Social and emotional learning research: Intervention studies for supporting adolescents in Turkey

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Abstract

This study is a systematic literature review that examines intervention research on social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in secondary schools of Turkey. Overall, 12 intervention studies were identified that had examined school programs on SEL-related topics. These topics included values development, conflict resolution, anger management, self-esteem enhancement, peer mediation, and several classroom-based interventions within subject area teaching. Findings suggest gaps in the publication of high quality research on intervention programs for supporting social and emotional learning in secondary schools of Turkey, along with inattention to how such programs influence academic achievement.

Keywords: social emotional learning; secondary education; systematic literature review; Turkey

1. Introduction

Since 2005, the Turkish Ministry of National Education has explicitly stated that one of its main objectives within curriculum reform, as described by Talim Terbiye Kurulu (The Board of Education), is to “move from a teacher-centered didactic model to a student-centered constructivist model” (as cited by Aksit, 2007, 133). A constructivist model necessarily implies that teachers not only give attention to course content and curricular objectives but that instruction is taught with a view of students as active participants in the learning process (Brooks, 1990; Eggen & Kauchak, 2004). As such, social interaction becomes critical, along with consideration of students’ social and emotional learning (SEL).

Within a student-centered constructivist model, students and teachers negotiate how to work within groups while developing a new understanding of content. “These negotiations occur as each participant actively seeks to learn about himself or herself, the other group members and the content of the course,” according to Brooks (1990, 68). If students are to be active participants in classrooms, it becomes essential to consider their capacities for interacting with others as well as their emotional responses to the learning process.

Extensive meta-analyses of SEL interventions, especially from the United States, have been conducted that demonstrate the value of SEL from varied perspectives of human development (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki,
Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Payton et al., 2008) as well as workplace needs (Opengart, 2007), along with attention to what more needs to be improved and reconsidered (Hoffman, 2009). In an extensive meta-analysis based on 213 control-group studies involving 270,034 students, it was concluded that “compared to controls, students demonstrated enhanced SEL skills, attitudes, and positive social behaviors following intervention, and also demonstrated fewer conduct problems and had lower levels of emotional distress” (Durlak et al., 2011, 412-413). Perhaps even more impressive for those still unconvinced of the value of such programs was that students who had participated in SEL programs also demonstrated an average gain of 11% in academic performance.

Over the past decade in Turkey, an increasing number of studies have reported on the social and emotional learning (SEL) needs of adolescents. These studies range from analyses of students’ challenges such as depression (Yildirim, Ergene, & Munir, 2007), internet dependency (Günc & Kayri, 2010), and bullying (Kartal & Bilgin, 2009; Kepenekci & Cinkır, 2006; Yurtal & Cenkseven, 2007), to studies that take pro-social perspectives examining issues such as adolescents’ life satisfaction (Çivitci, 2009; Öngen, 2009) and well-being (Eryılmaz, 2011; Kocyörük, 2010). Together, these studies form a portrait of Turkish adolescents who face increasing challenges and the need for social supports in developing themselves as well-balanced individuals with capacities for empathy, care for self and others, decision-making, and self-management.

As attention to SEL advances in other countries, the situation in Turkey is also changing. The first counseling services in Turkish schools were established in the 1970s; since 1996 more standardized procedures have been implemented for accrediting school counselors with an increased emphasis on preventative and developmental programs; since 2005, the Ministry of National Education has also required weekly one-hour guidance courses in 8th grade as well as in high school (Stockton & Güneri, 2011). While counselors may closely monitor these programs in their own schools, formal research does not yet seem to be widely available. Still, it is clear that on many levels there is a growing recognition of the value of specially designed programs to support students’ personal development, including their social and emotional learning needs.

The purpose of this small systematic review was to examine the initial directions of published research in the analysis of SEL interventions for adolescents within secondary schools of Turkey. Four research questions guided this initial review of SEL intervention research:

- How are SEL interventions reported in Turkey?
- What research methods are used to study these SEL interventions?
- How do the samples represent school populations of Turkey?
- What have been the findings to date of the studies reported about SEL intervention programs in secondary schools?

The findings are summarized and then discussed in terms of their implications for furthering this area of inquiry about SEL interventions in Turkey.

