



Inclusive Classroom Environments and the Development of Social Emotional Competencies in Kongwa District Schools, Tanzania

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Abstract: *Inclusive classrooms aim to accommodate diverse learners while fostering social-emotional competencies (SEL) essential for holistic pupil development. This study explored how inclusive classroom environments contribute to the development of SEL among primary school pupils in Kongwa District, Tanzania. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered through interviews with teachers and head teachers, focus group discussions with pupils, and classroom observations. The study found that inclusive environments characterized by participatory teaching, emotional support, peer collaboration, and differentiated instruction significantly enhanced pupils' empathy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. Theoretical insights from Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, and Bandura support these findings. However, limited accessibility, professional development gaps, and infrastructure challenges impeded the full realization of SEL outcomes. The paper recommends strengthening teacher training, enhancing classroom accessibility, and promoting policies that integrate SEL within inclusive education frameworks.*

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Social-Emotional Learning, Primary Schools, Social Emotional Learning*

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1. Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is central to learners' success both academically and socially. As global education systems shift toward inclusive approaches, the integration of SEL becomes even more vital, especially in classrooms serving pupils with diverse learning needs. Inclusive education is not only about physical presence in the classroom but about creating a supportive environment where all learners can thrive emotionally and socially.

In many European countries, social-emotional learning (SEL) has been integrated into national education frameworks as a core competency for the 21st century. Nations such as Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom have adopted structured SEL curricula that emphasize empathy, resilience, collaboration, and conflict resolution

alongside academic instruction (OECD, 2020; Humphrey, 2013). For example, Finland's education policy embeds SEL in everyday teaching practices through cooperative learning models and restorative approaches to discipline (Sahlberg, 2015). Similarly, the UK's *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning* (SEAL) program provides a structured framework for embedding SEL into school culture, teacher training, and student assessment (Department for Education, 2011). These approaches reflect the recognition that academic achievement alone is insufficient for holistic learner development, and that emotional well-being is essential for lifelong learning and social cohesion.

In the United States, SEL has gained significant attention through initiatives led by organizations such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020). Many states have developed SEL standards that guide instruction from kindergarten through high school, ensuring that skills like self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making are systematically taught (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Research from districts in California, Illinois, and New York shows that SEL integration not only improves academic performance but also reduces behavioral problems and promotes inclusivity for students with diverse learning needs (Durlak et al., 2011). In Latin America, countries such as Chile and Colombia have also begun to embed SEL into national education policies, often linking it with citizenship education and school safety initiatives (UNESCO, 2019), recognizing its role in fostering inclusive and equitable classrooms.

In Southern Africa, countries like South Africa have integrated SEL into the Life Orientation curriculum, aiming to address issues of diversity, emotional resilience, and social responsibility in post-apartheid educational settings (Department of Basic Education, 2011). These programs often emphasize anti-bullying initiatives, peer mediation, and teacher-led emotional coaching (Maringe & Prew, 2014). In East Africa, Kenya and Uganda have made strides in integrating SEL through competency-based curricula, which include life skills, citizenship, and values education (UNICEF, 2021). However, despite these policy-level commitments, many schools in the region face challenges in translating SEL policies into effective classroom practices due to inadequate teacher preparation, resource shortages, and large class sizes (Mugisha, 2021).

In Tanzania, SEL integration has become more prominent in recent years through the *National Strategy for Inclusive Education* (URT, 2021) and the *Education and Training Policy* (URT, 2023), which stress the importance of emotional and social competencies for all learners, including those with disabilities and other special needs. These frameworks advocate for participatory teaching methods, positive discipline, and the creation of emotionally supportive learning environments (Revelian & Tibategeza, 2022). Nevertheless, the practical realization of SEL remains uneven, especially in rural districts like Kongwa, where infrastructural limitations, insufficient teacher training, and lack of specialized resources hinder effective implementation. The gap between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities underscores the need for targeted research and context-specific interventions to fully harness the potential of SEL in fostering inclusive and equitable education.

