options, while highlighting that implementation context, fidelity, and sustained support critically influence realized benefits.

### **Factors, Teaching Models, and School Practices Influencing Discipline and Social-Emotional Development**

Ten studies examined factors, teaching practices, and school organizational characteristics that influence the development of discipline and social-emotional competencies. These investigations provide critical insight into contextual variables and implementation conditions that moderate program effectiveness. Krammer et al. (2025) conducted a longitudinal study of 5th-6th grade students in Austria examining how school tracking systems and classroom composition influenced behavioral development across three measurement points. Results indicated relative stability in student behavior over time with slight decreases in externalizing and internalizing problems, though students in middle schools and inclusive classrooms demonstrated somewhat higher levels of behavioral difficulties. While this study did not evaluate specific interventions, it highlighted the importance of structural and organizational factors in shaping student behavioral trajectories, suggesting that SEL and discipline approaches must account for these contextual influences.

Phinla et al. (2025) developed and evaluated a community-based social studies learning model integrating project-based learning (PPRSE) to promote disciplined behavior and learning responsibility among fifth-grade students in small schools. Using research and development methodology combined with quasi-experimental design, the study found that students in the experimental condition demonstrated significantly higher learning discipline and social studies achievement compared to control groups, with high student satisfaction regarding real-world relevance. The 20-week implementation in two schools provided preliminary evidence for subject-integrated approaches, though the small sample and single-grade focus indicated need for larger-scale replication across diverse contexts and grade levels.

Davis et al. (2024) examined relationships between social-emotional competencies and discipline incidents using a large dataset linking student self-report surveys with administrative discipline records for 30,494 students in grades 3-12. Higher social-emotional competencies correlated with fewer behavioral incidents and suspensions, supporting the premise that SEL skills function as protective factors against discipline problems. Critically, however, social-emotional competency levels did not explain persistent racial and grade-level disparities in discipline, indicating that structural and systemic factors beyond individual student characteristics drive inequitable discipline patterns. This finding suggests that while building student competencies is valuable, addressing discipline disparities requires examining educator bias, school policies, and systemic practices alongside individual skill development.

Qualitative research illuminated teaching practices and pedagogical approaches that support integrated SEL and discipline development. Gunawardena & Koivula (2023) conducted in-depth qualitative investigation of eight Australian elementary teachers' practices, examining how whole-school models and pedagogical storytelling supported social-emotional development and positive behavior. Teachers utilized frameworks such as Positive Behaviour for Learning and Berry Street Education Model to structure their discipline approaches while employing storytelling to stimulate emotional discussions and promote positive behaviors. While the small qualitative sample precluded generalization and lacked quantitative student outcome data, the study illustrated how educators translate programmatic frameworks into daily practice through specific pedagogical strategies, highlighting the importance of teacher discretion and adaptation in implementing SEL-discipline approaches.

Sobirovna (2025) investigated psychological and environmental factors influencing elementary students' social-emotional competencies through multi-method qualitative research including questionnaires, observations, role-playing, and student diaries. Results indicated that empathy and self-regulation correlated with cooperation, decision-making, and responsibility, while classroom climate, family support, and peer relationships strongly influenced competency development. Specific instructional strategies including emotional literacy activities, reflective exercises, and structured cooperative tasks enhanced social-emotional competencies. Although the study's

limited context and absence of large-scale quantitative validation constrained generalizability, it identified specific classroom-level strategies teachers can employ to support competency development through daily instruction.

Implementation quality and program characteristics emerged as critical factors determining effectiveness. Carpendale et al. (2025) analyzed population-level data from 18,643 students across 569 Australian elementary schools to evaluate associations between SEL program characteristics and student competencies. Schools implementing evidence-based programs with explicit competency instruction demonstrated significantly higher student scores on four of five CASEL competencies compared to schools using programs with limited or no empirical support. Schools not implementing recognized SEL programs showed no effects. This large-scale cross-sectional analysis provided compelling evidence that program selection matters substantially, with evidence-based, explicit instruction programs outperforming both non-evidence-based programs and absence of formal programming. The findings underscore the importance of careful program selection based on empirical evidence rather than popularity, cost, or theoretical appeal.

