Assessing Middle School Students' Understanding and Implementation of Social and Emotional Competencies: A Study Conducted in Private Schools in Mount Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

The changes taking place in this fast-paced world "have led to the rise of social and emotional processes" (Cefai et al., 2020, p.3). Although Social Emotional Learning (SEL) encompasses many aspects, the primary elements include self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010, p.40). Acknowledging the importance of adolescence as the critical period to explore developments in understanding oneself and others, this study addresses three primary research questions. The first question examines the extent to which middle school students possess SEL competencies in Lebanese private middle schools. The second question explores whether middle school students from lower socioeconomic status differed in their SEL competencies from those coming from higher socioeconomic status (SES). The third question assesses the presence of gender differences in possessing socio-emotional competencies in middle school students. This study's findings showed that middle school students (n = 165) in Lebanese private schools possess social and emotional competencies to varying extents. The results provide further evidence for the association of SES factors on an adolescents' acquisition and development of social-emotional competencies, self-control specifically. The findings confirm that, in addition to socioeconomic status (SES), personal and environmental factors—such as community and culture—play a crucial role in shaping the social-emotional development of middle school students. The given recommendations affirm that different stakeholders, including educational policymakers, schools, teachers, and families in Lebanon, should be active partners in supporting SEL by providing various services in safe and nurturing environments.

Keywords: social and emotional learning (SEL), social and emotional competencies, self-awareness, self-control, relationship skills, social awareness, decision-making, socio-economic status (SES), gender differences.

INTRODUCTION

The changes that are taking place in this fast-paced world "have led to the rise of social and emotional processes as an essential requirement in positive human development and meaningful education" (Cefai et al., 2020, p.3). Worldwide, quality education focuses on

instilling essential values, competencies, and lifelong skills in students-(Frey et al., 2019; Kress et al., 2004). Students, especially in adolescence, are expected to grow and develop into healthy citizens who understand themselves, work well with others, embrace diversity, make responsible and ethical decisions, and face challenging situations in this ever-changing world (Srivastava, 2015; Unicef, n.d.).

Various terms have been used to describe social and emotional processes in human development and education, such as the more inclusive "soft skills'', "non-cognitive skills," and "21st century skills" (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010, as cited in Cefai et al., 2020). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is another term that encompasses these concepts and is often referred to by other names, such as character education and personality (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). According to Jones and Doolittle (2017), "each label draws from a slightly different theoretical perspective and draws upon a different set of research, and each has its own related fields and disciplines" (p.3). Among these terms, SEL has gained the most traction in recent years, primarily for two reasons: (1) research demonstrates that SEL is a familiar and preferred term among policymakers, practitioners, and parents, and (2) it emphasizes learning and personal growth, aligning more closely with the educational mission of promoting healthy development, and wellbeing (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (n.d), an important non-profit organization in the SEL field in the United States, defines SEL as: the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to understand and manage emotions, achieve positive goals, show empathy, maintain relationships, and make responsible decisions. (Section 1)

Panorama Education (2018) simplifies this further by stating that SEL equips students with "the critical skills and mindsets that enable success in school and in life" (para. 1).

SEL outcomes have been linked to academic readiness, success, and adjustment (Denham, 2015, as cited in Soliman et al., 2021). Factors within a student's environment can hinder SEL development, negatively impacting their ability to manage academic expectations and life challenges (Guba & Bocanegra, 2015, as cited in Soliman et al., 2021). A lack of SEL can result in "maladaptive behaviors" such as bullying or school violence (Rivers & Brackett, 2011). In Lebanon, almost 30% of adolescents participate in bullying (Halabi et al., 2018, as cited in Baroud et al., 2020), and victims of bullying are at a higher risk for mental health problems (Arseneault et al., 2010, as cited in Baroud et al., 2020). Mental health problems are widespread among adolescents, with over 50% of Lebanese adolescents suffering from anxiety, and 13% from depression (Government of Lebanon and the United Nations, 2022, as cited in Devonald et al., 2022).

Adolescence is a critical phase in human development, where self-identity, social competence, and emotional resilience evolve (Yeo et al., 2007). Middle school curriculums often complicate the formation of meaningful peer relationships compared to elementary school (Hicks, 1997). The rise in social, emotional, and behavioral issues among students (Fernández-Martín et al., 2022), such as aggression and non-compliance (Stoiber, 2011), highlight the need for collecting data on middle school students' understanding and implementation of social-emotional competencies. This data enables school leaders to plan socioemotional and

behavioral improvements that stimulate protective factors, enhancing student productivity and well-being.

Protective factors are attributes that reduce negative impacts and encourage resilience (SAMHSA, 2019). Risk factors drain a student's capacity to cope, leading to dysfunction, while protective factors, like motivation, personality, family closeness, and community support, help students overcome challenges (Mastern & Garmezy, 1985; Werner, 1986, 1989, as cited in Hall-Lande et al., 2007, p.268). Henson et al. (2017) suggests that schools can encourage these protective factors by investing in SEL. Social-emotional competencies function as protective mechanisms, improving students' ability to adapt to risk (Pianta, 1998). Without these skills, students will struggle to navigate their social and academic environments (Olowe, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The Lebanese "Ministry of Education and Higher Education's Directorate for Secondary Education (MEHE-DGE) and the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CRDP) support the integration of SEL in the national curriculum. However, the Lebanese curriculum lacks structured SEL programs (Farshoukh, 2022). As students transition from elementary to middle school, many experiences a decline in their motivation and an increase in behavioral issues (Eccles et al., 2004, as cited in Neth et al., 2019). In September 2021, the UNICEF Youth-Focused Rapid Assessment (YFRA) showed that one in four Lebanese adolescents often felt depressed (Unicef Lebanon, 2022) with many experiencing anxiety, conduct disorders, and aggression (Reicher & Rossmann, 2008, as cited in Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2017). International SEL programs are vital for preventing problematic behaviors, promoting mental health (Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2017) and developing diverse student skills.Acknowledging the importance of adolescence in developing SEL competencies, more research is needed to explore how well middle school students in Lebanese private schools grasp SEL concepts.

This study aims to answer three questions: 1) To what extent do middle school students possess SEL competencies in Lebanese private schools? 2 How do SEL competencies differ between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds? and 3) Are there significant gender differences in socio-emotional competencies?

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to assess middle school students' understanding and implementation of SEL competencies in private schools in El Metn, Lebanon, by answering the above three questions, and mediating the gap in the existing literature. The findings will provide insight for the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) and school administrators to support future SEL implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As students transition to middle school, they face increased emotional complexity, peer pressure, and academic pressure, making it a critical time for SEL development (National Center on Safe Supportive Environments, n.d.). However, Lebanon's outdated curriculum, last updated in 1998, largely focuses on memorization and official examinations, leaving limited room for SEL instruction (Ghabash, 2022). Students are extrinsically motivated because much of their concern is focused on achieving excellent results in academic subjects to pass the

official government examination of middle school (Brevet). Ray (2022) has suggested that Lebanon's educational system must incorporate SEL to meet the demands of the modern workforce. Put another way, various research studies have demonstrated that SEL is a key to successful life outcomes, such as school and career success, because it fosters the ability of students to integrate thinking about their emotions and behaviors in ways that lead to positive academic and social outcomes (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, as cited by Swart, 2017).

As such, this literature review is divided into four thematic subsections. First, the conceptual definitions and importance of SEL. Second, the impact of socioeconomic status on social-emotional development. Third, the gender differences in SEL competencies. Fourth, middle school students' attitudes toward SEL.

The Conceptual Definitions and Importance of SEL

SEL is a framework that promotes students' positive social, emotional, and cognitive development. Although the concept is not new, SEL has gained renewed interest as a critical part of school education.

