

**Research Article****TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING, MINDFULNESS, AND ACADEMIC READINESS IN LEBANESE EARLY PRIMARY CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**^{1,*} **Maha Zoghbi** and ² **Mohammad B. Sukariyah**¹Saint Joseph University of Beirut, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Beirut, Lebanon²Saint Joseph University of Beirut, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Professor, Education Research Laboratory, Beirut, Lebanon**Received 19th July 2026; Accepted 25th August 2026; Published online 22nd September 2026**

Abstract

The integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness in education is progressively gaining attention due to its capacity for providing students with emotional regulation, emotional wellbeing, and academic development, which are not traditionally measured in academic metrics. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of how SEL and mindfulness practices are perceived and understood by Grade 1 & 2 teachers in Lebanon and to understand how it affects the outcomes associated with foundational literacy and numeracy. Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's framework was used to analyze the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight teachers. The analysis revealed four key themes: (1) Emotional Regulation and Readiness as Foundations for Learning, (2) Focus, Attention, and Engagement in the Classroom, (3) SEL as a Foundational Enabler of Academic Readiness, and (4) Contextual and Institutional Challenges to SEL Implementation in Lebanon. The results suggest that teachers view SEL and mindfulness as intertwined with academic learning, often relating to students' emotional preparedness for learning, attentiveness, and engagement in the classroom as well as developing basic literacy and numeracy skills. However, teacher experiences also show that there are also some strong contextual and institutional constraints, such as economic factors, inadequate resources, inadequate government and regulatory development and support. The conceptual contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that teachers' meaning making around SEL and mindfulness is also influenced by other socio-economic and institutional processes that are not only inherent in the classroom but also in the wider educational environment of Lebanon. These results highlight the need to identify teachers as significant interpreters and mediators of SEL and mindfulness implementation and to enhance the school system's capacity to sustain teachers' involvement in SEL implementation in early primary grades in Lebanon.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Mindfulness, Early Childhood Education, Literacy and Numeracy, Lebanon.**INTRODUCTION****Background of the Study**

Recent years have experienced a shift in academic curriculum with the introduction of social-emotional learning, otherwise known as SEL, and mindfulness in education (Eriksen *et al.*, 2025; Wu *et al.*, 2025). The introduction of this new educational aspect has affected teachers, students, parents, and even policymakers and educational institutions. As elaborated by Denham and Zins (2014), early childhood education is fundamental for students, as it forms the initial cognitive, behavioral, and emotional traits of children, serving as a base for their future academic, social and emotional presence. Early learners are categorized at a development stage where they begin to explore their cognitive abilities and start getting in touch with their emotions and feelings (Allen, 2020). Without proper guidance, students might face difficulties trying to navigate their education while simultaneously regulating their emotions, self-control, and self-image. Therefore, the overlapping challenges prompt a solution that can address students' needs while enhancing their literacy and numeracy skills. According to Zins *et al.* (2007), the integration of SEL initiative across schools does not only ensure that they are well-supported on a personal development level but also assisted throughout their academic journeys, leading to healthy and productive learning outcomes. SEL has been shown to focus on key social and emotional skills, such as stress

management, empathy, self-control, confidence, and other social skills. These skills are essential to guide students in their social interactions to forge positive connections and relationships with people but also to help them deal with emotional challenges they might encounter in their everyday life. As highlighted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), students who engage with SEL initiatives were found to experience significant improvements in their academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall emotional wellbeing (CASEL, 2025). Therefore, SEL learning emerges as a key driver for determining a person's life success, as argued by Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences where interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence are equally ranked with logical mathematical and linguistic intelligence (May, 2022).

Furthermore, mindfulness is a practice that is characterized as a type of mediation, in which students learn to focus on being intensely aware of what they are sensing and feeling at a particular moment, without interpretation or judgment (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2022). This practice has been highlighted by researchers like Do and Giang (2024) as a complementary approach to SEL, allowing students and children to be in tune with their emotions through various activities like guided breathing, body language analysis, mindful and active listening, as well as body scans. Research shows that these initiatives help students regulate their emotions and optimize their attention spans, leading to fruitful academic outcomes (Flook *et al.*, 2024). In early ages, mastering these skills contributes to the emotional

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maturity that children will need throughout their academic journeys and beyond (Nieminen & Sajaniemi, 2016). Across the literature, several researchers like Pham (2024) have associated the integration of SEL/mindfulness initiatives with an improved academic performance. However, most existing studies either evaluate this relationship on older students or developing economies within the West. Therefore, this study acknowledges the existing gaps in understanding this crucial dynamic in younger children, especially grades 1 and 2, and in developing nations such as Lebanon, where the education system faces serious economic, political, and social challenges (LCPS, 2026). This angle is crucial to address because younger children may need tailored SEL and mindfulness initiatives to accommodate their specific needs and intellectual levels while the Lebanese context is equally crucial because it addresses an underexplored region with unique traits.