1.2 Problem Statement

In Tanzania, inclusive education has been prioritized through policies such as the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (2021–2025) and the Education and Training Policy (2023), supported by initiatives like teacher training, integration of inclusive pedagogies, and the provision of assistive learning materials. These efforts aim to ensure equitable access to quality education and to promote social and emotional well-being for learners of all abilities. However, implementation challenges, particularly in rural districts, continue to hinder the realization of these goals. Pupils in inclusive classrooms often experience emotional neglect, peer exclusion, and limited teacher support, partly due to inadequate professional development, shortages of skilled teachers, and poor infrastructure.

The existing research in Tanzania has largely focused on access, academic outcomes, and policy implementation, with limited empirical attention to how inclusive classroom environments foster social-emotional learning (SEL). Few studies have examined the lived experiences of teachers and pupils, especially in rural contexts, where challenges are most pronounced. This study addresses this gap by exploring how inclusive classrooms in Kongwa District contribute to SEL development, identifying both enabling practices and persistent barriers to inform policy, teacher training, and resource allocation

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Literature Review

Cavioni, Broli & Grazzani (2024, Italy) Explored the alignment of the CASEL SEL framework with European education policies. Methodologically, this was Policy analysis across WHO Health Promoting Schools and OECD's SSES initiatives. The study demonstrated strong synergy between global SEL frameworks and European policy; emphasized need for cohesive assessment and teacher training integration. The OECD SSES Report (2024) aimed at providing large-scale data on how schools promote SEL across education systems. Methodology: Cross-national survey of students, teachers, and principals (SSES 2023). Results: Found that teacher feedback and whole-school integration are associated with higher SEL. Highlighted gaps in awareness of SEL's impact and curriculum integration.

Ferreira et al. (2024) conducted in Spain & Portugal aimed to examine primary teachers' representations and classroom practices around SEL. It was a qualitative survey/interview of teachers. The findings revealed that teachers recognize SEL's theoretical importance but apply limited strategies in daily practice, due to curricular

constraints. Studie in Europe collectively underscores that SEL is increasingly embedded in policies. However, persistent challenges, such as aligning frameworks with teacher practice and enhancing curriculum flexibility affect implementation fidelity.

On the other hand, in America, Learning Policy Institute (2023–2025 Review) summarized the evidence on SEL across Pre K–12 worldwide. The review included hundreds of studies and meta-analyses. The findings revealed that there were consistent positive effects on social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains across diverse demographic groups. Chile National SEL Rollout (2023) conducted a study to evaluate results of SEL implementation across Chilean schools. This was a quasi-experimental study using administrative data. The study came up with mixed outcomes. Where, some schools saw improvements, but overall effects were modest due to variable implementation quality. In the Americas, especially the U.S., SEL outcomes remain robust when interventions are evidence-based and well implemented. Chile’s mixed outcomes reflect challenges in scaling, while the USAID review confirms that SEL interventions succeed in low-resource settings, if appropriately contextualized and supported.

USAID–OECD SSES Global Report (2024) Saw the global findings, including implications for African systems. *It was found that teacher feedback and inclusive school cultures support SEL. It was then recommended for policy attention to teacher development and integration across subjects. Regional evidence confirms SEL’s potential but notes barriers common across Sub-Saharan contexts mainly, limited teacher support and resource gaps. African studies thus mirror global patterns: interventions work when practitioners are trained, and contexts enable them.*

Maphie (2023) study conducted in Dar es Salaam and Kilimanjaro secondary schools aimed at investigating parent and student perceptions of inclusive education. It was a phenomenological qualitative study, using FGDs and interviews with 24 respondents. It was found that students and parents of learners with disabilities have positive view about inclusion, but parents of learners without disabilities expressed resistance. Key issues included insufficient teacher numbers, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of financial cooperation.

Larios and Zetlin (2023) found that inclusive classroom environments foster SEL through cooperative learning, empathy-building, and teacher modeling. Mugisha (2021) emphasized that emotionally supportive teaching styles and peer relationships are essential for promoting emotional competence. Revelian and Tibategeza (2022) pointed to challenges in Tanzania, where despite policy

reforms, many inclusive classrooms lack the resources and training required to effectively implement SEL strategies.