To CASEL (2013), SEL "refers to the process of developing social and emotional competencies" (p. 9). These key competencies are:

> *The skills to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively. Also, these skills provide the foundation for academic achievement, maintenance of good health, resilience, and civic engagement in a democratic society. (CASEL, 2013, p. 7)*

CASEL's systemic SEL framework recognizes five "Core SEL Competencies", those being:
- Self-awareness: the ability to recognize and assess one's own emotions, feelings, thoughts, values, and behavior;
- Social awareness: the ability to interact socially, ethically, and caringly with people with different perspectives, cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds;
- Self-management: the ability to regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations using different strategies to control stress, impulses, motivation, and goal setting effectively;
- Relationship skills: the ability to maintain positive connections with diverse individuals, peers, teachers, families, and groups through healthy communication and active listening; and
- Responsible decision-making: the ability to make choices grounded on ethical standards and social norms for the well-being of oneself and others. (CASEL, 2013; Oberle et al., 2016)

To CASEL (2017), "demand for SEL is at an all-time high". However, despite its benefits, many schools worldwide still struggle to integrate SEL programs, with challenges such as lack of teacher training, cultural adaptation, and funding.

Undeniably, it is challenging to comprehensively track the progress of all SEL programs in every country worldwide (Kim, 2022). However, countries that have successfully applied SEL, include the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, China (Zakrzewski, 2015), Australia, Canada (Humphrey, 2013), and Korea (Kim, Lim & An, 2022), were able to face barriers in implementing SEL within schools. However, this is not the case in the Middle Eastern context.

Since this paper aims to depict SEL competencies that middle-school students implement in Mount Lebanon, it is important to shed light on the present status of efforts dedicated to promoting *social-emotional growth (SEG)* in students within the Lebanese education sector, especially in middle school. "In Lebanon, research on social-emotional learning (SEL) is scarce" (Massalkhi Farshoukh, 2022, p. 18). "Despite the proven importance of SEL in student success, few efforts have been deployed to streamline SEL to benefit learners in the education system in Lebanon" (Cefai et al., 2020, p.101). These include the "Ana Aqra" model, which helps disadvantaged students falling behind in their education due to emergency displacement, "have their own learning path, transmit that learning from their classroom to their surrounding environment, and later integrate successfully into socio-professional life" (Ana Aqra Association, in press, as cited in Cefai et al., 2020, p.101).

In the Templeton World Charity Foundation seminar video, Dr. Garene Kaloustian, the SEL specialist for World Learning's QITABI 2 programs in Lebanon, has given a complete picture of the status of SEL in Lebanon (Templeton World Charity Foundation, 2022). To note, QITABI stands for Quality Instruction Towards Access and Basic Education Improvement is a program funded by USAID to improve the reading, writing, and social and emotional learning skills of more than 300,000 public primary school students in Lebanon (World Learning, 2021). According to Kaloustian, SEL is not a new concept, but it has never been considered a developmental progression of skill acquisition in Lebanon (Templeton World Charity Foundation, 2022). Since Lebanon has been in a constant crisis mode, different initiatives have always been to help children and people survive, mainly through the offered psychosocial support sessions. In her seminar, Kaloustian explained that the Lebanese educational system focuses more on psychosocial support. Rregardless of its importance, the system is failing to adopt a systematic approach to help students acquire the needed skills to develop. One approach is to integrate SEL education into their curriculum. The problem in Lebanon is that its educational system fails to understand that learning occurs and is supported both by cognitive processes and socio-emotional processes that involve social interactions and trigger emotions and feelings in the learner, not only by cognitive processes (Chatterjee Singh et al., 2020, Templeton World Charity Foundation, 2022). Cefai et al. have discussed this reality by stating:

> *The curricula in Lebanon are designed in a non-holistic manner, leading educators to think about SEL as an independent issue (separate from the education system). In fact, SEL is often regarded as a non-academic contributor to enhancing children's health, safety or citizenship. (2020, p.101)*

Yet, we should not deny the fact that for two and a half consecutive years, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) at its General Directorate of Education (GDE) has

been collaborating with CRDP, World Learning (WL), New York University, Global TIES (NYU-TIES), and Harvard University, dedicating their efforts to implementing the SEL framework in order to equip students with social-emotional competencies across schools in Lebanon (Cefai et al., 2020). Nevertheless, its lack of implementation is noticeable based on what the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2021) has stated:

> *The implementation of this…[framework]… will undoubtedly encounter several challenges. The most important can be grouped under four factors: the capacity of the educational administration at all levels; the available funding; the coordination among the different actors; and the uncertainties that are inherent to the present context, which is characterized by several crises and disruptions along with an unpredictable national, regional, and global environment. (p. 137)*

In view of Elias et al. (1997), the student's social and emotional skills could be supported through classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, a supportive school climate, and their involvement in community service. Generally, and as shown in the literature, the set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills that SEL concentrates on embraces achievement and success not only in school but also in the workplace and interactions and the community overall (Cefai et al., 2020; Coelho et al., 2015; Merrell et al., 2008). Another significant benefit is that without SEL skills, students are more inclined to dislike school and perform poorly on academic tasks, eventually leading them to experience more grade retention and school dropout (Raver & Knitzer, 2002, as cited in Denham, 2016). Similarly, in their study, Bohlin and Hagekull (2009) have explained that poor SEG can lead to disruptive behavioral problems and poor social-emotional competence often associated with delinquency issues, academic failure, behavioral problems in school, and substance use and abuse later in life (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016). SEL is a promising and effective way of improving outcomes for children and adolescents in school settings.

Considering all that, such data should encourage the educational sector in the Middle East, particularly Lebanon's, to deliberately invest in implementing social and emotional developmental milestones and benchmarks.

Socioeconomic Status and its Impact on Social and Emotional Growth (SEG)
Socioeconomic status (SES) refers to an individual's status or social class within society (American Psychological Association, 2020). Research has shown that SES has been widely defined and measured as a quantification combination of parental education, family income, and occupational status (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Therefore, we can also state that "family SES is based primarily on the resources owned" (Bian & Wu, 2021, p.1). These dimensions will be utilized as data-collection instruments in this study. Based on the dimensions mentioned earlier, an individual's SES is placed in either of these three levels: (1) High SES, (2) Middle SES, and (3) Low SES.

Research has also shown that SES significantly impacts children's social-emotional growth (SEG), with children from high-SES families having more resources and opportunities to support their development (Lou et al., 2016), leading to somewhat higher levels of social-

emotional skills compared to individuals from low SES. In contrast, low-SES children face disadvantages that can hinder their cognitive and social-emotional growth (Dow, 2015).

Studies confirm that higher-SES families are equipped with rich recreational, educational, and cultural resources (e.g., toys, books, tutorials) to provide enriching and stimulating environments that develop children's SEG, conversely, children from low-SES families are at a higher risk of facing challenges such as diminished well-being and poor academic results (Mohamed et al., 2018; Kennewell et al., 2022).

Several findings have shown that the emotional regulation self-efficiency level was higher in students whose family income was advantageous (Seyedi-Andi, Bakouei, Adib Rad, Khafri, & Salavati, 2019). Conversely, another finding discussed that low-SES students exhibited social and emotional skills linked to being attuned to other's needs, such as emotion recognition, empathy, and cooperation, due to their exposure to challenging adverse contexts (Kraus et al., 2010). As such, "lower-class individuals, living in more threatening environments, were more empathically attuned to the emotions of others, responsive nonverbally to others' emotions, and interdependent than upper-class individuals" (Stellar et al., 2012, p.450). All these findings can justify that although high-SES students may have higher self-efficacy compared to those from low-SES, low-SES students are more attuned to suffering, and quicker to express compassion than their more affluent counterparts.