Furthermore, literacy and numeracy are two fundamental academic areas that are essential and serve as a base for all future learning (Salminen *et al.*, 2021). Mastering these skills is not for mere technicalities but also to ensure that learners can concentrate, remain motivated, accept constructive criticism, and manage their frustration throughout their academic journeys. This is why it is logical to assume that the integration of SEL/mindfulness practices is not merely a knowledge transfer but a key socio-emotional driver for young learners that can also affect their academic performance (Lawlor, 2016). Teachers of the targeted young learners are the direct actors that experience these impacts firsthand. Their daily contact and interaction with students are critical, making their presence fundamental in early developmental phases. Teachers can provide valuable insights that clarify the importance of SEL/mindfulness practices across academic curricula and how their impact translates into the real world with students' interactions and behaviors (Albrecht, 2018). Therefore, their perspectives are indispensable in the quest of understanding the impact of SEL/mindfulness practices on early learners.

Aim of this Study

The aim of this study is to understand the impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness practices on the academic performance of young learners, targeting Grades 1 and 2 students specifically in Lebanese schools. This research focuses on literacy and numeracy, gathering subjective insights from teachers to understand their perspectives on these kinds of educational initiatives and examine the connections between emotional regulation and academic performance.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and gain an understanding of how teachers perceive Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness practices and their connection to academic readiness in young learners within Lebanon's early primary education classrooms. The study also aims to analyze how teachers see the necessity of modifying such practices in relation to all students' intellectual and developmental differences in these practices, and to identify the unique pedagogical, socio-economic and institutional context in which teachers are operating in Lebanon. The study will focus on teachers' meaning making and experience in the classroom, and aim to fill the gap in existing research on the implementation of SEL and mindfulness while offering locally relevant perspectives on the implementation of SEL and mindfulness in early Lebanese primary grades.

Research Question and Objectives

To address the aim of this study, one central research question and sub-questions with the irrespective objectives are established:

Central Research Question (CRQ): How do Grade 1 and 2 teachers in Lebanon perceive and make sense of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness practices in relation to students' emotional readiness, classroom engagement, and academic learning?

Significance of the Study

This is a significant study since it targets the unique Lebanese setting, where education systems face structural, educational, and emotional challenges (ASFARI Institute for Civil Society & Citizenship, 2025; LCPS, 2026). Given Lebanon's ongoing economic and social challenges, the need for advanced educational approaches that encompass emotional regulation and support became fundamental, especially for young learners. Students in Grades 1 and 2 need a strong formative period, necessitating strong emotional support from teachers alongside their academic responsibilities. While studies have attempted to clarify the significance of SEL and mindfulness, there is an evident lack of subjective context-specific studies that address the impact of such educational initiatives on Lebanese primary classrooms. This research is significant because it addresses this specific gap, investigating the different perspectives of Lebanese teachers concerning SEL/mindfulness and how they perceive them as educational tools to enhance literacy and numeracy.

Table 1. Research Questions and Objectives

Research Question	Objective	Rationale
RQ1: How do teachers describe their experiences of implementing SEL and mindfulness practices in Grade 1 and 2 classrooms?	O1: To explore teachers' experiences and approaches to implementing SEL and mindfulness practices.	Provides insight into how teachers experience and apply these practices within their everyday classroom settings.
RQ2: How do teachers perceive the relationship between SEL and mindfulness practices and students' emotional regulation, attention, and classroom engagement?	O2: To understand teachers' perceptions of students' emotional regulation, attention, and engagement in relation to SEL and mindfulness practices.	Examine teachers' meaning making around emotional readiness, focus, and engagement as dimensions of students' readiness to learn.
RQ3: How do teachers make sense of the relationship between SEL and mindfulness practices and students' readiness for foundational literacy and numeracy learning?	O3: To explore teachers' perceptions of the relationship between SEL and mindfulness practices and students' foundational literacy and numeracy learning.	Examine how teachers interpret the connection between emotional and cognitive readiness and early academic learning.
RQ4: What contextual and institutional factors do teachers perceive as enabling or constraining the implementation of SEL and mindfulness practices in Lebanese early primary classrooms?	O4: To identify the contextual and institutional factors that teachers perceive as supporting or hindering implementation.	Highlights the resources, training, time, cultural, economic, and institutional conditions that shape implementation in Lebanon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over recent years, international studies have acknowledged the presence of social and emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness practices across different social and educational settings (Zins & Elias, 2007; Schonert-Reichl *et al.*, 2015; Osher *et al.*, 2016; Wepener & Moen, 2025). In this literature review, a closer examination of these practices is carried out, focusing on their impact on early learners and their perceived importance in general and in the Lebanese setting.

The Foundations and Promise of SEL and Mindfulness in Education

To begin with, the foundations of SEL are developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), known as the CASEL 5 framework. This framework addresses five major and interconnected areas of competence known as: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2025). As explained by CASEL (2025) and Zins and Elias (2007), this framework can be taught and applied at different educational stages and across several cultural settings. CASEL (2025) highlights that SEL initiatives are essential to understand how social and emotional competencies can be expressed and enhanced at early ages, from preschool levels all the way to adulthood. SEL standards, instruction, and assessments ought to be adapted to students' social, emotional, and cognitive abilities, to generate the best outcomes possible. Given that, Osher *et al.* (2016) highlights the importance of focusing on SEL implementation at early educational stages to support progressive growth and development of students.