2. Methods

Using a systematic review of the literature, this study examined quantitative and qualitative empirical studies published between 2000 and 2011. The sample of articles reviewed were published in English and Turkish journals, for national and international audiences. Although the present author does not have advanced Turkish reading skills for reviewing journals, a colleague with expertise in the education system of Turkey participated in helping to locate and review these articles.

The present literature review initially focused on SSCI journals† to collect the articles that were likely of the highest quality; the review was then extended to any references made within those articles, as well as key word searches of databases in both English and Turkish that included an assortment of systemically chosen words and phrases. Over 110 articles were collected, and are in fact a part of a larger study that aims to investigate research of potential factors influencing the social and emotional development of adolescents in Turkish society. This set of 110 articles included only 12 published studies reporting interventions to meet the SEL needs of students; these studies examine programs or classroom practices that specifically targeted at aims for social and emotional learning of youth, ages 13 to 18, grades 6 to 12.

† SSCI journals are those indexed by the Social Sciences Citation Index. In Turkey, four general education journals are currently referenced by SSCI all of whose tables of contents were reviewed for potential SEL articles across the span of this study—which in some cases included journals prior to their entry in SSCI.
Within these parameters, this review is limited in that its scope began with primarily SSCI journals and did not include unpublished research, nor conference proceedings. In addition, the 12 studies reviewed were not necessarily labeled as “social and emotional learning” per se by their authors; however, by using the criteria of five common features of SEL as identified by authors in the field (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008) these studies could be clustered as representing SEL interventions. By doing this, it created a means for considering inroads and progress that has begun toward documenting the value of SEL-related programs within secondary schools of Turkey.

3. Findings

3.1 Reporting of SEL interventions

Features that all the studies reported about the implementation of SEL interventions included: 1) type of program; 2) targeted student outcomes; and 3) program duration.

In terms of the program types, half of the studies focused on cognitive-behavioral (group) therapy, administered by trained counselors; however, the other half were varied from self-esteem enhancement to psychodrama to human values development (see Table 1). Within the latter programs, student outcomes were notable for their variation ranging in topics from dating anxiety to conflict resolution to the development of human values.

Student outcomes exhibited two basic directions: proactive approaches to SEL and reactive approaches. Eight of the 12 studies focused on interventions that seemed predominantly proactive—that is they targeted the healthy attitudes and behaviors of adolescents, providing preventative supports. The other four programs focused on outcomes that seemed predominantly reactive in nature—that is they targeted changing unhealthy behaviors such as conduct problems. The proactive interventions focused on issues such as expression of anger, communication skills, and attitudes toward self and others. One of the reactive programs also focused on improving attitudes toward self and others, while the other three focused on reducing conduct problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type of intervention</th>
<th>Targeted student outcomes</th>
<th>Program duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cenkseven (2003)</td>
<td>Cognitive-behavioral therapy</td>
<td>Reactive: Reducing conduct problems through anger management</td>
<td>10 weeks, 90 min sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Çeçen &amp; Koçak (2007)</td>
<td>Self-esteem enhancement program</td>
<td>Pro-active: Attitudes toward self, related to self-esteem and teacher opinions</td>
<td>8 weeks, 50 to 70 min sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilmaç, Kulaksızoğlu, &amp; Ekşi (2007)</td>
<td>Human values program</td>
<td>Proactive: Development of responsibility, friendship/amiability, pacifism, respect, honesty, and tolerance</td>
<td>7 weeks, 14 sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demir &amp; Kaya (2008)</td>
<td>Structured group guidance to improve friendship skills</td>
<td>Pro-active: Attitudes toward self and others, related to social acceptance</td>
<td>8 weeks, 40 min sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duran &amp; Eldekleklioğlu (2008)</td>
<td>Cognitive-behavioural therapy</td>
<td>Pro-active: Positive social behavior through anger management</td>
<td>10 sessions, 90 min sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalkan (2008)</td>
<td>Cognitive-behavioural group therapy</td>
<td>Reactive: Attitudes toward self &amp; others, regarding dating anxiety</td>
<td>8 weeks, 90 min. sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avcı, Yüksel, Soyer, and Balıkçıoğlu (2009)</td>
<td>Differentiated instruction in the classroom</td>
<td>Pro-active: Observable affective change regarding new or strengthened friendships</td>
<td>3 periods, 40 min. periods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karataş &amp; Gökçakan (2009)</td>
<td>Cognitive-behavioral group therapy; psychodrama techniques</td>
<td>Reactive: Conduct problems with respect to aggression</td>
<td>Cog-bhvr group: 10 sessions; Psycho-drama group: 14 sessions, 90-120 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnuklu, Kacmaz,</td>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>Proactive: Peer mediation for</td>
<td>Training of 31 hours,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sunbul, & Ergul (2010) | peer mediation training | conflict resolution | about 2 hours every 2 weeks; then, 2 years of mediations

