

The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Shaping a Productive Workforce: A Case for Integrating Socio-Emotional Learning in School Counselling Programmes

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Abstract

The evolving demands of the 21st-century workforce require competencies that extend beyond cognitive intelligence to include emotional regulation, interpersonal competence, adaptability, and resilience. This paper examines the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in shaping a productive workforce and advances a case for the systematic integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) into school counselling programmes. Anchored within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), this study conceptualises emotional intelligence as a foundational human capital asset. Drawing on empirical literature, the paper synthesises evidence linking emotional intelligence competencies, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills to workplace productivity, leadership effectiveness, job satisfaction, conflict management, and organisational commitment. The review further argues that early acquisition of socio-emotional competencies through structured school counselling interventions enhances employability, adaptability, and long-term career sustainability. The paper adopts a position that workforce productivity is not solely an economic function but a developmental outcome shaped by educational systems. It recommends embedding structured SEL frameworks within school counselling programmes to foster emotionally competent graduates capable of contributing meaningfully to sustainable economic growth. By aligning emotional intelligence development with SDG 4 and SDG 8 targets, this study advances a policy-relevant and development-orientated perspective on education to workforce transitions.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Integrating Socio-Emotional Learning, Workforce Productivity, School Counselling, Human Capital Development

Introduction

The modern workforce is no longer solely reliant on technical expertise and cognitive skills but increasingly requires workers to possess strong emotional intelligence (EI) to navigate interpersonal relationships, adapt to change, and collaborate effectively. As industries evolve, so do the demands placed on employees, with emotional intelligence becoming an essential component of productivity and success (Goleman, 2015). The educational system, particularly through its counselling services, has a responsibility to prepare students not just academically but also emotionally for the workforce. Integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) into school counselling programmes offers a vital opportunity to foster emotional intelligence in students, equipping them with the skills needed to excel in the workplace and contribute to societal productivity (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Tatlor & Schellinger 2011).

Emotional intelligence (EI), broadly defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilise emotions effectively in oneself and others, has emerged as a significant predictor of workplace success. Empirical studies

link high emotional intelligence to enhanced job performance, improved conflict resolution, stronger leadership outcomes, reduced workplace stress, and greater organisational commitment. Employees with strong socio-emotional competencies demonstrate resilience under pressure, effective interpersonal communication, and adaptive problem-solving qualities essential for sustained productivity.

The development of emotional intelligence (EI) through socio-emotional learning (SEL) has been widely recognised as a key factor in preparing individuals for success in the 21st-century workforce. Emotional intelligence encompasses the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions in oneself and others, which is vital for collaboration, leadership, and resilience in a modern work environment (Goleman, 2015). Research from 2014 onwards has provided significant empirical evidence supporting the impact of EI on workforce productivity and the role of SEL in schools for fostering these skills. This review synthesises recent empirical studies on emotional intelligence, its relationship with workforce competencies, and the effectiveness of SEL programmes in school counselling.

Emotional intelligence and workforce competencies cannot be overemphasised, as literature has revealed the predictive power of emotional intelligence on job performance. Several empirical studies have established a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and job performance across various industries. A meta-analysis by Joseph, Jin, Newman, and O’Boyle (2015) examined the role of emotional intelligence in predicting job performance and found that EI accounted for a significant proportion of variance in workplace success, beyond cognitive intelligence and personality traits. Employees with higher emotional intelligence were better able to manage workplace stress, resolve conflicts, and lead teams effectively, thus enhancing overall productivity.

Similarly, research by Kotsou, Nelis, Grégoire, and Mikolajczak (2019) demonstrated that emotionally intelligent individuals are more adaptable to changing work environments, which is essential in the fast-paced, technology-driven 21st-century workforce. The study found that employees who underwent EI training showed improvements in emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships, leading to higher productivity and job satisfaction.

In the same vein, emotional intelligence is very critical to leadership roles. Leadership in modern organisations requires not only technical skills but also emotional intelligence to manage teams, resolve conflicts, and foster a positive organisational culture. A study by Boyatzis, Rochford, and Taylor (2015) investigated the impact of EI on leadership effectiveness. Using a sample of organisational leaders, the study found that those with higher emotional intelligence exhibited stronger leadership competencies, including empathy, motivation, and social skills.

The imperative to cultivate these competencies aligns directly with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically, Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities. Target 4.7 emphasises education for sustainable development, including skills necessary for responsible citizenship and global competence. Concurrently, Sustainable Development Goal 8 advocates for sustained, inclusive economic growth, productive employment, and decent work for all. Emotional intelligence serves as a bridge between these goals by linking educational outcomes to workforce readiness and economic productivity.