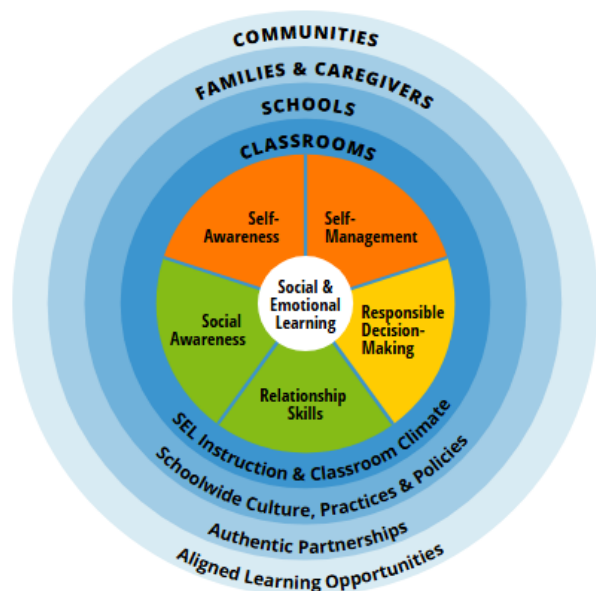


Figure 1. CASEL 5 Framework (CASEL, 2025)

Similarly, Gimbert *et al.* (2021) express that SEL practices are essential to advance educational equity and excellence across educational settings, mainly through authentic school-family-community partnerships to foster a healthy educational setting where students can grow and experience trusting and collaborative relationships with ongoing evaluation. Furthermore, mindfulness practices are essential in the educational setting as they complement SEL by enhancing students' emotional regulation, decrease stress, and improve

their attention to attain effective learning. For example, the study by Zenner *et al.* (2014) systemically reviewed the evidence of twenty-four studies regarding the effects of school-based mindfulness interventions on psychological outcomes. In total, 1348 students were instructed in mindfulness, with 876 serving as control ranging from grade 1 to 12. The results revealed that mindfulness-based interventions in children and youth show promising avenues, especially in terms of cognitive performance improvement and resilience to stress.

Jones and Bouffard (2012) emphasize that the integration of SEL initiatives with mindfulness practices help students to manage stress and emotions, allowing them to react to different situations effectively. The authors argue that only emotionally competent and trained teachers can educate children in an emotionally competent way, highlight the need for proper training and management for their administrative roles.

SEL, Mindfulness, and Academic Outcomes in Early Learners

Across the literature, researchers have attempted to understand the impact of SEL and mindfulness on academic outcomes of early learners. For example, the study by Durlak *et al.* (2011) presented findings from a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal SEL programs that involved 270,034 students from kindergarten through high school ages. Compared to the control groups, the authors found that students who were involved in SEL initiatives presented with better social and emotional skills, a positive attitude, and an improved academic performance with an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement. Similarly, the study by Nisa and Abdullah (2023) also attempted to understand how SEL programs can impact young students' emotional states and educational outcomes. Using a qualitative approach, the authors found that SEL can significantly improve students' mental state, which in turn can positively impact their motivation, learning focus, and academic achievement. In addition, the study found that students who were involved in SEL programs were better at recognizing and managing their emotions, contributing to a significant decrease in their stress and anxiety levels. Therefore, as also supported by Kim-Ju *et al.* (2024) and Tuncdemir (2025), there is a need to integrate SEL programs into the education curriculum to encourage inclusive learning environments that support student development and contribute to comprehensive education outcomes. For mindfulness practices, Schonert-Reichl *et al.* (2015) hypothesized that a SEL program that involves mindfulness practices and empathy-related activities designed for elementary school students would serve as a key driver for enhanced cognitive control, stress reduction, promotion of pro-sociality and wellbeing, as well as production of positive school outcomes. To test the hypothesis, four classes of 4th and 5th graders with a total of 99 students were randomly assigned to either undergo a SEL with mindfulness program or a regular social responsibility program. For these students, the authors concluded (1) improved cognitive control and stress physiology, (2) greater empathy, optimism, mindfulness, perspective-taking, (3) greater decrease in depression levels and peer-rated aggression, (4) more prosocial reports by peers, and lastly, (5) increase in peer acceptance. While Grades 1 and 2 were not the primary audience for this study, the findings affirm the theoretical importance of SEL and mindfulness programs in supporting students emotionally and academically.