Moreover, parents from different SESs tend to practice different parenting styles (Kalil & Ryan, 2020). Educators have claimed that low SES, along with poor parenting skills, affect the SEG of an individual (Zondi, 2020). The differences in parenting style would significantly impact children's social and emotional competencies (Bullinger et al., 2013). For instance, a study conducted by Vijila (2013) aimed to find the relationship between parenting styles, such as authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive, and adolescents' social competence. The study found that the authoritative parenting style positively influences adolescents' social competencies.

Within the Lebanese context, there is a rapidly growing socioeconomic crisis, leaving more than 75% of the population in a state of poverty (Qiblawi, 2020, as cited in Youssef, 2020, pp.1-2). Lebanon is witnessing severe inflation and unemployment, putting thousands of people's basic living costs out of reach (OCHA, 2022) and threatening students' healthy SEG and academic success. According to World Bank (2021), Lebanese students from poorer backgrounds have significantly lower learning outcomes than their wealthier peers. Parents with low socio-economic status are less likely to become engaged in their children's schools, and so are their children (Waanders et al., 2007), leading up to four years of difference in learning outcomes (Work Bank Group, 2018, as cited in Lebanon Education Sector, 2021).

Moreover, various research supports the relationship between family SES and the home environment (Li, Sun, & Dong, 2022). Low income or poverty is a potent cause of distress in family atmosphere such as marital problems, less marital happiness, and greater instability (Amato et al., 2009, as cited by Conger et al., 2010) such as divorce that has been on the rise in Lebanon.

This, in turn, influences the development of children, especially SEG that enables them to socialize with their surrounding environments. In their study, Luo et al. (2016) indicated that school and family interventions are vital for students from low SES backgrounds. When assessing one's SEG, we must recognize the SES dimensions that significantly shape it while creating and implementing interventions that close the gap between the SEG of high-SES students and low-SES students.

Gender Differences in Possessing Social-Emotional Skills in Middle School Students
Research shows that gender plays a noteworthy role in shaping social-emotional skills during adolescence, with boys exhibiting lower social-emotional competencies when compared to girls (Lam et al., 2016). Through the course of this study, gender differences are discussed in relation to the five major elements of SEL: self-awareness, social awareness, self-control, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Fernández-Martín et al., 2022).

When discussing adolescence formation of self-awareness skills, Chen et al. (1998) asserts that "during adolescence, individuals expand their self-awareness from proximal self-concerns about their bodies and immediate family relations to distal self-concerns about their relationship with people and the wider world" (pp.730-731).A study found that mothers' involvement with their adolescents in fostering social and emotional competence is a great advantage (Chen et al., 1998; Mohamed & Toran, 2018), whether for male or female adolescents. Additionally, research has shown a positive relationship between self-awareness or self-efficacy and empathy. Empathy is a crucial component in self-awareness, for it is the ability to understand someone else's feelings or emotions by putting oneself in the person's shoes. In their study, Trentini et al. (2021) investigated gender differences in exhibiting empathy during adolescence. Their findings affirmed that females have more difficulty identifying feelings or differentiating between their and others' emotions, leading them to experience personal distress and self-focused undesired responses when confronted with others' suffering, compared to males (Trentini et al., 2021). Another research by Balakrishna Acharya (2014) found that male adolescents showed higher intrapersonal awareness, meaning they had a higher understanding of their own emotions. Compared to male adolescents, female adolescents were abler to manage emotions in interpersonal relationships (Balakrishna Acharya, 2014). In brief, research has shown that female adolescents possess a subtle self-awareness advantage over male adolescents, as females are not only better in self-awareness but also in social awareness (Bibi & Saqlain, 2016; Ensari, 2017; Bacon et al., 2014, as cited in Perveen et al., 2018). In a recent study aimed at investigating the socio-emotional and socio-cultural perspectives of middle school students towards STEM learning in the U.S., the social awareness factor was significantly different for female and male students. For social awareness in this specific study, male participants had a mean of 3.70, whereas female participants had a mean of 4.04, and a statistically significant difference was found between genders (Portela-Pino et al., 2021). Therefore, female adolescents are more likely to display effective emotional self-awareness compared to male adolescents.

The third component of SEL is self-control, which is a complex and multifaceted construct that reflects the ability to create, uphold and regulate purposeful behavior (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011, as cited in Fryt et al., 2019). Research has proven that most students with self-control can manage much better than others in their paths in life, as they can achieve better results at

any task (Dumciene & Sipaviciene, 2021). Adolescents with poor self-control encounter more difficulties concentrating at school, organizing homework, and developing stable and healthy friendships (Tetering, Laan, Kogel, Groot, & Jolles, 2020). The correlation between gender and self-control is investigated by researchers. On the one hand, few studies have found that males, on average, have lower self-control than females (Gibbs, Giever, & Martin, 1998; Keane, Maxim, & Teevan, 1993; Tittle et al., 2003, as cited in Gibson et al., 2010). On the other hand, some studies found the opposite to be true. Till here, taken all together and other research with similar outcomes (Ajayi et al., 2022; Camarata & Woodcock, 2006; Hamama & Hamama-Raz, 2019), the degree of self-control is higher for female adolescents as compared to male adolescents.

Contrary to the abovementioned findings, other studies have confirmed that males have higher emotional self-regulation than females (Ahmad, Bangash, and Khan, 2009). Hosseini-Kamkar and Morton (2014) justify the different results in the level of acquisition of self-control between the genders, stating that females only sometimes have more self-regulation than males. According to Hosseini-Kamkar and Morton (2014), "sex differences in self-control are not trait-like enduring dimorphisms but rather, these sex differences fluctuate with the changing hormonal environment of the female menstrual cycle" (p.7). Another justifiable answer to the mixed findings of gender differences in self-control may be because of the use of biased criminological measures when examining differences between males and females (Gibson, Ward, Wright, Beaver, & Delisi, 2010).

Therefore, we may conclude that DIF is present when a test or instrument is biased, which will deflate or inflate the actual level of self-control across the genders. (Gibson et al., 2010). Researchers must avoid such instruments to ensure that average differences between groups are close to actual differences and cannot be efficiently disregarded as a function of a subjective test (Gibson et al., 2010).

For centuries, relationship skills, especially peer relationships in both genders, have been considered one of the vital facets of adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009), despite the fact that no significant gender difference has been recorded in the literature. "Some of the studies addressing both gender categories that have focused on exploring differences between boys and girls claimed that boys and girls develop different cultures within their same-gender peer relationships" (Frostad, Sip, & Pijl, 2016, p. 46). After reviewing different literature, Frostad et al. confirmed that "there is an ethnic effect on adolescents, social networks, and peer groups' preferences of friendship criteria" (p. 59). In this technological age, communication platforms have become increasingly important in the lives of adolescents (Dienlin & Johannes, 2020; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). During adolescence, the individual wants autonomy and to establish intimate relationships with others (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, as cited through Bilgin, Şahin, & Togay, 2020).When SEL programs offer adolescents a sense of belonging and respect, they are more likely to internalize acquired skills and apply them in the real world (Yeager, 2017), suggesting that parents create opportunities to empower their children to make decisions. With the explosive growth of technologies, experts of the World Economic Forum (2016), in collaboration with The Boston Consulting Group, have stated that:

Education technology has the potential to play a pivotal role in fostering SEL efficiently and cost-effectively… [it is] a tool that a parent, educator, or caregiver can use to complement and extend the learning experience… These innovations can mix the physical and virtual worlds and facilitating forms of human interaction impossible a decade ago. (p.5)

Finally, the decision-making competency of SEL and gender differences is made apparent during adolescence with many cognitive abilities, such as collecting and processing data, problem-solving, judging, memory, and learning, are developed and improve adolescents' ability to make decisions themselves (Shamma & Asaqli, 2020). Concerning gender differences in decision-making, in adolescence, externalized problems such as risk-taking and antisocial behavior are more frequent in boys, suggesting differences in how boys and girls evaluate risk and make decisions during this period (d'Acremont & Van der Linden, 2006). Consequently, we can state that although adolescence is a dynamic process in which rapid psychological and social growth and development occur, many adolescents, regardless of their genders, can make a final decision in light of the various options presented based on their perspective, social, and environmental conditions.