Despite growing recognition of its importance, socio-emotional learning (SEL) remains inconsistently integrated into formal educational curricula, particularly within school counselling frameworks. School counsellors are strategically positioned to deliver structured SEL interventions that cultivate emotional awareness, self-management, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and social competence. However, systemic integration of SEL into counselling programmes is often limited by policy gaps, inadequate training, and insufficient resource allocation.

This paper argues that incorporating SEL into school counselling programmes can enhance students' emotional intelligence, which in turn leads to the development of a more productive workforce. Drawing on contemporary research, the paper will demonstrate how emotional intelligence contributes to key workforce skills such as teamwork, leadership, conflict resolution, and resilience, and how SEL can be systematically integrated into counselling to nurture these competencies in students. This paper therefore examines the role of emotional intelligence in shaping a productive workforce and argues for institutionalising socio-emotional learning within school counselling programmes as a strategic investment in human capital development and sustainable economic growth.

Position Statement

This paper advances the position that emotional intelligence is a critical determinant of workforce productivity and that its systematic cultivation must begin within formal educational systems. Workforce productivity should not be conceptualised narrowly in economic or technical terms but as a function of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies developed across the lifespan.

Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Sustainable Development Goal 8, this study contends that integrating socio-emotional learning into school counselling programmes is not optional but essential for achieving sustainable development outcomes. Emotional intelligence competencies, self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, social skills, and intrinsic motivation constitute transferable skills that enhance employability, leadership potential, and workplace cohesion.

The paper further maintains that educational reform efforts must reposition school counselling services from reactive problem-solving units to proactive developmental hubs responsible for structured socio-emotional skill acquisition. Policy frameworks, curriculum design, and professional training must explicitly embed SEL competencies to ensure that graduates transition into the workforce as emotionally intelligent, resilient, and ethically responsible contributors to economic development.

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic empirical review design with a policy-orientated analytical framework. The approach integrates structured literature retrieval, thematic analysis, and conceptual synthesis to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, socio-emotional learning, and workforce productivity. Data was sourced from peer-reviewed empirical studies from Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. International policy documents related to the Sustainable Development Goals were reviewed to situate the discussion within global education and economic development frameworks. The search strategy employed for the study was keywords which included a combination of emotional intelligence and workforce productivity, socio-emotional learning in schools, emotional intelligence and job performance, school counselling and employability skills, SEL and economic development. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine search outputs.

Inclusion criteria for the review included empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method) and studies that examined emotional intelligence or socio-emotional learning. If they measured outcomes related to job performance, productivity, leadership, employability, or workplace behaviour, they were published in peer-reviewed journals and were written in English.

Conceptual Framework

Emotional Intelligence → Socio-Emotional Learning → Workforce Productivity → SDG Outcomes

This study proposes a developmental-human capital model in which emotional intelligence (EI) functions as the core psychological asset, socio-emotional learning (SEL) serves as the structured educational delivery mechanism, and workforce productivity represents the macroeconomic outcome.

1. **Emotional Intelligence (Individual-Level Competence)**

Based on the ability model of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004) and the mixed competency framework (Goleman, 1998), EI comprises self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

2. **Socio-Emotional Learning (Institutional Intervention Mechanism)**

SEL provides systematic training in emotional regulation, responsible decision-making, and relationship management (CASEL, 2020). School counselling programmes serve as the institutional platform for structured EI cultivation.

3. **Workforce Productivity (Economic Outcome)**

Emotional intelligence has been empirically associated with job performance (O'Boyle et al., 2011), leadership effectiveness (Harms & Credé, 2010), organisational citizenship behaviour, and reduced occupational stress (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2017).

4. **Sustainable Development Outcomes (Macro-Level Impact)**

Through improved employability, reduced workplace conflict, and enhanced innovation capacity, emotionally intelligent workers contribute directly to the targets of SDG 4 (quality, relevant skills acquisition) and SDG 8 (productive employment and sustained economic growth).