Implementation in Real-World Classrooms: Teacher Perspectives and Challenges

Nevertheless, despite the promised results, researchers have highlighted the challenges that teachers meet when they try to implement these programs in real-world classrooms. For example, Mischenko et al. (2022) highlighted the issue of trust from both students' and teachers' perspectives when implementing SEL and mindfulness strategies in classrooms. The results of the study suggest that the process of developing relational trust among the school community is essential to guarantee the success of SEL and mindfulness programs. The authors concluded with a specific recommendation: to take the time to cultivate relational trust before fully implementing a mindfulness-based SEL program for students. Other implementation challenges were highlighted by Fu et al. (2025), who highlighted the dangers of inner setting pressures and administrative burdens that might favor academic success over the SEL program. For the authors, having the educational institution and teachers on board with the SEL program is essential to guarantee its success, as these actors ensure that the program is adopted and properly shared with students. The authors also warned from the dangers of a lack of community buy-in and low governmental funding for SEL initiatives, which may affect teachers' confidence in the SEL curricula and their ability to deliver it with the right resources.

This argument is further elaborated by Roeser et al. (2012), who highlight the importance of teachers' perceptions to successfully implement mindfulness-based SEL programs as it depends on teachers' full support and expert knowledge. In other words, as also supported by recent evidence by Elbertson et al. (2025) and Zhao and Sang (2025), when these programs are well-understood and valued by teachers, their implementation becomes easier, leading to positive emotional regulation and academic outcomes. In the Lebanese context, researchers like Farshoukh (2022) and Brown et al. (2023) highlight the difficulties faced by teachers, which are not only limited to the SEL program. With ongoing economic and political crises in the region, teachers face multifaceted challenges, leading to a fragmented integration of mindfulness-based SEL programs. Without national guidelines and governmental support, these programs are either adopted according to Western contexts or not adopted at all, leading to unfavorable outcomes. This argument highlights the role of teachers and the significance of their presence when seeking to make mindfulness-based SEL programs widely adopted by all schools in Lebanon.

SEL and Mindfulness in the Lebanese Context

Moving on to the Lebanese context, SEL and mindfulness have been explored on a limited level in the region, mainly because of the limited resources and the economic and political tensions that affect the country. However, one initiative was launched by World Learning in partnership with NYU's Global TIES for Children from 2020 to 2022 (World Learning, 2022). The initiative comprised a qualitative study to "identify what social and emotional competencies are most valued by diverse stakeholders from across all eight governorates in Lebanon, and how they are defined". Group discussions and in-depth interviews with students, parents, principals, teachers and policymakers were carried out, drawn from a stratified random sample of 70 public and 17 private schools. The

targeted audience for the focus groups consisted of grades 2, 3, and 6, to generate valuable insights during the formative years of students. This project was implemented in collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), aimed at informing the country's development of SEL assessments that will be utilized nation-wide and to generate an SEL-based curriculum to be introduced within five years (World Learning, 2022). The program had the following goals:

Table 2. Potential Outcomes and Contributions of the World Learning's SEL Project (World Learning, 2022)

Outcome Area	Description
Government Capacity Building	Equip the Government of Lebanon to ensure SEL competency frameworks, curricula, and materials reflect the values, realities, and needs of Lebanese children.
Ministry Confidence and Alignment	Increase Ministry officials' confidence in the relevance and cultural appropriateness of SEL frameworks and curricula tailored to Lebanon's context.
Awareness and Knowledge Building	Increase awareness and understanding of character strengths and their role in holistic child development among educators and policymakers.
Policy and Curriculum Development	Inform changes to and/or the creation of national policies, curricula, or standards that promote SEL and character development.
Framework and Assessment Tool Adaptation	Support revisions to SEL frameworks and formative assessment tools based on context-specific research findings, ensuring better alignment with Lebanese children's lived experiences.

While this project had promising goals and projections, there were no publicly available data on its completion nor on its impact. Upon review of the literature, several initiatives share the same fate, with initial plans but no implementation. Therefore, as pointed out by Farshoukh (2022) and Halwani and Geha (2022), most Lebanese public and private schools still lack proper SEL curricula and mindfulness-based initiatives, leaving a significant gap regarding how such programs affect the Lebanese education system.

Gaps and Directions for the Present Study

The literature reviewed demonstrates growing support for the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness practices in schools, especially when considering the increased importance of these abilities in the early years, when emotional regulation, engagement, literacy and numeracy skills are developing. But there are a few more contextual and conceptual gaps. First, while there is evidence of the consistent relationship between SEL, mindfulness, emotional regulation, and academic involvement, relatively less is known about teachers' interpretations and understandings of these practices within everyday classroom contexts. Much of the available literature concentrates on what can be measured, or on the successfulness or failed implementation of a program, while less attention is directed to the role of teachers' sense making, perceptions, and experiences as important mediators of program implementation. Second, there has been less focus on Grade 1 and 2 classes where the chances for the growth of foundational literacy and numeracy skills converge with considerable emotional and behavioral adjustment. This limits the insight into teachers' attitudes about SEL and mindfulness, emotional readiness, teacher-student engagement, and the fundamental

