

BRIDGING HEARTS AND MINDS: TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY IN HOLISTIC 21ST CENTURY EDUCATION

^{1*}PRIYA. T and ²Dr. ARUN KUMAR. P

**^{1*}Part -Time Research Scholar, Government College of Teacher Education, Kozhikode,
University of Calicut**

**²Associate Professor in Educational Psychology, Government College Of Teacher Education,
Kozhikode, University of Calicut**

ABSTRACT

This is qualitative study explores how teachers perceive, interpret, and fulfil their responsibilities for socio-emotional learning (SEL) alongside traditional instructional roles in 21st-century classrooms. It highlights the expanding possibility of teaching, where educators are expected not only to bring academic content but also to foster students' social and emotional growth. The study uncovers the challenges besides complexities teachers face while balancing these dual responsibilities. Data were collected through in-depth, open-ended interviews with teachers from diverse educational settings, enabling participants to share rich, detailed accounts of their experiences without the limitations of predetermined response categories. The interview guide focused on critical themes such as teachers' conceptualizations of SEL, strategies for embedding socio-emotional development into classroom practice, the impact of administrative and extracurricular demands, and ways of managing information overload in digitally driven learning environments. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and examined using thematic analysis, a systematic approach for identifying, interpreting, and organizing recurring patterns of meanings. The findings reveal how teachers navigate accountability by employing a range of strategies and coping mechanisms to meet both academic and socio-emotional expectations. The study underscores the evolving role of teachers in supporting holistic student development amid rapid educational change and digital challenges. It further emphasizes the importance of supportive institutional structures, continuous professional development in SEL, and policy frameworks that acknowledge the multifaceted responsibilities of educators. Ultimately, the study provides valuable insights for educational stakeholders, highlighting the necessity of balancing academic rigor with socio-emotional well-being to ensure sustainable and effective teaching practices in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS : Teacher, Socio-Emotional Learning, predetermined response, extracurricular demands, digital challenges and Academic Instruction, 21st Century Classrooms

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the role of teachers has undergone significant transformation, shaped by evolving demands and expectations within global education systems. Traditionally, teachers were viewed primarily as transmitters of academic knowledge, responsible for ensuring that students mastered the core curriculum and achieved required learning outcomes. In contrast, modern education now requires a more complex and holistic approach to teaching and learning. Today's educators are expected not only to deliver subject expertise but also to cultivate socio-emotional learning (SEL)¹. This includes nurturing skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, communication, resilience, and ethical decision-making in students. Increasingly, both educators and policymakers recognize that academic achievement alone is insufficient for success in the 21st century; learners must also acquire the social and emotional competencies needed to navigate an interconnected, rapidly changing, and often unpredictable world. Beyond instructional duties, teachers are also held accountable for a growing number of administrative responsibilities. These include preparing and attending parent-teacher meetings, managing student assessments, maintaining accurate records, coordinating extracurricular activities, and complying with institutional and governmental requirements. Such additional tasks are often time-consuming and can reduce direct teaching opportunities, thereby contributing to heavier workloads and increased stress among educators². The digital era has brought about an unprecedented expansion of information access, reshaping how both students and teachers acquire, process, and apply knowledge. While this abundance of resources has democratized learning and created new opportunities, it has also introduced significant challenges. The overwhelming volume of information can make it difficult to distinguish credible sources from unreliable ones, leading to stress, distraction, and reduced productivity in both teaching and learning. To address these challenges, teachers play a pivotal role in fostering information literacy and critical thinking. By equipping students with the skills to critically evaluate sources,