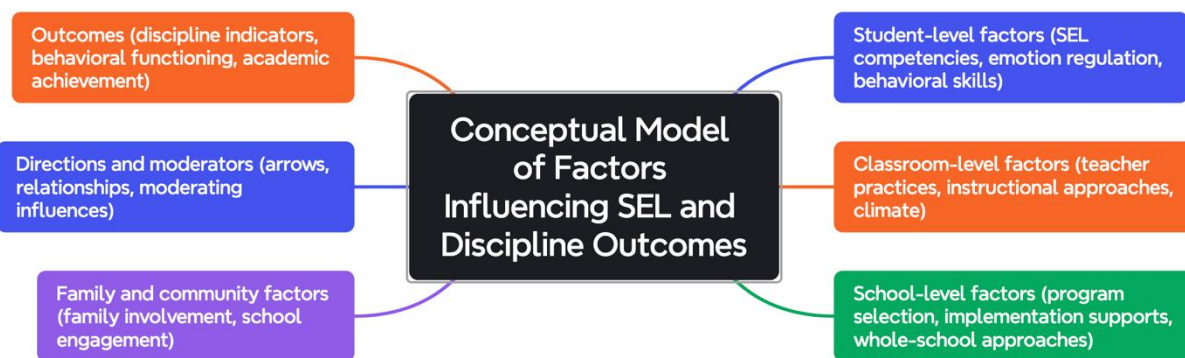
Professional development and implementation support systems significantly influenced teacher practice and program fidelity. Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2025) conducted a two-year randomized controlled trial examining coaching and communities of practice as implementation supports for the Pyramid Model, an evidence-based tiered framework for promoting social-emotional competence in preschool settings. Intervention group teachers receiving coaching and participating in communities of practice demonstrated significantly increased use of evidence-based social-emotional teaching strategies, reduced use of problematic practices, and improved self-efficacy compared to control teachers. However, the study detected no significant effects on child behavior or social-emotional outcomes within the two-year timeframe, suggesting that improving teacher practice may be a necessary but insufficient condition for child-level change, or that effects may emerge over longer implementation periods. This research highlights the complexity of implementation, indicating that teacher capacity building through structured supports is feasible and important even when direct child outcomes are not immediately apparent.

Family and contextual factors play important roles in shaping social-emotional development and behavioral functioning. Martinez-Yarza et al. (2024) examined the roles of family involvement and school engagement in social-emotional development among 170 students aged 8-17 years from vulnerable populations using generalized linear modeling with mediation analysis. Results revealed that family involvement at home increased school engagement, and school engagement fully mediated the relationship between family involvement and social-emotional development. While the relatively small sample and cross-sectional design limited causal inference and did not examine classroom practices directly, the findings emphasized that family engagement and student connection to school function as critical contextual supports for SEL and behavioral development, suggesting that effective approaches should extend beyond classroom-level interventions to systematically engage families.

Teacher-level factors including pedagogical orientation and psychological characteristics influence implementation and effectiveness. Collie et al. (2024) examined relationships among autonomy-supportive teaching, student-perceived social-emotional competencies, well-being, and behavior using structural equation modeling with bifactor exploratory structural equation modeling incorporating both student and parent reports. Autonomy-supportive teaching practices were positively associated with students' perceived global social-emotional competencies, which in turn predicted higher positive affect, better emotion regulation, more prosocial behavior, and fewer behavior problems. While the correlational design precluded causal conclusions and did not test interventions directly, findings suggested that teaching style emphasizing student autonomy, choice, and self-direction may support social-emotional competency development and positive behavioral functioning, offering a pedagogical model complementary to structured SEL curricula.

Tinnes-Vigne et al. (2025) applied the Theory of Planned Behaviour framework to examine factors predicting elementary teachers' adoption of SEL practices, using structural equation modeling with cross-sectional survey data. Teacher positive attitudes toward SEL and self-efficacy for implementing SEL practices significantly predicted both intention to use and actual frequency of SEL implementation, with the model explaining 49% of variance in intentions and 44% of implementation variance. Notably, many teachers reported implementing SEL primarily reactively in response to problems rather than preventively as part of routine instruction. Although the self-report,

cross-sectional design without classroom observation limited conclusions, the research identified malleable teacher characteristics attitudes and efficacy beliefs as important implementation factors, suggesting that professional development should explicitly address these psychological dimensions while promoting shift from reactive to proactive, preventive SEL integration.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Factors Influencing SEL and Discipline Outcomes**