academic learning that occurs during this key developmental period. Third, most of the current research is predominantly drawn from Western and more developed educational contexts, leaving limited knowledge about the interpretation and implementation of SEL and mindfulness in less resource-rich and socially diverse environments. The Lebanese context is especially noteworthy because, as the country faces numerous economic, social and institutional challenges, this could affect teachers' ability to integrate new education practices into already demanding curricula. Next, the literature does not offer qualitative analysis of teacher meaning making in crisis-involved educational situations. What is important for teachers in Lebanon is to grasp how existing evidence that supports SEL in other contexts can be meaningful, feasible, and valuable when integrated into their own classrooms. This study, therefore, targets a contextual gap, exploring SEL and mindfulness in the context of Lebanese schools, and a conceptual gap, by highlighted teachers' perspectives and meaning making. The study takes a qualitative interpretivist approach to understand teachers' perceptions of these practices, how they are related to their notions of emotional readiness and academic learning, while considering the contexts that influence the practices along with the institutional structures that impact how they are enacted by Grade 1 and 2 teachers.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study conceptualizes SEL and mindfulness as complementary practices that can support students' emotional and academic readiness. Mindfulness refers to focused awareness of the present moment with acceptance of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (CASEL, 2025). While SEL develops social and emotional competencies, mindfulness can complement these skills by strengthening emotional regulation and attention. Accordingly, the study proposes the following conceptual framework:

Conceptual Framework:
SEL, Mindfulness, and Academic Readiness



Proposed pathway based on teachers' perceptions and the reviewed literature.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

This framework reflects the expectation that improved emotional regulation enables students to focus, persist with challenging tasks, and engage more effectively in early academic learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Qualitative Approach and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative research design within an interpretivist paradigm to address the primary research question and address the study's aims and objectives. An interpretivist approach is suitable for this study given the researcher's aim to gain insight on how teachers understand and construct meaning from SEL and mindfulness in their own classroom practice, as knowledge is co-created by the

researcher and the participants (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). To do so, semi-structured interviews are employed with Lebanese teachers. This approach will provide deep insights on the teachers' perspectives concerning SEL and mindfulness practices and their integration in Lebanese school curricula. This helps also in putting the researcher as a reflexive participant as a reflexive co-participant in the interpretation of the data, while the results are judged according to depth, richness and trustworthiness of the meanings found. Through this approach, deep understanding can be displayed about teachers' views regarding SEL and mindfulness and how they have been incorporated into the Lebanese school curriculum.

Qualitative Research Plan

The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews to generate subjective insights from Lebanese teachers involved with students in Grades 1 and 2. This qualitative research plan is fundamental because it helped the study generate context-rich data, addressing the specific Lebanese setting while highlighting key perspectives (Mashuri *et al.*, 2022). Semi-structured interviews are one of the most used instruments in qualitative research, as they instill a standardized approach to the discussion with pre-determined questions and themes while still allowing participants to organically share their thoughts and opinions (Kakilla, 2021). Follow-ups can always be made to clarify a certain insight or elaborate on an important topic.

Sampling and Target Population

The target population consisted of Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers involved in the delivery of the adapted MindUP curriculum in a Lebanese school setting with at least two-year teaching experience using SEL & mindfulness practices in order to be a valid source of understand the impact of SEL on students. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers who had direct experience implementing the intervention and could provide informed reflections on its feasibility, implementation challenges, and observed effects on students. Six teachers participated in the qualitative component, including five homeroom teachers from Grades 1 and 2 and one Arts and Library teacher who observed and co-facilitated the lessons. All participants had direct involvement in the implementation of the intervention. Teachers were recruited through the participating school following the necessary institutional permissions. Participants were identified using codes to maintain confidentiality. Further participant characteristics, including teaching experience and relevant experience with SEL and mindfulness practices, are reported without identifying information.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data was gathered using one focus group discussion with the six teachers who delivered, observed and co-facilitated the adapted MindUP lessons. The discussion was held in the staff meeting room of the school and took about 60 minutes. The discussion guide for this semi-structured discussion focused on teacher experience with MindUP implementation, how it was viewed to have a positive impact on students' social skills and learning engagement, implementation challenges, teacher perceptions, and recommendations for improvements. The main discussion questions and prompts are provided in Appendix A. The focus

group was moderated by the lead researcher and audio-recorded with participants' permission. Written and verbal consent was gathered prior to session. The recording was typed from start to finish and additional notes were made during discussion. The participants were given the opportunity to read their statements to clarify their intentions and confirm the accuracy of the statements. The discussion was held in both Arabic and English and in the case of the Arabic, it was translated into English for analysis while checking the translation against the original transcript.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