filter relevant content, and use technology responsibly, educators can transform potential digital pitfalls into empowering learning experiences. Teachers' daily realities are characterized by continuous adaptation and multitasking³. Striking a balance between educational innovation, administrative efficiency, and the integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) into classroom practice requires creativity, resilience, and effective time management. Many educators report difficulties in managing workloads and allocating resources, often experiencing pressure to "do it all." These demands, when coupled with inadequate institutional support, may contribute to burnout or feelings of inadequacy. To counter these challenges, collaboration among colleagues, parents, and the broader community becomes essential⁴. Sharing best practices, offering mutual support, and building collective strategies can create a more sustainable and supportive teaching environment. Acknowledging the broad spectrum of teachers' responsibilities is essential for shaping effective policies and professional development initiatives. Schools that allocate structured time for collaboration, establish clear guidelines for balancing diverse tasks, and prioritize socio-emotional development alongside academic performance are better positioned to achieve positive outcomes for both teachers and students⁵. Looking ahead, ongoing research and policymaking must continue to address these evolving challenges to ensure that teachers are empowered, supported, and well-prepared to thrive within the complex landscape of 21st-century education. To understand teachers' perceptions of their accountability in facilitating both academic and socio-emotional development⁶. To identify strategies used by teachers to manage information overload while promoting information literacy in students. To uncover the challenges and coping mechanisms teachers employ to balance their multifaceted responsibilities⁷. The research specifically focuses on practicing primary and secondary school teachers actively involved in integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) within their classrooms. It provides detailed insights into teachers' current practices and perceptions regarding SEL, with particular emphasis on managing information overload and fostering information literacy among students⁸. The findings may not fully represent teachers' experiences across different regions, school types, or educational systems. Teachers' self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability bias, potentially affecting the authenticity of responses⁹. Thematic analysis relies on researcher interpretation, introducing subjectivity that could influence theme identification. The study does not extensively address technological barriers, such as digital inequity or teacher readiness for ICT integration¹⁰. The research focuses solely on teacher perspectives and does not include direct measures of student socio-emotional outcomes¹¹.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Preparation of research questions with the standard guidelines

Formulating precise and meaningful research questions is one of the most critical steps in any academic investigation¹². Well-designed questions provide a clear direction for the study, guide the choice of methodology, and ensure that the research remains focused and relevant. The process of preparing research questions must therefore follow standard guidelines established in research methodology¹³. Research questions must be stated in simple, unambiguous language. Avoiding vague expressions, double negatives, and technical jargon ensures that the questions can be easily understood by the researcher, participants, and readers. Clear wording enhances the accuracy of data collection and analysis¹⁴. Questions should target specific aspects of the research problem rather than being overly broad or general¹⁵. Focused questions make it possible to collect data that directly addresses the objectives of the study. Feasible research questions take into account the resources, time frame, and accessibility of participants or data sources¹⁶. A question that cannot be practically answered within the study's constraints is likely to weaken the overall research design. Good research questions are aligned with the purpose and objectives of the study. They should contribute meaningfully to existing knowledge, theory, or practice and address an identified gap in the literature¹⁷⁻²⁰. Research questions should be framed in a way that respects participants' rights and dignity. Questions leading to potential harm, bias, or violation of privacy must be avoided. By following these guidelines, researchers can prepare research questions that are both academically rigorous and practically attainable²¹⁻²³. Well-structured questions not only improve the quality of the findings but also ensure that the study contributes valuable insights to the broader field of knowledge. The methodology outlines the systematic process through which the research is conducted. It provides a clear explanation of the approach adopted to achieve the study's objectives and ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. This section describes the research design, methods of data collection, and procedures for data analysis, which together form the foundation for drawing meaningful conclusions. Specifies the overall framework and strategy guiding the study, ensuring alignment with the research objectives and questions. Details the sources of data, the instruments or tools used, and the procedures followed to gather accurate and relevant information. Explains the techniques and methods applied to interpret the collected data, identify patterns, and derive insights that contribute to answering the research questions²³⁻²⁵.

1. How do teachers perceive their accountability in promoting socio-emotional learning alongside academic instruction?

2. What strategies do teachers use to integrate socio-emotional learning into their classroom practices?
3. How do teachers manage the challenges of balancing academic, administrative, and socio-emotional responsibilities?
4. In what ways do teachers navigate information overload to support both their teaching and students' learning?
5. How do teachers incorporate real-life and societal issues to enhance students' socio-emotional growth?

Study Design

To investigate and document the complex attitudes, experiences, and behaviors of educators regarding socio-emotional learning (SEL), this study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are particularly effective for examining intricate human phenomena, as they enable participants to articulate their thoughts and perspectives in their own words, without being restricted by predetermined response categories. This approach facilitates a deeper and more contextualized understanding of how teachers perceive their responsibilities in fostering social and emotional development alongside traditional academic instruction.

In this study, the qualitative approach supports a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of teacher accountability in contemporary educational settings. Through open-ended interviews with teachers, the research captures their subjective experiences in navigating both the challenges and opportunities of integrating SEL into daily practice. This method also highlights the strategies educators employ to balance increasing responsibilities, including administrative tasks and the management of information overload in digitally driven environments.