2.2 Theoretical Review

Three theories guided this study: Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory (1978), founded by Lev Vygotsky, posits that learning and development occur primarily through social interaction, with knowledge first constructed at the social level (inter-psychological) before being internalized individually (intra-psychological). The key assumptions include the critical role of language, cultural tools, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners achieve higher competence with guidance from more knowledgeable others. Its strength lies in emphasizing collaborative learning, scaffolding, and the importance of guided participation in building both cognitive and emotional skills, while its main weakness is limited attention to individual differences and biological factors. In the context of this study, the theory explains how inclusive classroom practices such as peer-assisted learning and teacher facilitation can foster SEL by supporting pupils to progress within their ZPD.

Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1977), proposed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes that individuals acquire new behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling, supported by cognitive processes that mediate between seeing a behavior and reproducing it. The theory assumes that learners can adopt behaviors without direct experience, that observed behaviors are influenced by perceived consequences, and that reinforcement—either direct or vicarious—strengthens behavior adoption. Its strengths include explaining the influence of role models and environmental cues on behavior, while its weaknesses involve underestimating internal predispositions and structural barriers that may limit behavior change. For this study, the theory is relevant because it shows how teachers and peers, through modeling empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation, can shape pupils’ SEL outcomes in inclusive settings.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979), developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, frames development as shaped by multiple interrelated systems: the microsystem (immediate environments), mesosystem (relationships between microsystems), ecosystems (indirect influences), macrosystem (cultural norms), and chronosystem (changes over time). It assumes that development is a dynamic interaction between individual characteristics and environmental contexts at multiple levels. Its strengths include offering a holistic framework for understanding how varied influences shape SEL, while a key weakness is its broad scope, which can make pinpointing mechanisms of change challenges. In this study, the theory is relevant because it situates the inclusive classroom within a broader network of influences; including family support,

community attitudes, and school leadership that collectively shape pupils' emotional and social competencies.

Together, these theories complement each other; Vygotsky emphasizes learning through guided interaction, Bandura explains learning through modeled behavior, and Bronfenbrenner situates both processes in wider ecological systems. This integrated perspective aligns closely with the study's aim of understanding how inclusive classroom environments in Kongwa District foster SEL through interpersonal, observational, and systemic influences.

2.3 Research Objective

This paper focuses on the role of inclusive classroom environments in promoting the development of social-emotional competencies among learners in Tanzania.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how inclusive classroom environments influence the development of social-emotional learning (SEL) among primary school pupils in Kongwa District, Tanzania. The qualitative approach was selected because it captures the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities of participants, which are essential for understanding complex educational and emotional processes. The case study method, as described by Yin (2018), enables in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its real-life setting, making it particularly suitable for examining how SEL is nurtured in inclusive classrooms where social, cultural, and policy contexts are intertwined. The design also allows for flexibility in data collection, accommodating multiple perspectives and data sources.

In applying this design, the study focused on a bounded system consisting of selected primary schools implementing inclusive education practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and head teachers, focus group discussions (FGDs) with pupils, and non-participant classroom observations, ensuring methodological triangulation for greater credibility and validity. This design was useful to the study because it facilitated a deep and holistic understanding of how teaching strategies, classroom interactions, and environmental factors shape pupils' SEL development. Moreover, it allowed the researcher to interpret classroom practices within the broader ecological systems such as family, community, and policy frameworks, thereby generating insights that can inform both local practice and national policy implementation.

3.2 Sampling Techniques and Procedures

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information on inclusive classroom practices and the development of social-emotional learning (SEL). This technique was chosen because it enables the deliberate selection of cases that meet specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target group comprised primary school teachers, head teachers, and pupils in Kongwa District from schools identified by the District Education Office as implementing inclusive education policies. Within each selected school, teachers with experience in inclusive classrooms and pupils from mixed-ability classes were included to capture diverse perspectives (Pott, 2015). The purposive approach ensured that the sample was information-rich and directly connected to the phenomenon under investigation.