In summary, gender differences vary from one competency to another. Generally, female adolescents tend to have a higher social and emotional development level than male adolescents (Yeo, Ang, Chong, & Huan, 2007), taking into consideration that this is not always the case (Gibson et al., 2014; Wang, Fan, Tao, & Gao, 2016). In this sense, regardless of students' gender, SEL must be promoted to help all students "coordinate cognition, affect, and behavior that enables people to thrive in diverse cultures and contexts and to achieve specific tasks and positive developmental outcomes" (Mahoney et al., 2020, p. 4). After all, caring, supportive, and well-managed learning environments are the perfect ambiance to teach SEL competencies (Zins & Elias, 2007). Such environments encouraging mutual respect, cooperation, caring, and decision-making will aid adolescents in equipping the skills of autonomy, self-discipline, and morality (Bear, 2010).

Relevant Research on the Middle School Students' Attitudes towards SEL
The literature associated with SEL over the past decade has focused on SEL practices and teacher and parental perceptions of SEL (Calkins, 2019; Taylor et al., 2017), with limited research on adolescents' opinions regarding SEL in schools across the globe. In their report, CASEL (2017) highlights the importance of incorporating the students' voices while planning and implementing an SEL program.

Researchers have identified and examined specific learning outcomes for SEL programs and curriculum (Hulvershorn, 2018). SEL programs support the goals of the restorative practices approach by providing a "coordinated and coherent approach to helping children recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and manage interpersonal situations effectively" to enhance a student's motivation in school (Payton et al., 2008, as cited in Hulvershorn, 2018).

According to Frisby and Martin (2010) student-student rapport is strongly related to the development of a positive classroom climate. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) found that the overall climate of a school and the climate of individual classrooms can have a positive or negative influence on a school's effectiveness and ultimately student performance. When tackling the social-emotional climate of a classroom, we can visualize the relationships between and among students and teachers that are "supportive and caring interactions, positive feelings, a shared sense of cohesion and respect, and teachers' sensitivity to student needs" (Hagelskamp, Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2013, p. 2). Taking all these into consideration, we conclude that perceptions of the middle school students concerning their SEL program, and the restorative practices implemented at school, including the school climate, will stand as an excellent opportunity for the educational stakeholders to pause, reflect, and assess if any weaknesses in not effectively executing the SEL curriculum.

Another SEL curriculum is CharacterStrong which "focuses on community building and interpersonal relationships between educators and students and among peers" (Cook, 2022, p. 2). Cook (2022) has investigated the perception of senior English class students' perceptions of the integrated CharacterStrong curriculum. The results found that:

> *Students felt a strong sense of community in the classroom, were able to realize their emotional needs and develop friendships because of the CharacterStrong units, but they still felt that they lacked the necessary skills to express their emotions effectively or be respected by their peers. (Cook, 2022, p.10)*

Emotional regulation becomes more sophisticated during adolescence, requiring different teaching strategies to ensure adolescents can navigate and manage their interaction with others (Guyer, Silk, & Nelson, 2016; Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006).

"We know that emotions affect how and what we learn that caring relationships provide the foundation for lasting learning, and that critical SEL skills and knowledge can be taught" (Zins & Elias, 2007, p.3). Middle school students or adolescents will not turn down opportunities to feel supported by their relationships and environments while celebrating their strengths (National Center on Safe Supportive Environments, n.d.). Middle school students are aware that the implementation of SEL programs decline as they do the transition from elementary to middle school (Gulbrandson, 2019).

To this date, "Most of the SEL studies have taken place in U.S. schools" (Cristóvão, Candeias, & Verdasca, 2017, p. 10). Today more than ever, education in the United States persists in teaching academics and developing a "competent citizenry made up of independent and critical thinkers who could work effectively with others and contribute to a democratic society" (Greenberg et al., 2017, p. 16) through the implemented SEL programs.

Research findings show that interventions based on developing social-emotional learning skills are an essential common point that should be emphasized in studies conducted to increase academic achievement and happiness levels (Greenberg et al., 2017). Nevertheless, more progress needs to be made toward identifying evidence-based programs for this age group (Rosen et al., 2022), especially since the need for well-designed studies examining

middle school student programs across grades has been pointed out before (e.g., Domitrovich et al., 2017). Issues hindering this progress in developing evidence-based programs could be the different logistical and funding challenges (Rosen et al., 2022). Besides, "designing developmentally appropriate SEL programs requires an understanding of the unique challenges students face at different points in development" (Rosen, et al., 2022, p.7). Adolescence, being a critical developmental period, underscores the need for developmentally appropriate SEL programs that are responsive to the needs of middle school students of a few crucial features, such as adopting a more comprehensive program that includes both teaching multiple SEL skills and assessing students' competencies across core SEL competencies (Rosen, Hudson, Rotermund, Roberts, & Mackey, 2022).

Undeniably, teachers' attitudes are crucial in implementing SEL practices throughout a classroom (Brackett et al., 2011). Wanless & Domitrovich (2015) indicated the recent evidence that teacher-related factors could affect the implementation of SEL programs in ways that may influence a program's quality and success. Their roles cannot be underestimated, as Jennings and Greenberg (2009) confirm:

> *Socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons and building on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioral guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as a role model for respectful and appropriate communication and exhibitions of prosocial behavior. (p.246)*

Hence, a teacher's proficiency in managing their social and emotional competencies and sense of well-being is crucial in developing and maintaining a prosocial classroom (Main and O'Neil, 2018). As students enter middle school, they learn how to manage new demands in school and social life while dealing with new, intense positive and negative emotions, as they feel they do not require adult guidance (Yeager, 2017). SEL programs are confirmed to be a successful way to help adolescents navigate the demanding situations they face during their significant development period (Backes & Bonnie, 2019; Yeager, 2017). Besides, "emerging research and popular texts indicate that students' mindsets, beliefs, dispositions, emotions and behaviors can advance outcomes, such as college readiness, career success, mental health and relationships" (Allbright, Marsh, Kennedy, Hough, & McKibben, 2019, p. 35). Per say, the different challenges faced by adolescence affect their behavior and mental health leaving long-lasting consequence into adulthood (Yeager, 2017).

Schools should strive for a collaborative partnership of not only parents, teachers, and stakeholders, but also students while planning effective SEL implementation. Students' perceptions and attitudes remain crucial in successfully implementing and evaluating SEL programs besides the gained perceptions of other educational stakeholders. A recent qualitative study examining principals' and teachers' perceptions of SEL and its impact on student academic achievement in schools in Lebanon showed that principals and teachers are aware of the positive aspects of SEL, admitting the significance of modifying the Lebanese school system for students by embedding SEL programs within the Lebanese curriculum

(Farshoukh, 2022). Looking back at the positive aspects of SEL in promoting personal and social and emotional development that is essential for their education and success in the diverse life demands (Oberle et al., 2016; Weissberg, 2016), more efforts and research must be made across countries and regions to mediate the gap in the literature in this area, especially in Lebanon (Farshoukh, 2022).