Bulut Serin & Genç (2011) | Cognitive-behavioral group therapy | Re-active: Conduct problems related to anger management | 10 weeks, no other info given

Karataş (2011) | Psychodrama intervention | Pro-active: a) Social-emotional skills; b) conduct problems | 10 weekly sessions, 90-120 min sessions

Öz & Aysan (2011) | Cognitive-behavioral therapy | Pro-active: a) state-trait anger expression; b) coping c) communication skills | 12 weeks, 90-min sessions

Most of these intervention studies were 7 to 15 weeks in duration, with the majority 8 to 10 weeks. Six studies reported weekly or bi-weekly sessions of 90 to 120 minutes, while others were only 40 to 70 minutes in duration, and three did not report the duration of the intervention sessions. In addition, the solitary case study was only three class periods in duration, designed to describe the process rather than to assess outcomes.

3.2 Research methods of SEL-related studies

In terms of research designs, interventions can be studied in a variety of ways, though there appears a tendency to study them through experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Indeed, 10 of the 12 studies in this review were of that nature. They used pre-test/post-test designs to show as clearly as possible the impact of the programs under examination. Two studies used even more complex designs, going beyond the control and experimental groups to include a second experimental group in one study (Karataş & Gökçakan, 2009) and a placebo group (no treatment) in the other (Karataş & Gökçakan, 2009; Öz & Aysan, 2011).

Two of these intervention studies fall outside the realm of quantitative designs, reflecting process-oriented and qualitative descriptions of the interventions under examination. The study that was the shortest in duration was a simple, yet elegantly designed case study that collected a variety of extensive observational data in a three-week period (Avcı et al., 2009). The other qualitative design was done for the largest sample in this review, a content analysis of 830 mediation forms that were completed by students following 31 hours of conflict resolution peer mediation training (Turnuklu et al., 2010).

3.3 School populations represented across studies

The majority of these intervention studies (10 out of 12) used samples of less than 30 students that were then divided into two (or three) groups: experimental and control. One experimental study was about twice this size with 60 students; the most extensive study, as mentioned, contained 830 students who were selected from a range of schools with migrant families in a large western city of Turkey.

The studies tended to examine programs within one school in a local area to which presumably they had convenient access; only two of the studies extended themselves into examining programs in two different cities, and in both cases the cities were located in southeastern Turkey. Overall, the studies were conducted around the country, five contained samples representing three large cities in the west (Izmir, Istanbul, and Bursa) along with seven studies conducted in northeastern and southeastern Turkey (such as Samsun, Antakya, Adana) and central eastern (such as Konya, Malatya).

In terms of the types of schools represented, only one study reported that it was conducted in a middle school and the others were in high schools. One study reported that it was conducted in a private high school, one in an Anatolian High School, and another in a vocational high school; however, most studies reported little about the high school environment, sometimes not even stating whether it was public or private.

3.4 Findings of published SEL intervention studies in Turkey

In this brief examination of what these studies found, it must again be acknowledged that they were all published studies, rather than unpublished; as such, a tendency can be assumed for the reporting of studies in which the results show a positive impact of the given interventions.
With respect to the six studies that examined cognitive-behavioral therapy programs, there is a growing though still small body of evidence that such programs are indeed effective with adolescents in Turkey. Of the four studies that focused on the impact of anger management programs, students from the experimental groups reported significantly lower incidences of anger and significantly improved rates of anger control after each intervention (Bulut Serin & Genç, 2011; Cenkeven, 2003; Duran & Eldelekioglu, 2008; Öz & Aysan, 2011). In one study these results were further reported to hold four months later (Cenkeven, 2003).