The sample consisted of 51 participants: 6 class teachers, 3 head teachers, and 42 pupils. Teachers and head teachers were selected for their professional expertise and firsthand involvement in inclusive education implementation, while pupils were chosen to represent a range of abilities, backgrounds, and experiences within the inclusive classroom environment. This sampling procedure was useful for the study because it ensured representation of the key stakeholders involved in fostering SEL, allowed for in-depth exploration of varied experiences, and facilitated comparative analysis between teacher and pupil perspectives. By focusing on participants who are directly engaged with inclusive practices, the study was able to gather nuanced insights into both the enabling factors and challenges affecting SEL in rural Tanzanian primary schools.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data was gathered from 51 participants: 6 class teachers, 3 head teachers, and 42 pupils. Interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The theoretical frameworks guided the discussion of interpretation.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the University, Dodoma Region Authority, Kongwa District Education Office and the head teachers of the selected schools. All participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and head teachers,

while verbal assent was sought from pupils during focus group discussions, with the approval of school authorities.

To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and observation notes. Data was stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers. Ethical guidelines for conducting educational research, as outlined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011), were adhered to, ensuring respect, beneficence, and justice in all interactions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Participatory Teaching and Social Engagement

The findings from the interviews indicated that teachers employed participatory strategies, such as group discussions, role-plays, storytelling, and songs, to actively involve all learners. One teacher from school A explained,

“I use songs and group activities to ensure that even slow learners feel part of the lesson. For example, when teaching about animals, we sing a song naming animals in turns, and everyone must act like their chosen animal. Even the quiet pupils laugh and join in.” (Interview with a teacher, School A, April 2025).

Another teacher added:

“When pupils work in groups to act out a story, they gain confidence and even the shy ones start to speak up. For instance, in a story about market day, pupils took turns being the seller and the buyer, practicing polite language and counting skills at the same time.” (Interview with a teacher, School B, April 2025).

These findings are consistent with Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory, which emphasizes learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) through social interaction and scaffolding. The results also support Larious and Zetlin’s (2023) argument that cooperative learning enhances communication and empathy. In Tanzania, such participatory methods reflect the Education and Training Policy (URT, 2023), which advocates learner-centered pedagogy, and the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (URT, 2021), which calls for active engagement of all learners regardless of ability.

4.2 Emotionally Supportive Environments

In the findings it was indicated that teachers created emotionally safe learning spaces through greetings, emotional check-ins, and patience with struggling learners. A head teacher from school B explained:

“We teach pupils to recognize feelings and encourage them to talk when they are sad. For example, if a pupil’s friend is absent, we discuss how they feel and encourage classmates to send a get-well card.” (Interview with head teacher, School C, April 2025).

A teacher from school D explained:

“Every morning, I ask pupils how they feel, and if someone is upset, we take a moment to talk about it before starting lessons. Last week, a pupil came in crying because she had lost her exercise book, so the class helped her look for it and made her feel better.” (Interview with a teacher, School D, April 2025).

Such practices align with CASEL’s (2020) emphasis on creating supportive environments as a foundation for emotional regulation and resilience. They also reflect Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, highlighting the microsystem’s role in shaping emotional well-being. These findings echo Revelian and Tibategeza’s (2022) observation that Tanzanian schools that foster emotional support improve pupil engagement and reduce behavioral problems. Policy-wise, these practices are aligned with the National Strategy for Inclusive Education’s recommendation for “nurturing safe and emotionally supportive classrooms” as a prerequisite for learning.

4.3 Peer Collaboration and Mutual Respect

The findings revealed that, the mixed-ability group work encouraged pupils to learn from each other and foster mutual respect. One pupil explained,

“When we work in groups, we help each other. If someone doesn’t understand, we explain until they do. Last time, my friend couldn’t solve a maths problem, so I showed her how to do it step-by-step, and she got it right.” (Focus group discussion, School A, April 2025).

Another pupil from school B added:

“We share books and ideas, and that makes everyone feel part of the class. For example, in science, my group didn’t have enough charts, so another group let us use theirs, and we all finished on time.” (Focus group discussion, School B, April 2025).

Bandura’s Social Learning Theory explains how positive behaviors such as cooperation and empathy are transmitted through observation and imitation, while Bronfenbrenner’s model situates peer dynamics as a key part of the classroom microsystem influencing SEL. Mugisha (2021) similarly found that collaborative peer work fosters emotional competence in East African schools. This approach aligns with Tanzanian inclusive education policy, which promotes collaborative learning strategies to reduce stigma and improve integration of learners with disabilities.