An additional strength of qualitative research lies in its flexibility and responsiveness during data collection. Interview protocols can be adapted, and probing questions introduced, to explore emerging themes more deeply. Furthermore, the iterative nature of qualitative analysis makes it possible to uncover patterns, meanings, and contradictions within teacher narratives that might remain hidden in quantitative surveys or experimental approaches²⁶.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, open-ended interview schedules were employed as the primary instrument for conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with teachers representing diverse educational backgrounds, encompassing variations in school types, grade levels, and geographical contexts²⁷.

Tools used for the study

A semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule was developed in alignment with the study objectives and informed by key concepts related to socio-emotional learning (SEL). This approach strikes a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling the researcher to address essential themes such as teacher accountability and SEL, while simultaneously allowing participants the freedom to articulate their perspectives in rich, detailed narratives²⁸.

Sample selected for the study

The sample for this study comprised 40 primary school teachers, selected through a purposive sampling technique. This approach allowed the researcher to intentionally include participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Using a qualitative approach, the interviewer pre-planned a set of guiding questions and topics to ensure that critical areas such as teachers' experiences with integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL), challenges related to information overload, and the balancing of academic and administrative responsibilities were systematically explored across all participants. Simultaneously, the open-ended format of the questions provided respondents with the opportunity to elaborate on their perspectives, introduce new ideas, and share personal experiences without being restricted by predetermined response options²⁹.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The transcribed interviews were meticulously analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the well-established framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic process began with multiple readings of the transcripts to develop a thorough familiarity with the data and gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' narratives. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, systematically identifying and labeling significant segments of text. From these codes, potential themes were developed by grouping similar concepts and patterns that captured key aspects of the participants' experiences. Each emerging theme was carefully reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. Subsequently, each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its core significance and relevance to the study objectives. The themes were organized and presented in a systematic manner, highlighting the richness and depth of the qualitative data. This approach ensured that the analysis was rigorous, transparent, and firmly grounded in the participants' accounts. The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of the following key themes: Communication and Collaboration, Lifelong Learning and Reflective

Practice, Integration of Societal Issues, Technology and Digital Tools, and Real-Life Application and Emotional Management. Participants emphasized the importance of teamwork and effective communication in fostering socio-emotional learning (SEL). Teachers highlighted the development of meaningful relationships with students and the use of purposeful dialogue to create supportive and emotionally safe learning environments. Open communication was considered essential for enabling students to freely express their thoughts and feelings, thereby promoting mutual respect and emotional stability. Collaboration extended beyond student interactions, encompassing co-teaching and multidisciplinary planning with colleagues. Such collaborative practices were identified as critical for addressing diverse student needs and enhancing the collective capacity to support SEL effectively. Teachers described themselves as lifelong learners, demonstrating curiosity, inquiry, and a growth-oriented mindset. They stressed the importance of ongoing professional development and reflective teaching as means to enhance the effectiveness of SEL integration. Many educators reported incorporating real-world examples and everyday-life scenarios into their lessons, enabling students to connect abstract academic concepts with their personal experiences³⁰. This approach not only facilitated deeper understanding but also fostered emotional engagement and responsibility, particularly in areas such as environmental sustainability and social well-being. Integrating contemporary societal issues into the curriculum emerged as a key strategy for enhancing SEL. Teachers indicated that discussing topics such as climate change, resource conservation, social inequity, and public health enabled students to develop empathy and a sense of civic responsibility. Engaging learners in real-world contexts promoted ethical thinking and social accountability, effectively grounding academic learning in meaningful and practical experiences. Participation in community-oriented projects further strengthened students' identities as engaged and responsible citizens, bridging the gap between classroom learning and broader societal engagement. Educators acknowledged the dual role of information and communication technology tools in supporting both academic and socio-emotional development. Digital platforms facilitated collaboration beyond the traditional classroom, enabled individualized learning experiences, and provided tools for comprehensive monitoring of student progress. At the same time, teachers highlighted challenges such as information overload and emphasized the importance of teaching students responsible and mindful use of technology. In their role as mentors, teachers guided students in navigating digital environments effectively, minimizing distractions, and maximizing learning outcomes. Incorporating real-life, practical scenario particularly those relating to environmental themes and