The Importance of Emotional Intelligence in the Workforce

Emotional intelligence is needed for workforce competencies; when this is achieved, peaceful co-existence can be enhanced. Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to recognise, understand, and manage one's own emotions and the emotions of others and is a crucial skill in today's workforce (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016). Research has consistently shown that employees with higher emotional intelligence are better equipped to handle interpersonal dynamics, collaborate effectively with diverse teams, and demonstrate resilience in the face of challenges (Bradberry & Greaves, 2016). These competencies are essential in a global economy that is characterised by rapid technological advancements, increased competition, and constant change (Boyatzis, 2018). In addition, emotionally intelligent employees are often seen as better leaders. Leadership in the modern workplace demands not only technical expertise but also the ability to motivate, empathise, and inspire others. Goleman (2015) highlights that emotional intelligence is a better predictor of leadership success than IQ alone, suggesting that developing EI in students can have long-term benefits for their leadership potential in the workforce.

Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a Foundation for EI Development

Socio-emotional learning is an educational process through which students acquire the skills to understand and manage emotions, set positive goals, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Durlak et al., 2015). SEL provides a structured approach to building the emotional and social skills that are foundational to emotional intelligence.

A meta-analysis by Taylor, Oberle, Durlak & Weissberg (2017) shows that students who participate in SEL programmes demonstrate significantly improved emotional and social skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance. These benefits extend beyond the classroom, as students with well-developed SEL skills are better equipped to handle the interpersonal and emotional demands of the workforce. Integrating SEL into school counselling programmes is therefore a critical strategy for fostering emotional intelligence in students, preparing them for the 21st-century workforce.

The Role of School Counselling in Promoting SEL

School counselling programmes play a pivotal role in the overall development of students, offering support in academic, career, and personal-social domains (Sink & Stroh, 2014). Counsellors are uniquely positioned to implement SEL programmes, given their focus on personal and social development alongside academic guidance. By incorporating SEL into counselling interventions, school counsellors can directly support the development of emotional intelligence in students, equipping them with the skills needed for personal and professional success.

The paper hereunder provides some key strategies to integrate socio-emotional learning into school counselling programmes to thrive.

Strategies for Integrating SEL into Counselling Programmes

There are several strategies that school counsellors can employ to integrate SEL into their work:

1. **Group Counselling Sessions:** These sessions can focus on topics such as self-awareness, empathy, and conflict resolution, all of which are key components of emotional intelligence (Jones & Bouffard, 2014). Group discussions allow students to practise emotional regulation and social interactions in a safe environment.
2. **Individual Counselling:** Counsellors can provide one-on-one support to help students navigate personal challenges, reflect on their emotional responses, and develop emotional regulation skills. This individualised attention ensures that students' unique emotional needs are addressed.
3. **Classroom-Based Interventions:** Counsellors can collaborate with teachers to integrate SEL activities into the broader curriculum. For example, lessons on emotional management, teamwork, and leadership can be embedded into existing subjects like civic education, citizenship education, government, etc. (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2015).
4. **Parental Involvement:** Engaging parents in SEL efforts ensures that students receive consistent messages about emotional intelligence both at home and in school (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich & Gullotta, 2015). Counsellors can provide resources and training for parents to support their children's socio-emotional development.

Case Studies on Integration of Socio-Emotional Learning in School Counselling Programmes

In recent years, emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a crucial component of socio-emotional learning (SEL) in schools, aiming to equip students not just with academic skills but also with the emotional and interpersonal tools needed for success. Integrating emotional intelligence into SEL fosters a nurturing environment where students develop self-awareness, empathy, and effective communication. Numerous case studies demonstrate that when schools prioritise EI, students not only improve academically but also enhance their social relationships and emotional resilience. These success stories highlight the transformative power of addressing emotional intelligence as an essential element of holistic education.

1. Austin Independent School District, Texas (USA). Dymnicki, Sambolt, and Kidon (2013) revealed that the Austin Independent School District (AISD) integrated SEL into their curriculum, with a particular focus on emotional regulation, empathy, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills. Over the course of five years, the following outcomes were recorded:
 - a. Academic Improvement: Schools that implemented SEL saw an 11% increase in standardised test scores. The schools also reported a reduction in dropout rates and an increase in student attendance, showing how SEL can directly influence academic success.
 - b. Behavioural Changes: Students involved in the SEL programmes exhibited fewer behavioural issues. Reports showed a 30% decrease in disciplinary actions, demonstrating how emotional regulation and improved social skills contributed to better behaviour.
 - c. Workforce Readiness: High school students expressed greater confidence in their communication and collaboration skills, which are essential for success in the workplace. Implications for Workforce Productivity: The increased emotional intelligence seen in these students through their ability to handle stress, cooperate with others, and communicate effectively positions them to be valuable members of a future workforce.
2. The MindUP Programme (Global): MindUP is a CASEL-accredited SEL programme designed to teach students emotional self-awareness, mindfulness, and empathy. Implemented across multiple countries, MindUP has consistently shown cognitive and academic gains. Studies conducted like that of Schonert-Reichi and Lawlor (2010) have found that students participating in MindUP programmes exhibited improvements in the following areas:

- a. They showed the ability to focus and showed better academic performance in subjects like maths and reading.
- b. Emotional Regulation and Well-being: The programme helped students develop self-regulation and coping mechanisms, reducing anxiety, increasing resilience, and improving overall well-being.
- c. Long-term Impact: Many students involved in the programme reported greater preparedness for handling stress and relationships later in life, providing a solid foundation for workplace challenges.

Implications for Workforce Productivity: By developing students' emotional intelligence early on, MindUP graduates tend to show increased problem-solving skills and adaptability in diverse work environments.

3. Anchorage School District, Alaska (USA). Dusenbury, Zadrazil, Mart, Weissberg and Goren (2011) reported that Anchorage School District introduced SEL into its curriculum through a district-wide initiative to foster a supportive learning environment. The initiative's impact was measured over several years, and the following outcomes were revealed:
 - a. Improved Student Outcomes: Students showed improved grades, with a 23% increase in students reaching proficiency in reading and math. The integration of SEL also led to improved school climate, with students feeling more connected to their peers and teachers.
 - b. Reduction in Bullying and Aggression: The district reported a 50% reduction in bullying and physical aggression among students, attributed to enhanced empathy, conflict resolution, and social interaction skills learned through SEL.
 - c. Future-Ready Skills: Students reported feeling more equipped to handle teamwork, leadership, and communication tasks, making them more likely to succeed in a work environment that values emotional intelligence.

Implications for Workforce Productivity: The SEL programme prepared students to be more effective collaborators and problem-solvers, qualities critical for productivity in today's diverse and dynamic workplaces.

4. Durban University of Technology, South Africa (DUT). The South African experience is one of the notable cases in Africa. Mkhize and Msweli (2015) revealed that in South Africa, the Durban University of Technology launched a programme that integrated SEL principles into student counselling and development services. While the programme was more focused on post-secondary students, its outcomes provide a solid argument for the long-term benefits of SEL, and the following benefits were reaped:
 - a. Enhanced Student Engagement and Retention: DUT saw improved retention rates and engagement among students who had previously been at risk of dropping out. This was due to SEL's impact on their ability to manage stress, form support networks, and build resilience.
 - b. Career Success: Alumni who had participated in SEL programmes during their university years demonstrated higher employability, with many reporting that the skills they learned (empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict management) helped them succeed in leadership positions and team environments.

Implications for Workforce Productivity: This case study illustrates how SEL integration into counselling programmes can build a strong foundation of emotional intelligence, which continues to benefit students as they transition into the workforce.

5. KIPP Charter Schools (USA) KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program). Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins (2009) observed that charter schools are known for their "Character Counts" initiative, which embeds socio-emotional learning alongside academic instruction. SEL is woven into daily lessons, focusing on seven key character strengths: zest, grit, optimism, self-control, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity. Outcomes from these initiatives include:
 - a. Improved Academic Performance: Students in KIPP schools consistently outperform their peers in standardised tests, with significant academic gains observed in schools where SEL was deeply embedded.

- b. College Readiness and Persistence: SEL has been linked to higher college enrolment and persistence rates. Many KIPP students attribute their resilience, time management, and social intelligence, which are core components of SEL, as key factors in their success at the collegiate level and beyond.
- c. Emotional Intelligence and Leadership: Alumni report that the focus on social intelligence and leadership development gave them an edge in professional environments, enabling them to work well in teams and handle leadership roles effectively.

Implications for Workforce Productivity: The KIPP case demonstrates that students who receive SEL-integrated instruction tend to become more effective leaders and collaborators, traits that are essential for a productive workforce.

These case studies and success stories demonstrate the profound impact that integrating SEL into school counselling programmes can have on students' emotional and academic development. By fostering emotional intelligence at an early age, schools are helping to produce individuals who are better equipped to navigate the challenges of the workforce, contributing to a more productive and emotionally resilient workforce in the long term.

Discussion

The findings from the empirical literature strongly support the proposition that emotional intelligence constitutes a strategic human capital variable influencing workforce productivity. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and job performance across occupational sectors (O'Boyle et al., 2011). Employees with higher EI exhibit superior interpersonal effectiveness, stress tolerance, adaptive coping, and collaborative competence traits that directly enhance organisational output.