Lastly, with the national challenges escalating in Lebanon, social-emotional learning (SEL) has become more critical than at any other point, inviting everyone in the educational sector to discover more about adolescence and how environmental factors, both internal and external, influence their experiences and the way they respond to stressors in their lives. Such insights will ease the process of creating and supporting SEL programs at schools, especially at the middle school level, knowing that it gives students the tools to effectively and efficiently face various daily situations and challenges, while increasing their satisfaction and productivity (Oberle et al., 2016; Weissberg, 2016).

To conclude, it is essential to review the existing literature on adolescents' amd middle school students' acquisition and implementation of social and emotional competencies, focusing on SES variables, gender-based differences, and other factors. Therefore, to better understand the gaps in students' implementation of social and emotional competencies in the El Metn district of Mount Lebanon, a comprehensive review of the following study is needed. This will help bridge the knowledge gap in social-emotional learning (SEL) in Lebanon (Massalkhi Farshoukh, 2022).

Such an overview may offer a comprehensive perspective to educational stakeholders, guiding efforts to address the mental health and psychosocial needs of Lebanese adolescents, who spend a significant portion of their time at school. Figure 1 summarizes prior research, illustrating the primary purpose of this study: to examine the acquisition and implementation of social and emotional competencies among private middle school students in the El Metn district of Mount Lebanon.
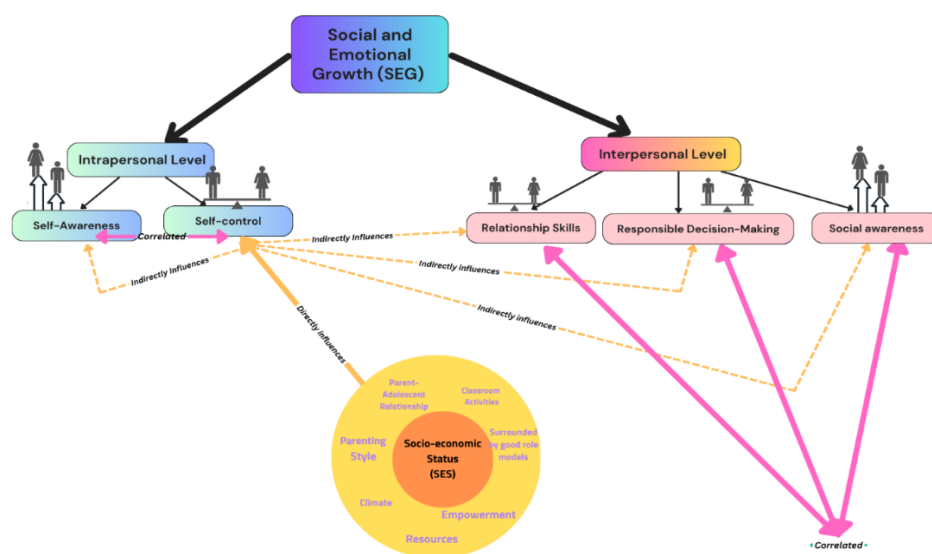

Figure 1: Theoretical Model of this Research

METHOD

The data collection method was a self-completion questionnaire, aimed at reaching a broader group of participants. It was administered in person to ensure consistent understanding among the students. All ethical considerations and procedures were followed, adhering to protocols that ensure the physical and emotional safety of the participants.

Study Population and Sampling

Participants in this study were middle school students aged 13-15 from six private schools located in Mount Lebanon. All students were invited to participate, regardless of their academic or behavioral performances. Researchers collected data from 165 participants, distributed evenly across grade levels: 55 students from grade 7 (33.3%), 55 from grade 8 (33.3%), and 55 from grade 9 (33.3%). The equal distribution across grades was coincidental. The sample included 82 male adolescents (49.7%) and 83 female adolescents (50.3%).

Instrument

In the search for available SEL measurement and assessment tools, it was noted that "research in Lebanon has not yet generated social and emotional developmental milestones and benchmarks that are validated and standardized for the Lebanese context" (Cefai et al., 2022, p.101). Given its recency and alignment with this research5's main objective, the Social and Emotional Learning Scale from a peer-reviewed article, "Adolescents' Emotions in Spanish Education: Development and Validation of the Social and Emotional Learning Scale", by Francisco D. Fernández-Martín, Antonio-José Moreno-Guerrero, José-Antonio Marín-Marín, and José-María Romero-Rodríguez (2022), was adopted. Referring to the views of Fernández-Martín et al. (2022):

> *The Social and Emotional Learning Scale is of satisfactory metric quality and provides a detailed and consolidated picture of adolescents' level of self-awareness, social awareness, self-control, interpersonal skills and responsible decision making, which provides students with an instrument that can help to understand their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and to establish mechanisms for their improvement. (p.1)*

After receiving the approval of Fernández-Martín et al.'s (2022), the researchers adopted the original "Social and Emotional Learning Scale," as this study's instrument. The five domains in this instrument are: (1) self-awareness, (2) social awareness, (3) self-control, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making. Within each domain, there are five statements that respondents must rate using the Likert scale, except for the self-control domain, which includes ten statements. All in all, the original instrument consisted of 30 items across five main domains.

In the instrument, each of these domains has a definite purpose in assessing a distinct social and emotional domain in a respondent's SEG. Understanding the purpose behind each variable will act as a powerful tool while analyzing the data of this study and making the connections with previous literature.

The five SEL variables are defined as follows:

1. Self-Awareness: The ability to recognize one's strengths and weaknesses, and to describe one's emotions, feelings, and moods.
2. Social Awareness: The capacity to empathize, understand others' feelings, and act appropriately while respecting individual differences.
3. Self-Control: The ability to regulate thoughts and behavior, manage challenges, and set intentional goals to achieve desired outcomes.
4. Relationship Skills: Confidence and self-esteem to engage with a community, collaborate with others, and provide assistance when needed.
5. Responsible Decision-Making: The practice of making moral decisions by considering cultural, environmental, and social factors.

Furthermore, researchers added 14 more items to collect pertinent demographic data. The first 11 items in the survey were added in alignment with the research questions targeting the participant's demographic profile—the components of gender and socioeconomic status. The last three items in the survey were added to give a better picture of the middle school students' perception and understanding of the importance of SEL within their education.

Data Analytic Plan
The data analysis process started with a descriptive analysis and correlation that were used to address the first research question (RQ1). The Likert scale ranged with the following assigned scores: "*strongly disagree*" was assigned a value of 1, "*disagree*" a value of 2, "*neutral*" a value of 3, "*agree*" a value of 4, and "*strongly agree*" a value of 5. This scoring system allowed for the quantification of attitudes, and the measurement of social and emotional competencies. Following the interpretation guidelines of Wanjohi et al. (2021), the mean scores were categorized as follows: 1.0-2.4 (Negative attitude), 2.5-3.4 (Neutral attitude), and 3.5-5.0 (Positive attitude). The Likert scale was then expanded into a rubric format to assess the extent to which middle school students possess SEL competencies in Lebanese private schools, as detailed in Table 1.

The second part of the analysis shifted beyond the rating scale interpretation to include two statistical methods: the *t*-Test and ANOVA. A *t*-Test was used to compare means between two groups or clusters (Mishra et al., 2019), while ANOVA compared means across three or more clusters (Mishra et al., 2019). ANOVA was applied to the second research question (RQ2) wo determine whether middle school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds significantly differed in their SEL competencies compared to those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The *t*-Test was utilized to assess potential gender differences in the possession of socio-emotional competencies among middle school students. Overall, the data gathered from this study aimed to provide a clear understanding of middle school students' comprehension and implementation of SEL competencies in Lebanese private schools.