4.4 Differentiated Instruction

Teachers adopted teaching strategies and materials to meet diverse learner needs. One teacher explained:

“If a pupil can’t write, we find another way to assess their learning. For example, I may ask them to explain the answer orally, use matching cards, or point to the correct picture. This way, they can still show what they know without struggling with writing. (Interview with a teacher in School C, April 2025).

Another teacher from school A supported this approach, explaining:

“Some pupils learn better with pictures or acting, so I prepare different activities for them. For instance, when teaching a story, I use picture sequences for visual learners, while others act out the scenes in small groups. This keeps everyone involved and helps them understand in their own way.” (Interview with a teacher in School A, April 2025).

This practice aligns with Vygotsky’s principle of scaffolding and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach, ensuring all learners access the curriculum. Mugisha (2021) highlights that tailoring instruction improves emotional competence and inclusivity. The approach also reflects the Education and Training Policy (URT, 2023), which calls for adapting teaching methods to suit learner differences, and is a direct response to the National Strategy for Inclusive Education’s emphasis on differentiated pedagogy.

4.5 Conflict Resolution and Self-Control

It was also revealed that the teachers modeled constructive problem-solving, encouraging pupils to express themselves calmly. A teacher from school B explained:

“We teach them to say, ‘I didn’t like that,’ instead of fighting. For example, if someone takes their pencil without asking, we practice how to politely ask for it back, then discuss the importance of respecting each other’s property.” (Interview with teacher from school B, April 2025).

A pupil from school C described the impact:

“When someone annoys me, I first tell them politely before telling the teacher. For example, last week my friend pushed me when we were lining up, so I told him, ‘Please stop, I don’t like that.’ He said sorry, and we played together at break.” (Focus group discussion, School C, April 2025).

These strategies align with Bandura’s notion of learning through modeled behavior, reinforcing self-control and respectful communication. They also reflect CASEL’s (2020) SEL competencies of self-management and responsible decision-making. Internationally, Durlak et al. (2011) found that explicit instruction in conflict resolution leads to reductions in aggressive behavior, a finding mirrored in Tanzanian classrooms when SEL principles are deliberately taught. Policy alignment is seen in the National Strategy for Inclusive Education, which urges schools to embed positive discipline and social-emotional skills in classroom practice.

Therefore, the findings indicated the interplay between Vygotsky’s emphasis on guided interaction, Bandura’s focus on modeled behavior, and Bronfenbrenner’s systemic perspective is evident. The findings confirm that SEL in inclusive classrooms is not only shaped by teacher-led strategies but also by peer dynamics and the broader policy and community context. The results are consistent with both global research and Tanzanian policy aspirations, but they also reveal persistent implementation gaps, particularly in teacher training, resource provision, and consistent application of inclusive pedagogies which need to be addressed for SEL to be fully embedded in rural primary schools.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that inclusive classroom environments play a critical role in promoting the development of social-emotional learning (SEL) among primary school pupils in Kongwa. Practices such as participatory teaching, emotional support, peer learning, and structured conflict resolution were identified as key strategies fostering social-emotional competencies. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges persist, particularly related to inadequate infrastructure, limited accessibility, and gaps in teacher preparedness. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that all pupils can fully benefit from inclusive education initiatives.

5.2 Recommendations

From the study, the following recommendations are in order:

1. The Ministry should increase Teacher Training which integrate SEL and inclusive pedagogical approaches into both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs to enhance educators' capacity to support diverse learners effectively.
2. *The government should improve the infrastructure:* Upgrade classroom facilities and provide appropriate learning materials to ensure accessibility for all pupils, including those with special needs.
3. *The Ministry of Education should enforce Policy Implementation:* Strengthen the enforcement of the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (2021–2025) through rigorous school-level monitoring and support mechanisms.
4. *Tanzania Institute of Education should improve Curriculum Enhancement:* Explicitly incorporate SEL into the primary school curriculum to guide teachers in systematically fostering pupils' social-emotional competencies.
5. *Further Research:* Conduct similar studies in urban districts or other rural regions with larger and more diverse samples to validate and generalize the findings of this study.

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