## Discussion

The comprehensive meta-analytic evidence synthesized in this review establishes that universal school-based social-emotional learning interventions constitute an effective approach for simultaneously enhancing student competencies and improving behavioral outcomes including those directly related to school discipline. Cipriano et al. (2023) analysis of 424 studies across 53 countries provides robust evidence that universal SEL programs produce moderate positive effects on student behavior ( $g = 0.20$ ), school climate and safety ( $g = 0.27$ ), and related outcomes that collectively support more positive, less punitive approaches to student discipline (Wigelsworth et al., 2021). These effect sizes, while modest in magnitude, represent meaningful improvements when translated to practical terms: reduced behavioral incidents, fewer office referrals and suspensions, and enhanced school safety perceptions across large student populations. The consistency of findings across diverse international contexts suggests that the fundamental principles underlying effective SEL instruction explicit teaching of social-emotional competencies, opportunities for practice and application, supportive classroom environments transcend specific cultural contexts, though cultural adaptation of program content and delivery remains important for maximizing relevance and engagement (Pedrini et al., 2022). Understanding specific mechanisms through which SEL interventions influence behavioral outcomes can inform both program design and implementation. Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy (2024) systematic review of mentalization-based interventions provides compelling evidence that explicitly targeting social-cognitive capacities including perspective-taking, theory of mind, and emotional understanding produces improvements in behavior regulation and reductions in disruptive conduct.

The evidence base reveals important nuances regarding program type and implementation approach that inform practical decisions about SEL-discipline integration strategies. Wigelsworth et al. (2021) overview finding that classroom-based curriculum programs demonstrate stronger evidence than whole-school approaches suggests that structured, explicit instruction within regular classroom contexts may be more reliably implemented and effective than diffuse whole-school initiatives lacking clear instructional components (Ştefan et al., 2022). However, Bergin et al. (2024) positive evaluation of the Leader in Me whole-school program indicates that comprehensive approaches can be effective when they include both explicit curriculum components and systematic attention to school culture, adult modeling, and environmental supports. Ştefan et al. (2022) finding that only 10.5% of preschool SEL programs meet "well-established" evidence criteria underscores the critical importance of program selection

based on rigorous empirical evidence rather than marketing claims or theoretical appeal. Educational leaders face abundant SEL program options varying widely in evidence quality, implementation requirements, and cost; the evidence strongly supports selecting programs with demonstrated effectiveness through rigorous evaluation, clear implementation protocols, and alignment with established SEL frameworks such as CASEL's competency model and SAFE implementation criteria (Carpendale et al., 2025). Kołodziejczyk et al. (2025) finding that an SEL program initially improved emotion regulation without immediate behavioral changes suggests that competency development may precede observable behavior change, highlighting the importance of measuring both proximal competency outcomes and more distal behavioral indicators with sufficient follow-up periods. These mechanistic insights indicate that effective SEL-discipline integration should explicitly teach both social-cognitive understanding and emotion regulation skills while providing structured opportunities for students to practice applying these competencies in authentic social contexts.

The evidence synthesized in this review reveals a critical tension between universal approaches targeting all students and the need for differentiated, intensive supports for students with significant behavioral challenges or special educational needs. Ballard & Bender's (2021) systematic review of interventions in alternative education settings demonstrates that students with severe behavioral difficulties benefit from structured behavioral approaches including group contingencies, Check-In/Check-Out systems, and other evidence-based behavioral supports that may not be necessary or appropriate for all students in universal programming (Almardiyah et al., 2025). This finding supports multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) or response-to-intervention (RTI) frameworks that layer increasingly intensive interventions matching student need levels. Universal SEL programming provides foundational competency development for all students while establishing common language, expectations, and skills that facilitate more targeted interventions for students requiring additional support (Pedrini et al., 2022). Strnadová et al. (2023) umbrella review identifying evidence-based instructional practices including visual supports, peer-mediated instruction, self-management, prompting, and time delay provides valuable guidance for adapting SEL instruction to meet diverse learning needs within inclusive classrooms. However, Hassani & Schwab (2021) finding of small effect sizes for SEL interventions specifically designed for students with special educational needs, combined with limited research outside the United States, indicates substantial need for development and evaluation of adapted SEL approaches for this population. The principle of Universal Design for Learning suggests that designing SEL instruction with built-in flexibility, multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression benefits not only students with identified disabilities but all learners, potentially obviating the need for separate adapted programming while ensuring accessibility for diverse learners.