everyday experiences emerged as a key strategy for fostering both cognitive understanding and emotional engagement. This approach helped students perceive the relevance of academic concepts, enhancing motivation and purpose. Teachers aimed to support holistic student development by encouraging learners to see themselves as lifelong learners connected to broader societal and ecological systems. By emotionally anchoring curriculum content, teachers fostered meaningful engagement and strengthened students' socio-emotional growth. The findings collectively highlight the diverse approaches teachers employ to integrate socio-emotional learning within contemporary education. The study underscores the importance of effective technology use, communication, collaboration, reflective practice, and societal relevance as essential components in promoting holistic student development in the twenty-first century³¹ The study reveals that teachers perceive accountability for socio-emotional learning (SEL) as extending beyond academic instruction to the intentional cultivation of students' emotional well-being, interpersonal skills, and resilience. Teachers emphasized that their responsibility includes creating supportive classroom environments where students feel safe to express themselves and develop empathy, self-regulation, and collaborative skills. Achieving these goals requires careful planning, classroom flexibility, and the integration of SEL strategies into daily lessons without compromising academic rigor. This dual responsibility often requires teachers to negotiate between curriculum demands and the holistic needs of their students. Findings also indicate that teachers face accountability pressures not only from institutional policies but also from parents and the wider community, who increasingly expect schools to prepare students for the social and emotional challenges of contemporary life. While teachers recognized the long-term benefits of SEL, they frequently encountered constraints such as limited training, time, and resources. Consequently, implementation of SEL varied; some teachers successfully embedded SEL into teaching practices, while others struggled to move beyond superficial or isolated activities. These dynamics illustrate the complex realities educators navigate in balancing academic performance, emotional development, and administrative expectations in 21st-century classrooms.³²

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The responsibilities of twenty-first-century teachers extend far beyond the traditional role of delivering academic instruction. Educators are now expected to actively support socio-emotional learning (SEL), helping students develop essential skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, teamwork, resilience, and responsible decision-making, in addition to mastering the curriculum³³. This expanded role reflects a growing recognition that academic achievement alone is insufficient

for preparing students to succeed in today's complex and interconnected world. In fulfilling these multifaceted responsibilities, teachers must also navigate the vast amounts of digital information present in modern learning environments³⁴. The rapid proliferation of social media, multimedia, and internet resources has transformed how knowledge is acquired and shared, but it has also introduced significant challenges related to information overload. Educators are tasked not only with managing this digital landscape themselves but also with equipping students with strong information literacy skills. This includes teaching students to identify credible sources, critically evaluate content, and manage the flow of information responsibly. Without such guidance, students risk becoming overwhelmed, distracted, or misinformed, potentially compromising both their well-being and learning outcomes. The increasing complexity of teaching responsibilities, coupled with technological challenges, underscores the importance of institutional support. Schools and educational institutions can address these demands by providing targeted resources such as dedicated time for SEL planning, collaborative team structures, and access to mental health and socio-emotional specialists. Institutional policies should explicitly recognize the dual role of teachers in fostering both academic and socio-emotional development, positioning SEL as a core component of education rather than an optional or extracurricular activity. Ongoing professional development (PD) focused on SEL is equally critical. Teachers need opportunities to learn effective integration strategies, enhance their skills in technology use, and improve their capacity to foster information literacy. PD programs should be continuous, adaptable to emerging challenges, and designed to strengthen teachers' confidence and competence in these complex areas. Educators who receive comprehensive support are better prepared to implement SEL strategies consistently and respond effectively to diverse classroom contexts. To align accountability frameworks with the realities of twenty-first-century education, policies at the school, district, and governmental levels must evolve. This includes recognizing the time and resources necessary to fulfill these expanded responsibilities and avoiding evaluation systems that focus solely on quantitative metrics while neglecting qualitative aspects such as emotional development and well-being. Supportive policies can create environments where teachers feel valued, encouraged, and adequately prepared to manage the evolving demands of their profession. Ultimately, the sustainability and effectiveness of educational initiatives depend on well-coordinated support systems that enable teachers to balance academic instruction, SEL facilitation, and digital literacy guidance. By attending carefully to these responsibilities, educators can

cultivate well-rounded students who thrive academically, socially, and emotionally in a rapidly changing society³⁵.

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