Table 1: Five-point Likert Rating Scale Interpretation of Weighted Means

Scale	Range-Value	Verbal Interpretation	Further Explanation
1	1.00-1.49	Do not implement it	The middle school students don't implement the following practice/competency
2	1.50-	Struggle to	The middle school students sometimes attempt to

	2.49	implement it	implement the following practice, and when they implement it, they have difficulty implementing it.
3	2.50-3.49	Implement it reasonably well	The middle school students attempt to implement the following practice; however, with more practice and/or some support, they could implement it well
4	3.50-4.49	Generally implement it well	The middle school students implement the following practice well regularly but do not implement it perfectly.
5	4.5-5.00	Implement it extremely well	The middle school students consider the following practice among their regular daily practices

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social and Emotional Competencies of Students in Private Middle Schools in Mount Lebanon

To illustrate the results in this section, the five-point Likert scale interpretation of the weighted mean rubric was used. The findings indicate that middle school students from Private Schools in Mount Lebanon exhibit social and emotional competencies to varying degrees, with mean scores ranging from 3.33 to 3.82. These variations will be discussed in detail throughout the rest of this section. Specifically, the results suggest that students are most adept at implementing and mastering relationship skills, with self-control being the least developed competency. The other three competencies - (1) responsible decision-making; (2) social awareness, and (3) self-awareness – fall between these two.

It is reasonable to conclude that many middle school students already demonstrate a range of social and emotional competencies as they enter middle school, likely developed during their preschool and elementary school years. Nonetheless, the degree to which they possess or apply these competencies may vary based on the complex emotions and social situations they experience during the challenging transition from elementary to middle school (Kraus et al., 2010; National Center on Safe Supportive Environments, n.d.; Yeo et al., 2007).

On an interpersonal level, students who exhibit strong relationship skills are able to maintain positive connections with peers and teachers through effective communication, cooperation, and effective conflict resolution (CASEL, 2013; Oberle et al., 2016). This is evidenced by the ratings of statements under the relationship skills competency, which respondents rated the extent they agree with each statement on a 1-5 scale (from 1 being "*strongly disagree*" to 5 being "*strongly agree*") which were further interpreted based on the five-point rating scale interpretation.

Table 2: Middle School Students' Possession of SEL Relationship Skills Competency

	N	Mean
1. I use appropriate verbal language when conversing with friends, family, classmates, etc.	165	3,56
2. I am confident in my ability to work as part of a team in class.	165	3.76
3. I treat all members of my team in class in the same way, politely and respectfully.	165	3.86
4. In offer help and help others when I think they need it.	165	4.07
5. I get on well with my classmates.	165	3.88
Total Average-Relationships Skills	**165**	**3.82**

Respondents highly agreed with statements such as "I treat all team members in class in the same way, politely and respectfully" (3.86) and "I get on well with my classmates" (3.88)—both statements inferring the maintaining of positive connections with others, though not perfectly. During adolescence, students strive to "fit in" and find social belonging (Schall et al., 2014, p. 470), aiming to make their school experience enjoyable (Kindermann 2016, as cited in Kiuru et al., 2019). However, peer relationships can be inconsistent during this transitional period, as not all adolescents are willing to "sacrifice one's sense of self to conform to a desired social peer group" (Kiuru et al., 2019, p. 469). This explains why the statement "I offer help and help others when they [whether they are friends, family, classmates] need it" received the highest rating (4.07), reflecting students' strong tendency to assist others regularly. Nevertheless, not all students may excel in relationship skills within the social and emotional framework.

Students who experience positive relationships tend to better develop relationship skills. However, those unable to resist inappropriate social pressure or seek help when needed may struggle with this competency, particularly if their school does not emphasize the importance of SEL. Such challenges can affect students' confidence, which is essential for overcoming challenges and establishing a positive self-image (Kim et al., 2021). Likewise, a rating of 3.76 on "I am confident in my ability to work as part of a team in class" statement affirms that although middle school students have higher relationship skills competency compared to other SEL competencies, there is still room for the mastery of this skill. Adults, whether teachers, parents, or caregivers, play a vital role in fostering and guiding their middle school students' relationships (Office of Population Affairs, 2022—as referenced in chapter 3). Consistent guidance can pave the way for students to master relationship skills (e.g., Kiuru et al., 2019).

Exposure to good role models with effective communication skills can help students develop healthier relationships. *For example, the statement* "I use appropriate verbal language when conversing with friends, family, classmates, etc." scored the lowest (3.56) compared to other statements associated with relationship skills, also suggesting that middle school students may not regularly practice healthy communication. Lebanon, where bilingualism and trilingualism are common (Arabic, English, and French), adolescents often switch between languages. Subsequently, this can lead to challenges in communication, as not all students are proficient in all three languages, and mixing structures may lead to misunderstandings. Henceforth, although middle school students attempt to implement the social and emotional competency of relationship skills, they need further acquisition of its components to regularly establish healthy relationship skills.

On an interpersonal level, social awareness is another competency that encompassing abilities such as embracing others' differences and being empathetic and considering of others' mindsets and moods with care and sympathy (CASEL, 2013; Beamish & Bryer, 2015, as cited in Huynh, 2018; Oberle et al., 2016). In line with this description, students were assessed on the values of empathy, respect, open mindsets, and understanding others' verbal and nonverbal communication cues, all being key aspects of social awareness.

Middle school students have scored highest (Mean = 3.99) on the statement "I can easily recognize how another person is feeling by their facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc." compared to other aspects of social awareness. This suggests that empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is a notable strength for these students. Empathy helps adolescents understand what others feel and why, yet the results indicate a lower mean score of 3.50 for statements related to understanding the reason behind others' feelings (e.g., "it is easy for me to understand why people feel the way they do" and "if someone close to me is sad or happy, upset or nervous, I have a pretty good idea why"). The gap might stem from the complexities of adolescence along with the escalating crisis in Lebanon, making it hard for any middle school student to interpret the reasons behind their peers' emotions. Factors such as mixed emotions and unpleasant social situations can significantly impact how adolescents feel, complicating their ability to understand others' emotions fully.

Empathy also motivates people to care for and assist others, which aligns with the high score (Mean = 4.07) on the relationship skills statement, "I offer help and help others when I think they need it". Research has shown that relationship skills are closely tied to social awareness (Brian, 2022). As such, we notice a slight insignificant difference of 0.13 between the two competencies: (1) Relationship Skills (Mean = 3.82) and (2) Social Awareness (Mean = 3.69). Additionally, Table 3 shows a strong correlation ($|r| = 0.310$) between social awareness and relationship skills, falling within the range of 0.3 to 0.5. This correlation highlights a significant connection between these two competencies, as further illustrated in Table 3, which depicts correlations among all five SEL competencies.

These findings align with the notion of empathy, which improves interactions and relationship skills with family, friends, and even strangers. Per se, empathy can lead people to be more caring and helpful toward one another. Undoubtedly, the more students can empathize with others (social awareness), the better they can manage and resolve conflicts through effective communication (relationship skills).

Regarding the decision-making social-emotional competency, results show that middle school students need to be more competent in looking at the bigger picture before making responsible decisions. In other words, there is a minor difference in how middle schoolers approach decision-making, as reflected in the following statements: (1) "When I have to make a decision or face a problem… (1) I think of all possible options or coping strategies before I act or decide." (Mean = 3.63); (2) "I consider the advantages and disadvantages of each option or strategy before acting or deciding" (Mean = 3.64); and (3) "I check that my decisions or actions are having positive results" (Mean = 3.65). Therefore, such results demonstrate that middle schoolers do not take sufficient time to make well-considered decisions, which could help them avoid risky behaviors.