Cultural responsiveness and attention to systemic inequities emerge as critical considerations largely inadequately addressed in the current evidence base. Davis et al. (2024) finding that social-emotional competency levels do not explain persistent racial and grade-level disparities in school discipline powerfully illustrates that individual skill deficits do not account for inequitable discipline patterns observed across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. This finding challenges deficit-oriented interpretations suggesting that disparities result primarily from differences in student competencies or behaviors, instead pointing to systemic factors including implicit bias, differential application of behavior expectations and consequences, and cultural discontinuity between home and school environments. Effective approaches to discipline equity must therefore extend beyond building student competencies to examining and transforming educator beliefs, school policies, disciplinary procedures, and cultural climates that produce disparate outcomes (Almardiyah et al., 2025). The limited cultural diversity in SEL program development and evaluation research constrains understanding of whether and how programs developed primarily in Western, individualistic cultural contexts function effectively in collectivist, non-Western settings or with students from diverse cultural backgrounds within multicultural societies. Gaspar et al. (2024) real-world implementation study in Portugal represents important steps toward understanding cultural transferability, yet substantial work remains to develop truly culturally responsive SEL and discipline approaches that honor diverse values, communication patterns, and socialization goals while building universally valuable competencies.

The evidence synthesized in this review consistently identifies implementation quality, fidelity, and support as critical determinants of program effectiveness, with implications for professional development, organizational

structures, and resource allocation. Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2025) randomized controlled trial demonstrating that coaching and communities of practice improve teacher implementation of evidence-based social-emotional teaching strategies illustrates that simply providing curricula or training is insufficient; sustained implementation requires ongoing support, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving (Gaspar et al., 2024). Professional development models emphasizing active learning, practice with feedback, and job-embedded support prove more effective than traditional workshop-only approaches for changing teaching practice. School and district leaders play essential roles in creating conditions supporting high-quality implementation including allocating protected time for SEL instruction, providing necessary materials and resources, establishing accountability systems monitoring implementation fidelity and outcomes, and fostering organizational cultures valuing social-emotional development alongside academic achievement (Carpendale et al., 2025). Tinnes-Vigne et al. (2025) application of Theory of Planned Behaviour demonstrating that teacher attitudes and self-efficacy predict both intention and actual implementation of SEL practices indicates that professional development must address not only knowledge and skills but also motivation and confidence. Collie et al. (2024) finding that autonomy-supportive teaching practices associate with enhanced student social-emotional competencies and positive behaviors suggests that general pedagogical approach matters alongside specific SEL curricula.

Family engagement and school-family partnership emerge as important yet often neglected dimensions of comprehensive approaches to student social-emotional development and behavioral functioning. Martinez-Yarza et al. (2024) finding that family involvement enhances social-emotional development through its effect on school engagement illustrates that students' connection to school mediates various contextual influences on developmental outcomes (Sobirovna, 2025). Families support social-emotional learning through modeling, direct teaching of skills and values, providing emotional support, and partnering with schools to reinforce competencies across contexts. Effective school-family partnerships require bidirectional communication, mutual respect for families' funds of knowledge and cultural practices, and accessible opportunities for family participation that accommodate diverse work schedules, languages, and comfort levels with school engagement. Schools implementing SEL programs should provide families with information about program goals and content, suggest home-based activities reinforcing school-taught competencies, and seek family input regarding cultural values and priorities to inform program adaptation (Gunawardena & Koivula, 2023). The evidence base would benefit from additional research explicitly examining family engagement strategies within SEL programming and their effects on student outcomes, particularly for families from marginalized communities who may have experienced negative school interactions or face barriers to traditional involvement opportunities. Structural factors operating at school and system levels including organizational policies, leadership support, and resource allocation also shape the conditions within which teachers implement SEL and discipline practices.