The School Board and teachers provided ethical approval. Written informed consent was obtained from participants prior to participating in the focus group. Participant codes were used to confidential personal information, and recordings, transcriptions and research notes were held securely, only being accessible to the research team. Throughout data collection and interpretation, the researcher also remained reflexive, knowing that assumptions of the construct of SEL and mindfulness may affect how the data are interpreted. Written reflexive notes were then kept differentiating participants' perspectives from the researcher's interpretations.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The focus group transcript was analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes produced directly from the data included "student calming," "increased engagement," "fit into schedule," "teacher support," and "implementation challenges." Overlapping codes were then combined, separate concepts from distinct words or inverted, and renaming codes as needed. Codes were then regrouped into larger categories and created as four major themes: Ease of Implementation, Student Engagement and Response, Teacher Beliefs about SEL, and Challenges in Integration. Manual coding was done using Microsoft Word. Maintenance of an audit trail occurred by coding notes, changing code lists, development of thematic tables and analytic memos that contained the decisions made during the process of coding and theme development (see Appendix B). A final set of themes were reviewed against the original transcript to ensure they reflected participants' accounts. Participant self-evaluation and triangulation with pertinent literature added to the credibility of the study. This model helped in data synthesis and generation of recurrent themes and patterns that informed this study and contributed to its purpose:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings from interviews with 8 Grade 1 and 2 teachers from various Lebanese schools, both public and private. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, four key themes emerged: (1) Emotional Readiness as a Foundation for Learning, (2) Improved Focus and Classroom Engagement, (3) SEL as a Bridge to Literacy and Numeracy, and (4) Implementation Challenges in the Lebanese Context. Each theme is supported by teachers' direct quotes and discussed in relation to existing literature.

Theme 1: Emotional Readiness as a Foundation for Learning

This theme addresses RQ1, as all participating teachers emphasized the importance of emotional regulation in helping students access learning. Teachers reported that mindfulness and SEL practices helped students manage anxiety, settle into routines, and cope with frustration as emotional states often disruptive to academic engagement in early grades. In fact, a teacher at a private school in Lebanon affirmed that: "When I started using breathing exercises in the morning, I noticed fewer meltdowns. The children are calmer, and we can begin the literacy lesson without emotional outbursts." This idea was reinforced by another teacher, who claimed that "I could see clear improvements in the way students started to recognize their feelings and take time to articulate them".

These observations align with the literature that positions emotional regulation as a critical precursor to academic readiness (Graziano *et al.*, 2007). According to CASEL (2025) and Pham (2024), SEL practices foster self-awareness and emotional control, which in turn allow students to engage more fully in academic tasks. For young learners especially, emotional security is not separate from academic ability, it underpins it.

Theme 2: Improved Focus and Classroom Engagement

In line with RQ2, teachers consistently observed increased attention and task persistence following regular SEL or mindfulness routines. Several described activities such as "mindful coloring," "listening to calming sounds," or "name-your-feeling" exercises that helped students transition between subjects with greater focus.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description	Application to This Study
1. Familiarization with the Data	Immersing in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts; noting initial observations.	Interview transcripts from Grade 1 and 2 teachers were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of their perspectives on SEL, mindfulness, and academic outcomes.
2. Generating Initial Codes	Systematically identifying and labeling key features of the data relevant to the research questions.	Codes such as "emotional regulation," "improved attention," "academic improvement," "teacher challenges," and "implementation barriers" were assigned to relevant text segments.
3. Searching for Themes	Collating codes into potential themes and gather supporting data for each theme.	Related codes were grouped to form preliminary themes, e.g., "SEL supports learning focus," "Teacher agency in implementation," and "Contextual barriers in Lebanon."
4. Reviewing Themes	Refining themes by checking how well they fit with the coded extracts and the entire dataset.	Themes were checked for coherence and distinction, ensuring they accurately represent teacher narratives across diverse school types.
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Clearly defining the essence of each theme and subtheme and naming them meaningfully.	Final themes such as "Emotional Readiness for Learning" or "Cultural Relevance and Curriculum Gaps" were defined with supporting quotes.
6. Producing the Report	Final analysis and write-up of the findings, using vivid examples to support each theme.	A rich narrative was developed using direct quotes from participants, linking themes to the research questions and existing literature.

“After five minutes of mindfulness, I see a clear difference because students stop fidgeting, and they stay on task longer, especially during math time”, said a teacher at a private school in Mount Lebanon. Similarly, *another teacher at a public school in the South of Lebanon agreed that* “SEL helps them recognize when they’re distracted or upset. One of my students said, ‘Miss, I need to breathe before I do my reading.’ That’s huge for a six-year-old.” These insights resonate with research showing that mindfulness enhances executive functioning and attention regulation (Koch, 2024). In early grades, where attention spans are still developing, even small improvements in focus can significantly impact the quality of academic engagement. Teachers' reports confirm that SEL and mindfulness are not just "soft" skills, they directly influence cognitive readiness.

Theme 3: SEL as a Foundational Enabler of Academic Readiness

Answering RQ3, while most teachers noted that SEL and mindfulness supported behavior and emotional regulation, several specifically observed positive effects on early reading and math readiness among Grade 1 and 2 students. Teachers described young learners showing more patience with difficult tasks, better focus during lessons, and a greater willingness to try, even when they didn’t immediately succeed.