In the study of dating anxiety (Kalkan, 2008), an inventory was completed by 440 students from three high schools in Samsun (a small northeastern city); it was initially learned that 30% claimed they had not dated, 41.4% claimed they had had dating experiences, and 28.6% claimed they were in "an ongoing dating relationship." When offered a special program that used cognitive-behavioral group therapy, 40 students expressed interest and completed the needed forms to participate; of those 40, 10 were randomly assigned to the treatment and 10 to a control group who received no treatment; those who received training showed significant decreases in their dating anxiety levels.

Another study examined the impact of cognitive-behavioral therapy with respect to aggression. Here, group-based cognitive-behavioral therapy was shown to have "a positive effect on total aggression score, including physical aggression, hostility, indirect aggression scores, but had no effect on verbal aggression score" in the Turkish adaptation of a survey eliciting self-report data of state-trait aggression (Karataş & Göğçakan, 2009, 1448). This study used a second experimental intervention of group-based psycho-drama which also had a positive effect on total aggression as well as on three subscales—anger, hostility, and indirect aggression, but no significant effect on physical or verbal aggression scores. Also noteworthy is that the positive effects of both treatments were still in effect as measured 16 weeks later in a second post-test.

Results from another study on the technique of psycho-drama showed that "problem solving scores increase and aggression scores decrease in the experimental group participating in the psychodrama sessions compared to the control and placebo groups" (Karataş, 2011, 612). Although the first author of both studies on psycho-drama was the same, the studies were conducted in different small cities of southeastern Turkey.

The largest study in this review examined a conflict resolution peer-mediation (CRPM) program in which 830 students (from 28 classrooms, over half the student body) were trained in four skill areas: 1) understanding interpersonal conflicts, 2) communication skills, 3) anger management, and 4) negotiation and peer mediation skills. The students elected 12 peer mediators who facilitated 253 mediation sessions throughout the following two years. Out these sessions for which the mediators completed forms, the authors claimed that “240 (94.9%) resulted in peaceful and constructive agreement, while only 13 (5.1 %) resulted in no agreement” (Turnuklu et al., 2010, 76). This was one of the most impressive of the 12 studies reviewed; the program certainly seems worthy of replication and further investigation.

The smallest study in this review was conducted with high school students in Malatya (Demir & Kaya, 2008). Examining a structured therapy designed especially for students to improve their friendship skills, the program was shown to significantly improve the social acceptance levels of students in the experimental group, along with a positive change in a sociometric status assessed to determine whether students felt popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, or average in relation to their peers. Even with the small size of this study (4 each in the experimental and control groups), significant results were nonetheless obtained.

In a pre-test of the Human Values Program, 200 students from a Konya high school were scored by an instrument that assessed their values across six areas: Responsibility, friendship/ amiability, pacifism, respect, honesty, and tolerance (Dilmaç et al., 2007). The 15 students who scored lowest were selected along with 15 others students and then divided into experimental and control groups. The study concluded that the program was effective in terms of "affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes" for the six areas analyzed; however, the manner in which the subscales measured each of these outcomes was not clearly articulated. In addition, the authors gave practically no information about how the program was designed to support values development in these specified areas. Indeed, not only this study, but a handful of the studies in the sample did not describe in sufficient detail the program design or implementation details that would allow future curriculum developers to make use of their findings.

The one intervention study that was conducted in middle school examined the results of a self-esteem enhancement program. Results of this study claimed that "the group experience based on the self-esteem enhancing programme had significant positive effect on middle school [students’] self esteem" (Çeçen & Koçak, 2007, 60).