Despite the substantial body of evidence accumulated in recent years, multiple significant gaps and limitations constrain current understanding and warrant focused research attention. The predominance of short-term outcome measurement with limited follow-up assessment prevents understanding whether SEL intervention effects sustain over time, fade after programming ends, or demonstrate sleeper effects emerging only after delayed intervals (Kołodziejczyk et al., 2025). Longitudinal research with multiple measurement points extending years beyond intervention completion would clarify the developmental trajectory of effects, identify critical periods for intervention, and distinguish programs producing lasting change from those generating only temporary improvements. Methodological limitations including reliance on self-report measures, lack of active control conditions, and inadequate attention to implementation fidelity constrain confidence in many study findings (Davis et al., 2024; Wigelsworth et al., 2021). Multi-method assessment incorporating behavioral observations, teacher reports, peer nominations, and performance-based tasks would provide more robust, less biased competency measurement. The limited attention to mechanisms of change and moderators of effectiveness constrains both theoretical understanding and practical application; component analysis research systematically varying program elements while holding others constant would identify active ingredients distinguishing effective from ineffective programs (Cipriano et al., 2023). The international evidence base, while growing, remains concentrated in Western,

English-speaking countries with limited representation from diverse cultural contexts, constraining understanding of cultural transferability and optimal approaches in diverse educational systems.

The evidence synthesized in this review provides several concrete implications for educational policy and practice. First, school principals and curriculum teams should conduct an annual review of SEL program selection using evidence-based criteria aligned with CASEL's SAFE implementation standards (Carpendale et al., 2025; Cipriano et al., 2023), avoiding adoption based on cost or popularity alone. Second, school districts should formally implement a three-tier intervention system (Tier 1: universal SEL curriculum for all; Tier 2: small-group targeted support for at-risk students; Tier 3: intensive individualized behavioral intervention), with a designated school counselor or psychologist conducting bi-annual behavioral screening using validated tools. Third, school administrators should mandate a minimum of 20 hours per year of teacher professional development in SEL delivery, delivered through instructional coaching, peer classroom observation, and community-of-practice meetings rather than one-off workshops. Fourth, school committees should integrate equity audits into their annual planning cycle, reviewing disciplinary data disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and grade level to identify and address systemic disparities, rather than treating discipline as a student-level problem alone. Fifth, national and regional education authorities should establish school-level reporting requirements that include social-emotional competency indicators alongside academic achievement metrics, enabling accountability for holistic student development outcomes. These concrete actions would transform this review's evidence base into measurable improvements in school discipline and student well-being.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review synthesized evidence from 28 empirical studies examining approaches and strategies for enhancing discipline and social-emotional skills in students, revealing substantial progress in establishing effective practices while identifying persistent gaps requiring continued research attention. The evidence conclusively demonstrates that universal school-based SEL interventions improve student social-emotional competencies, behavioral outcomes, school climate, and related indicators directly relevant to positive discipline practices. Specific programs including Leader in Me, SPARK, Incredible Years, and other manualized curricula demonstrate effectiveness when implemented with fidelity and appropriate support systems. Implementation factors including coaching, professional learning communities, teacher self-efficacy, and autonomy-supportive pedagogical practices critically moderate effectiveness, while family engagement and school-family partnerships extend benefits beyond classroom settings.

Critical gaps remain in understanding long-term sustainability of effects, cultural transferability across diverse contexts, differential effectiveness for students with special needs, and specific mechanisms through which interventions produce behavioral change. Future research should employ longitudinal designs with extended follow-up periods, active control conditions, multi-method outcome assessment, and systematic examination of implementation fidelity and moderators of effectiveness. Cross-cultural research examining effectiveness in non-Western contexts and culturally-specific adaptations would advance global understanding and promote equitable practice. Addressing persistent discipline disparities requires research explicitly examining systemic factors including implicit bias, structural inequities in policies and procedures, and culturally responsive discipline alternatives alongside continued attention to student competency development. For Indonesian educators and policymakers in particular, the findings of this review are directly relevant to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), which explicitly emphasizes holistic student development aligned with the Profil Pelajar Pancasila a framework that encompasses dimensions such as beriman (faith and integrity), berkebhinekaan global (global diversity), bergotong royong (collaboration), kreatif (creativity), bernalar kritis (critical thinking), and mandiri (independence). The SEL competencies and evidence-based discipline approaches synthesized in this review align closely with these Pancasila student profile dimensions, suggesting that globally validated SEL program structures can serve as practical frameworks for schools implementing the Merdeka Curriculum while retaining their cultural and values-based identity.

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