Table 3: Correlations Across the SEL Competencies

		Self-Awareness	Social Awareness	Self-Control	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision Making
Self-Awareness	Pearson Correlation	1	.317**	.659**	.239**	.289**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.002	.000
	N	165	165	165	165	165

Social Awareness	Pearson Correlation	.317**	1	.349**	.310**	.279**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	165	165	165	165	165
Self-Control	Pearson Correlation	.659**	.349**	1	.343**	.427**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	165	165	165	165	165
Relationship Skills	Pearson Correlation	.239**	.310**	.343**	1	.575**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.000		.000
	N	165	165	165	165	165
Responsible Decision Making	Pearson Correlation	.289**	.279**	.427**	.575**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	165	165	165	165	165
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).						

On the basis of correlation, a slight difference of 0.01 between the means of Responsible Decision-Making (Mean = 3.70) and Social Awareness (Mean = 3.69) carries a positive implication. The minor difference suggests that not only are relationship skills and social awareness interrelated, but these two competencies are also closely linked with decision-making— although no significant difference was found in the correlation matrix. According to Huynh (2018), social awareness and responsible decision-making are the basic elements of SEL, as there is a close correlation between the two competencies. From a detailed analysis, we can infer that the more middle school students possess strong relationship skills and social awareness, the better they can understand and respect those around them, leading to more ethical standards and socially responsible decisions. This interpretation perfectly aligns with Huynh's (2018) statement: "The clearer students are aware of other people [relationship skills and social awareness competencies], the more responsible the decisions are [responsible decision-making competency]." (p.7)

Self-awareness is another crucial SEL component, which takes us from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal level. Holding an average mean of 3.49, ratings for the Self-Awareness statements ranged from 2.89 to 4.01. Self-awareness enables adolescents to identify and evaluate their emotions, feelings, thoughts, values, and actions (CASEL, 2013; Oberle et al., 2016). Research has implied that self-awareness is a precondition for developing social awareness (Trentini et al., 2021). However, among middle school students, self-awareness ranked lower than social awareness, with a difference of 0.2 in mean scores. The statement "I can easily describe my emotions" had the lowest mean (2.89), which contributed to the overall lower average of self-awareness. Adolescents encounter diverse emotions as they undergo significant changes in multiple areas—physiological, emotional, social, and cognitive— during their transition from elementary to middle school (Burkitt et al., 2019). Burkitt et al. (2019) cited Larson and Brown (2007) to describe adolescent emotional development as a wave-like pattern of fluctuating emotions, often dominated by negative expressions. Such negative emotions can lead to poor psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Burkitt et al., 2019). Understanding these mixed emotions in oneself and others is crucial during adolescence (Burkitt et al., 2019).

Emotional clarity, or the ability to identify and articulate one's emotions, is often challenging for adolescents (Freed et al., 2016). Within the Lebanese context, middle schoolers struggle with emotional clarity because they are overwhelmed with academic demands, leaving little time to express of share their feelings. Nevertheless, learning to express emotions remains a fundamental facet of healthy social-emotional development. Herewith, different educational stakeholders, such as educational policymakers, educational scholars, school administrators, educators, and parents, play an important role in Lebanon. Hence, such educational stakeholders must recognize the importance of fostering social-emotional development in adolescents to promote positive outcomes, including boosting academic performance and achievement in the short and long term.

Environmental experiences and neurobiology both contribute to and interact in shaping different emotional experiences, which can change depending on the context (Burkitt et al., 2019). Adolescents move through various contexts throughout the day, such as from home to school, which influences their emotional clarity and overall self-awareness. In this study, the sample population did not demonstrate full competency in self-awareness. However, correlation among the five SEL competencies confirmed existing research suggesting that self-awareness is a prerequisite for establishing social awareness (Trentini et al., 2021), Specifically, the study showed a strong correlation between self-awareness and social awareness ($|r| = 0.317$). Donath (2001) confirmed that:

> *Awareness empowers individuals, as it gives them the ability to understand their position in a given system and use that knowledge to operate more effectively. In social interactions, people want to be aware of their own presentation, of what is appropriate in the given context, and how others perceive them. (p.44)*

Hence, self-awareness promotes social awareness. Understanding one's feelings and thoughts (self-awareness) allows for more effective social and ethical interactions with people from diverse cultures and perspectives (social awareness). On the other hand, self-control or self-regulation within the same intrapersonal domain was rated the lowest by middle school students, indicating the greatest need for support among the SEL competencies, with a mean score of 3.33.

Li et al. (2020) affirm that self-control plays a significant role in adolescent development. Students with the skill of controlling themselves can regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors across various situations, while also considering their social norms, moral values, and goals (CASEL, 2013; Oberle et al., 2016). The study results indicate that participants' rating of self-control-related statements ranged between 2.76 and 3.74. To elaborate, four out of the ten statements scored means in the lower range of 2.50-3.49, namely "Whatever happens to me, I can keep calm" (Mean = 2.76); "When I am angry with someone, I calm down first and then talk to him/her about it" (Mean = 2.92); "I resist any temptation or distraction while doing my homework" (Mean = 2.98); and "I know how to stay calm when I am under pressure" (Mean = 3.01). These results suggest that middle school students attempt to apply self-control skills, but do not do so consistently or effectively, indicating a need for further guidance and support in these areas. The remaining statements had mean scores ranging from 3.50 to 4.49, indicating that middle school students generally practice self-control

behaviors, albeit not regularly. These statements are: "I concentrate easily on the schoolwork I have to do" (Mean = 3.50); "I carefully plan my homework according to my goals" (Mean = 3.50); "If I commit to a school assignment, I do it because I know how to motivate myself" (Mean = 3.55); "I am clear about my school goals" (Mean = 3.67); "I am able to work effectively to achieve long-term school goals" (Mean = 3.68); "I am disciplined (i.e., I follow certain routines to do my homework accurately)" (Mean = 3.74). Such results confirm that middle school students prioritize their academic responsibilities and strive to complete assignments to the best of their abilities. However, their impulsive behavior hinders their ability to regulate emotions and reflexes, which affects their capacity to make good decisions in the long run. This correlation will be further explored in the following section.

As evidenced, there are three significant strong correlations on the level of self-control: (1) self-control and relationship skills ($|r|$ = 0.343); (2) self-control and social awareness ($|r|$ = 0.349); and (3) self-control and responsible decision-making ($|r|$ = 0.427). Given the importance of peer relationships in adolescent development, these findings suggest that positive self-regulation in adolescents can enhance their social interactions. For instance, Farleyand Kim-Spoon (2014) claims that adolescents who self-regulate behaviorally are more socially competent since they are inclined to be more sensitive to others and engage in more pro-social activities, eventually influencing their image in front of their peers and owning their friendship and respect. Evidence shows that high-quality relationships with peers and friends can promote adolescent self-regulation skills, but poor-quality relationships with peers are associated with degradation in self-regulation skills (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). Tetering et al. (2020) proved that adolescents with poor self-control encounter more difficulties concentrating at school, organizing homework, and developing stable and healthy friendships. Taken together, self-regulation and social relationships in adolescence are interrelated, meaning a caring peer environment will influence an adolescent's emotional regulation reserves and vice versa. Similarly, the ability to emotionally self-control could help lessen conflict in relationships and thus maintain supportive relations with others.

Taking this into account, there is a strong correlation between self-control and social awareness ($|r|$ =0.349). Earlier, we also confirmed a correlation between social awareness and relationship skills with ($|r|$ = 0.310). Herein, Silvia and O'Brien (2004) assert that "self-awareness enables people to internalize standards of conduct, appraise whether or not they are meeting them, and reflect upon their actions in light of broader principles" (p. 5). Hence, we can conclude that self-control is inherently linked to social awareness. Per se, students who can internalize positive standards of conduct (self-awareness) to interact empathetically with others (social awareness) are better equipped to regulate their emotions, manage their acts, and achieve their goals effectively (self-control).