One Grade 1 teacher at a private school in Tripoli shared, *“Some of my students used to shut down when they couldn’t read a word. Now, after our morning SEL routines, they raise their hands more and try to sound it out, even if it’s wrong.”* Similarly, a Grade 2 teacher in a Beirut public school explained, *“When we started using calm corners and feelings charts, the students were less restless during math time. They could sit longer and count or do simple addition without getting frustrated.”*

Teachers' observations indicate that emotional regulation is a prerequisite for academic readiness as students who have the ability to regulate their emotions when frustrated, to maintain attention and to recover from errors are more able to engage with literacy and numeracy tasks. For instance, teachers reported that students who used to get frustrated when reading had become more willing to persevere. As one teacher said, “Where I used to give up when I couldn't read a word, I am not doing it now.” Another teacher commented, “They can sit and concentrate on numbers for an extended period after the breathing activity.” In addition, teachers commented on how the students changed with respect to seeking help and continuing tasks. One observational note featured the following: “Instead of putting the pencil down, children started asking for help” and “Children will try more times after making the wrong move again.” The observation data show that SEL and mindfulness complement traditional academic teaching, setting the right emotional and cognitive climate to achieve successful academic teaching.

These findings reinforce that SEL and mindfulness help create the emotional conditions needed for foundational learning (Banerjee *et al.*, 2025). Especially in Lebanon’s challenging context, building emotional resilience may be a key enabler of literacy and numeracy progress in the early years.

Theme 4: Implementation Challenges in the Lebanese Context

Nevertheless, answering RQ4, despite the positive impressions and perspectives associated with SEL and mindfulness practices, teachers still expressed their concerns about their integration in both public and private schools, highlighting key challenges like resources limitation, time constraints, lack of training, and cultural mistrust and lack of awareness. For example, one teacher in a private school in Beirut stated that: “our Lebanese curriculum is very dense and we are always on a time crunch to finish it. With the ongoing political turmoil that is constantly affecting the country and imposing days off, we are further pressured to finalize the academic lessons. So, it makes it hard for us to accommodate mindfulness practices, especially since the school still doesn’t fully support it as an essential component.” Another teacher at a public school in North Lebanon further added: “the concept of SEL initiatives is still very new to parents to the point where they still think it is a waste of time. So, if we were to try to include these initiatives in our programs, I think we need to work on awareness to make parents understand the significance of what we are trying to teach their young children. I also think that teachers have limited knowledge concerning these programs, also necessitating training.” A teacher in a public school in the South of Lebanon also addressed the added challenges of dealing with Grades 1 and 2 students: “we need to remember that we are dealing with very young students. Therefore, special tools and instruments are needed to assist our SEL-related lessons. In the current situation of schools in Lebanon, investing in such resources is difficult, especially with all of the imposed financial needs of schools.”

These challenges are also addressed across the literature, especially with the systemic limitations emphasized by the OECD (2024) as barriers to proper SEL integration. With the existing social, economic, and political challenges that teachers have to also navigate and deal with, integrating a new component into the Lebanese curricula adds more obstacles, especially with limited resources, time, and cultural differences. Therefore, without proper support, whether institutional or governmental, this mission will remain limited and poorly adopted.

Implications of the Findings

After detailing the key themes, the following present the key implications of the findings:

Table 4. Implications of the Findings

Theme	Implications
Emotional Readiness as a Foundation for Learning	Integrate SEL into early grade curricula as a core component of academic readiness, ensuring schedules allocate time for structured emotional-regulation activities.
Improved Focus and Classroom Engagement	Establish daily, age-appropriate mindfulness routines (e.g., breathing exercises, mindful transitions) supported by national SEL guidelines for primary classrooms.
SEL as a Bridge to Literacy and Numeracy	Embed SEL indicators within literacy and numeracy improvement plans and assessment tools, framing emotional-regulation skills as essential precursors to academic success.
Implementation Challenges in the Lebanese Context	Develop and deliver culturally tailored SEL and mindfulness training for teachers; engage parents and school leaders to build understanding and institutional support.

Critical Analysis and Reflections

Teachers' positive perceptions of SEL and mindfulness may reflect both their training and the specific emotional and academic needs of their students. In Lebanon's crisis-affected context, teachers may particularly value practices that help students manage anxiety, frustration, and attention, which they perceive as supporting readiness for learning. However, these perceptions may vary across public and private schools depending on resources, training, leadership support, and parental awareness. Teacher buy-in may also influence implementation. Teachers who understand and value SEL may be more likely to integrate practices consistently, whereas limited training or institutional support may reduce implementation. Nevertheless, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence of a direct causal effect on literacy or numeracy. As the study relies on teacher perceptions and a small qualitative sample, improvements may also reflect maturation, classroom routines, or teaching strategies. Further research using objective academic measures and classroom observations is therefore needed.

CONCLUSION

Summary

This study aimed to understand how the perception and conceptualization of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness practices relate to emotional readiness, engagement in the classroom, and building foundational literacy and numeracy skills among first and second-grade students using teachers' perceptions and conceptualizations. The four themes that the data identified were as follows: emotional readiness as a foundation for learning, improved focus and engagement, SEL as a bridge to academic readiness, and implementation challenges within the Lebanese context. Teachers mostly saw SEL and mindfulness as an approach that creates the right atmosphere for learning. Teachers noted that the emotional regulation was related to sustained attention, task persistence and effective involvement in literacy and numeracy activities. However, systemic barriers, including limited training, time constraints, and cultural misconceptions, constrained consistent implementation.