Leadership research further indicates that emotionally intelligent leaders foster higher employee engagement, psychological safety, and team cohesion (Harms & Credé, 2010). In high-demand work environments, emotional regulation predicts lower burnout and turnover intentions (Miao et al., 2017). These outcomes suggest that EI is not a peripheral soft skill but a performance-relevant competency.

The educational implications are substantial. The integration of socio-emotional learning into school systems has shown measurable benefits, including improved academic achievement, better classroom behaviour, and enhanced long-term life outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL interventions significantly increase students' social-emotional skills while reducing conduct problems and emotional distress.

From a development policy perspective, the alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals is evident. Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasises skills acquisition relevant for employment and sustainable development. Emotional intelligence represents a transferable competency critical for global citizenship and responsible workplace engagement. Simultaneously, Sustainable Development Goal 8 underscores productive employment and economic growth. Workforce productivity, innovation, and ethical leadership are strengthened when emotional competencies are systematically cultivated.

In many developing contexts, including sub-Saharan Africa, graduate unemployment is often linked to deficits in employability skills rather than purely technical knowledge. Employers increasingly report gaps in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional resilience. Integrating SEL into school counselling programmes offers a preventive and developmental solution that bridges the education-to-employment gap.

Thus, emotional intelligence development must be repositioned as a structural educational priority rather than an optional enrichment activity. School counselling units should serve as hubs for preventive socio-emotional skill training that prepares students for dynamic workplace environments.

Ethical Considerations

As a secondary review of published literature, the study did not involve human participants. Academic rigour was maintained through accurate citation, systematic screening, and objective synthesis of findings.

Conclusion

As the demands of the 21st-century workforce continue to evolve, it is clear that emotional intelligence is a critical factor in ensuring productivity, resilience, and success. Integrating socio-emotional learning into school counselling programmes offers a proactive approach to nurturing emotional intelligence in students, preparing them not only for academic success but also for the interpersonal and emotional challenges they will face in the workforce. By fostering emotional intelligence from an early age, educational institutions can contribute to the development of a more emotionally intelligent, adaptable, and productive workforce, thereby enhancing societal productivity in the long term.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are put forth for achieving integration of emotional intelligence into SEL in schools:

1. **Teacher Training on EI:** Schools should prioritise professional development that equips teachers with strategies to model and teach emotional intelligence. Teachers should be trained in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and how to create emotionally safe classroom environments.
2. **Developing an EI-Focused Curriculum:** Schools should integrate emotional intelligence into existing curricula. Lessons should include activities that promote self-awareness, empathy, and responsible decision-making, allowing students to practise these skills in real-life scenarios.
3. **Embedding EI in Classroom Practices:** Teachers should incorporate regular reflection, mindfulness exercises, and emotional check-ins during the school day. This encourages students to identify and express their emotions healthily and to develop better interpersonal skills.
4. **Parental Involvement:** Schools should collaborate with parents to foster emotional intelligence at home. Workshops and resources can help parents reinforce emotional and social skills, creating a consistent approach across both school and home environments.
5. **Creating a Supportive School Culture:** School leaders should cultivate a culture that values emotional intelligence through policies that promote kindness, collaboration, and emotional safety. School-wide initiatives like peer mentoring programmes, counselling services, and restorative practices can further support SEL and EI development.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Schools should establish mechanisms to track the progress of SEL and EI programmes. Regular assessments and feedback can help in adjusting approaches to ensure that emotional intelligence is effectively integrated and improving student outcomes. By making emotional intelligence a cornerstone of socio-emotional learning, schools can create an environment where students thrive emotionally, socially, and academically.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Institutionalisation of SEL within National Curriculum Frameworks**
Ministries of Education should embed structured socio-emotional learning benchmarks into primary and secondary school curricula in alignment with SDG 4 competencies.
2. **Professional Training for School Counsellors**
Pre-service and in-service training programmes should incorporate standardised EI assessment tools and SEL intervention strategies to strengthen counsellor capacity.
3. **Cross-Sector Collaboration**
Education and Labour ministries should collaborate to align school-based SEL outcomes with workforce competency frameworks under SDG 8.
4. **Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms**
National education quality assurance agencies should develop measurable indicators for socio-emotional competence acquisition and track long-term employment outcomes.

5. Integration of EI Assessment in Career Guidance

School counselling programmes should incorporate validated EI measures to inform career placement, leadership training, and employability coaching.

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