Finally, the only study that examined an in-class intervention by a teacher focused on the use of differentiated instruction by means of a “station strategy” and “interest centers” in a 6th grade Turkish lesson about poetry (Avcı et al., 2009). Although the period of investigation covered only three 40-minute class periods, the data collected for
qualitative analysis was extensive. According to the 22 students and teacher opinions, differentiated instruction showed "positive influence on student learning"; this strategy also "led to the development of new friendship relationships and increased existing relationships among students" along with skills for giving and receiving help when needed (Avcı et al., 2009, 1076-1077). Analysis also includes a summary of problems encountered by students and suggestions for addressing each problem. Although the nature of this case study does not allow for conclusive findings about the impact of this approach to differentiated instruction on SEL in Turkish classrooms, it provides an example of how case study can be used for examining the process of an in-class intervention.

4. Discussion

With increased attention given in Turkey to the integration of constructivist student-centered approaches to learning and teaching, the social and emotional well-being of students becomes ever more critical to address.

In terms of the reporting about SEL intervention studies in Turkey, at a minimum, most of the published studies to date have summarized briefly the type of program, the targeted student outcomes, and program duration. There have been more cognitive-behavioral therapy programs reported for the support of anger management than other more uniquely designed programs; however, it appears that program developers as well as researchers are beginning to show interest in a handful of other SEL-related topics for supporting adolescents.

At present, most published studies (which we might assume are among the best studies yet conducted) are relatively short in duration, none spanning more than 14 sessions or about 10 weeks. In comparison, 77% of the 213 control-group studies examined by Durlak et al. (2011) were less than one year, and 23% were more than a year in duration with 12% that lasted more than two years. As evidence and discussion about the value of school counseling and especially SEL interventions continues to expand, suggestions and funding for more extensive programs and research about them may also expand.

In addition, curriculum design features are often reported by SEL intervention studies; however, such features were not reviewed by most of these 12 studies, and therefore not summarized in this review, a gap worth further attention. One emerging curricular design framework for examining SEL studies is known as SAFE, an acronym that stands for: Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Rather than looking exclusively at specific outcomes, this framework focuses on the structure of interventions that are most likely to lead to successful outcomes. In scanning these 12 studies to see how they were reporting each intervention in terms of these four “SAFE” characteristics, little to no attention was given to the reporting of sequencing, active student participation, focus on specific tasks, or the explicit summary of learning goals. As counselors and schools move forward with examining what makes successful SEL programs in Turkey, this framework for implementation and research could be helpful.

In terms of research methods used by intervention studies, even when actively searching for articles that spanned the variations possible, mostly only control group research studies were located, both experimental and quasi-experimental designs. This points out a gap in which more qualitative studies could be helpful to highlight the complex aspects of program development and implementation; such studies could explore details about challenges faced as well as perspectives of school participants and program developers.

As there is little to no coordination of educational research in Turkey, it was a little surprising to find that the initial studies in this field have covered both urban and rural areas, east and west. School populations and learning environments were briefly described in these studies; however, more facts about the environments and student populations who were participating in programs could be helpful for future interpretations of the given results.

In looking at the overall findings of these 12 studies, it was little surprise that they all showed a positive impact of the intervention programs under examination. After all, any researcher who is interested enough to conduct formal research, especially in a field that is only now gaining momentum in Turkey, would not likely go to the trouble of publishing findings that were primarily negative. To gain a better perspective on the extent and success of SEL programs at large, more unpublished studies from theses, dissertations, or conference proceedings would need to be analyzed. Still, the extent to which these studies point in positive directions indicates that effective SEL designs are indeed possible within the constraints of the Turkish education system.

Another gap in this early research of SEL interventions in Turkey is that of the correlation between SEL and academic performance. Elsewhere, over a 10% improvement in academic performance has been carefully reported in meta-research (Durlak et al., 2011) while no such published studies were located about any Turkish schools. As the growing body of evidence increases about the need of adolescents to be more fully supported beyond academics
and as the role of school counseling continues to stabilize or even gains prestige, next steps in research could certainly investigate the relation of well-designed SEL interventions to students’ academic performance.

Of course, school-based interventions are not the only answer to supporting adolescents’ social and emotional learning. Other solutions include improved teacher training and in-service programs that give teachers a chance to more fully consider the SEL of their students, as well as programs to support adolescents’ physical and social development beyond schools. Research into pivotal elements of SEL school-based programs is just one step on a path to supporting young people to develop resilience in facing the social and emotional challenges that come with learning and working together in the modern era.

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References