Study Contribution

The study adds qualitative evidence on teachers' meaning-making regarding SEL and mindfulness in Lebanese early primary classrooms, which is a context that has not been well explored. The study's particularity is that it emphasizes how teachers identify emotional regulation as a prerequisite skill for students' readiness to learn early literacy and numeracy. Rather than establishing direct academic effects, the findings demonstrate how teachers understand the pathway from emotional self-control and attention, engagement, and persistence on tasks, and then academic readiness. This provides a context-specific perspective that can support further review for future studies and planning of SEL and mindfulness practices in Lebanese schools.

Practical Implications

The results indicate that teachers need specific training in SEL and mindfulness and that brief, developmentally appropriate

SEL and mindfulness practices should be embedded into existing classroom routines. To support implementation, school leaders must provide sufficient time, resources and institutional support, while policy-makers should draft context-appropriate guidelines and teacher training programs that take into account the specific context of primary education in Lebanon. All of these can support efforts to place SEL and mindfulness as complimentary interventions to support students' emotional needs and learning readiness.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study's small qualitative sample size does not represent the full range of experiences in regions and school types in Lebanon, a greater sample size would allow for more in-depth data collection. Moreover, while using teacher perception as a tool to help learn the meaning of texts is useful, it was not an objective measure for academic progress. Larger mixed methods studies, including direct assessment of literacy and numeracy skills, observations of the classroom and students' perspectives, should therefore be included in future studies. Future research opportunities include investigating whether the observed connections between SEL, mindfulness, emotional regulation, and academic readiness are significant in the long run. The relationships should also be explored in other socio-cultural and educational settings in Lebanon.

The findings also indicate that SEL and Mindfulness in early education goes beyond behavior management, as attested by teachers as they believe that these practices are linked to building emotional and cognitive readiness in which young learners engage with foundational academic learning areas. Within this context, however, having a robust SEL focus and providing meaningful instructional support and conditions to enhance SEL and mindfulness in early primary education may be crucial.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Main Interview Discussion Questions and Prompts

Theme 1: Emotional Readiness as a Foundation for Learning

- How do you perceive the role of SEL and mindfulness in students' emotional regulation?
- Have you observed changes in students' ability to manage emotions, anxiety, or frustration?
- How do students' emotional states affect their readiness to learn?

Theme 2: Improved Focus and Classroom Engagement

- How do SEL and mindfulness practices affect students' attention and concentration?
- Have you observed changes in students' classroom participation or task persistence?
- Which practices appear most effective in helping students remain focused and engaged?

Theme 3: SEL as a Foundational Enabler of Academic Readiness

- How do you perceive the relationship between SEL/mindfulness and students' readiness for literacy and numeracy learning?
- Have you observed changes in students' willingness to attempt reading or mathematics tasks?
- Can you describe an example where emotional regulation appeared to support academic learning?

Theme 4: Implementation Challenges in the Lebanese Context

- What challenges do you face when implementing SEL and mindfulness in your classroom?
- How do resources, teacher training, school policies, and parental attitudes affect implementation?
- What factors would make it easier to integrate SEL and mindfulness into Grade 1 and 2 classrooms?

Appendix B: Main Interview Discussion Questions and Prompts

Step	What was done during analysis	Example from the data	Result / Decision
Initial coding	Interview transcripts were read individually and relevant statements were highlighted in Microsoft Word.	"The children are calmer, and we can begin the literacy lesson without emotional outbursts."	Coded as emotional regulation, calmer classroom, and learning readiness.
Comparing codes	Similar codes from different teachers were compared and grouped.	References to children becoming calmer, managing frustration, and recognizing feelings appeared across interviews.	Emotional regulation was retained as a broader category.
Developing categories	Codes relating to students' ability to remain focused and continue tasks were grouped together.	Teachers described students staying on task longer and being more willing to continue after mistakes.	Category developed as attention and task persistence.
Connecting categories	Emotional regulation was compared with teachers' observations about classroom participation and academic tasks.	Teachers linked breathing activities and calming routines with greater concentration during reading and mathematics.	Categories were connected around emotional readiness → engagement.
Developing Theme 3	Statements specifically referring to reading, counting, addition, and persistence with difficult academic tasks were reviewed together.	"They could sit longer and count or do simple addition without getting frustrated."	Developed SEL as a Foundational Enabler of Academic Readiness.
Reviewing implementation data	Statements concerning time, training, resources, parents, and school support were compared across teachers and school types.	Teachers described curriculum pressure, limited resources, lack of training, and parental misunderstanding.	Developed Implementation Challenges in the Lebanese Context.
Theme refinement	Themes were re-read against the original transcripts to ensure that they represented repeated patterns rather than isolated comments.	Emotional regulation, attention, academic readiness, and implementation barriers appeared across multiple interviews.	Four final themes were retained.
Analytic memos	Brief notes were recorded in Word when an interpretation or relationship between codes became apparent.	Emotional regulation appeared repeatedly before teachers described improved concentration or persistence.	This informed the interpretation of emotional regulation as a foundation for learning.