The third and last correlation on the level of self-control competency in SEL is between self-control and responsible decision-making ($|r|$ = 0.427). Hare et al. (2009) explain that optimal decision-making requires self-control. In his book, Byrnes (2013) relates the decision-making process within the framework of context, stating, "a context can be defined as a situation involving actors [need to make a decision] at a certain time and place" (p.7). To Byrnes, context plays a vital role because it includes the culture in which the decision maker should consider their actions when making responsible decisions. This is where self-control becomes

essential, as it allows individuals to regulate their emotions and thoughts, enabling them to make well-considered decisions that align with their surrounding context.

All in all, middle school students in private schools in Lebanon possess and implement the five competencies within the social-emotional spectrum at varying levels. Considering the data, the variation pendulum in the middle school students' attainment of social and emotional competencies is ordered as follow: (1) Relationship Skills (Mean = 3.82); (2) Responsible Decision-Making (Mean = 3.70); (3) Social Awareness (Mean = 3.69); (4) Self-Awareness (Mean = 3.49); and (5) Self-Control (Mean = 3.33). It is evident that students demonstrated a positive attitude in most of the statements related to social and emotional competencies since most of the means were above 3.50 except for two SEL competencies, namely self-control (3.33) and self-awareness (3.49). In other words, with weighted means between 2.50 and 3.49, the 165 participants attempt to implement self-control and self-awareness competencies, however, not consistently at the desired levels. This suggests that, with additional practice and support, their proficiency in these areas could be improved. As shown respondents demonstrated a higher level of competency in relationship skills (3.82) than in decision-making (3.70) and social awareness (3.69), with a slight difference of nearly ≈0.10 across these categorical variables. Thus, the results illustrate that middle school students mainly implement three SEL competencies; yet not on a regular basis, which could be ordered as follows: (1) Relationship Skills (3.82); (2) Decision-Making (3.70); and (3) Social Awareness (3.69). Conversely, the respondents had a neutral attitude in most statements related to the SEL Self-Awareness (3.49) and self-control competency (3.33) suggesting that these areas require further attention and support to reach the standards observed in other SEL competencies.

In short, the findings show that the respondents effectively employed relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and social awareness. However, based on the range of values and the aforementioned interpretations, middle school students need to utilize these skills more regularly and ideally. Besides, there is a noticeable gap in the middle schools' utilization of social-emotional self-awareness and self-control competencies. Since the mean average of self-awareness and self-control fall into the 2.50 to 3.49 range, it is interpreted that middle school students put effort into applying these skills. Nevertheless, their application needs to reach the desired and expected level set by educational stakeholders. That said, to achieve the desired levels of self-awareness and self-control in their daily life, intervention from educational stakeholders is essential. To elaborate, parents and teachers must support and guide the students in adequately utilizing these skills more frequently and adequately. Only then will middle school students operate these skills in different contexts, especially when facing challenges. Eventually, stakeholders should focus on helping middle school students regulate and modify their responses to promote desirable behaviors, while minimizing undesirable ones. In the long run, this approach will improve students' academic achievement and social outcomes, as indicated by the significant correlation among the five SEL variables outlined in the correlation matrix table.

Such data or findings align with recent research (Templeton World Charity Foundation, 2022) highlighting the absence of any intention within the Lebanese educational system to adopt a systematic approach to help adolescents acquire essential competencies for healthy and

successful development. When students transition from elementary to middle school, they often experience a decline in their motivation and an increase in behavioral issues (Eccles et al., 2004, as cited in Neth et al., 2019). Also, it is crucial to note that most respondents may have already developed some of these competencies during their childhood or preschool years, as we inferred in the previous section. The competencies they have developed function as their strengths, while those they have not yet acquired present as their weaknesses. If not properly addressed, these weaknesses may become challenges for adolescents at both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

Actions aimed at targeting adolescents' weaknesses, especially when taken by schools, can have a profound and long-lasting impact on their physical and psychological wellbeing into adulthood (Patton et al., 2018, as cited in Li et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) (1994) in Lebanon stated the significance of forming students who "consolidate peace within the self and others through relationships and through national and social relationships" (p.12). It is the role of the caregivers and teachers to support adolescent students by addressing and focusing on their strengths to help them grow into healthy citizens in the future. The absence of implementing programs or initiatives designed to create a supportive environment for adolescents' social and emotional competencies was evident in the responses from the last section of the questionnaire. This part explored students' understanding and perceptions of SEL at their schools. The results provide evidence of middle school students' positive attitude towards an agreement regarding the importance of SEL at schools.

The highest mean among the three statements was observed for "Teachers should encourage me to work hard to develop skills to better cope with everyday challenges and benefit academically and socially" with a mean of 4.17 (83.4%). This primary finding is consistent with existing research, which suggests that teachers in Lebanon give more importance to academic subjects, often leaving little time for imparting important life skills that equip adolescents with the necessary skills to face challenging situations. With 80.6 % agreement, participants emphasized the critical role of teachers in implementing activities that promote social and emotional development, rather than solely focusing on academics, which can seem unengaging to students. Besides, participants recognized the importance of implementing SEL in school curricula, recognizing its positive outcomes (Mean = 4.00,80%). Indeed, there is a need for the Lebanese curriculum to incorporate established SEL programs (Farshoukh, 2022) to effectively enhance the social and emotional competencies of middle school students in private schools.

Social and Emotional Competencies: Differences Among Socioeconomic Statuses
The statistical method of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was utilized to assess potential significant differences in the acquisition of social and emotional competencies among middle school students from varying socioeconomic statuses. ANOVA was chosen as the most appropriate approach since it allows for the comparison of sub-factors with more than two categories, effectively measuring the variance between group means and within-group means to determine if they are homogeneous. In the ANOVA results (refer to Table 4), the analysis included comparisons between different grades (7, 8, and 9) as well as within those grades (7-8-9) to explore potential differences in the competencies based on socioeconomic status. The

objective was to identify which competencies or variables showed a significant level of variance across those groups.

Table 4: Middle School Students' Possession of SEL Competencies from Different SESs

		Sum of Squares	Df	F	Sig.
Average Self-Awareness	Between Groups	3.299	3	2.581	.055
	Within Groups	68.584	161		
	Total	71.883	164		
Average Social Awareness	Between Groups	.567	3	.443	.723
	Within Groups	68.678	161		
	Total	69.245	164		
Average Self-Control	Between Groups	4.411	3	3.372	.020
	Within Groups	70.213	161		
	Total	74.624	164		
Average Relationship Skills	Between Groups	1.087	3	.949	.419
	Within Groups	61.465	161		
	Total	62.552	164		
Average Responsible Decision-Making	Between Groups	2.468	3	1.911	.130
	Within Groups	69.337	161		
	Total	71.805	164		

According to the findings in Table 4, it can be stated that among the social-emotional learning (SEL) components, only the self-control variable demonstrates a significant level below 0.05, specifically at 0.020. Self-awareness, on the other hand, showed a significance of 0.055, which is slightly above the 0.05 threshold, indicating that it is not significantly interrelated to family SES. For the remaining SEL components—social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—their significance levels were all above 0.05, as shown in Table 4. Consequently, responsible decision making (Mean = 0.130), relationship skills (Mean = 0.419), and social awareness (Mean = 0.723) did not show significant correlations with family SES.

Therefore, the participants' only variable that shows significance from all competencies/variables (i.e., self-awareness, social awareness, self-control, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) is self-control. "Self-control enables adolescents to inhibit undesired actions, emotions, and cognitions and to strengthen desired ones for the sake of long-term adaptation" (Kim et al., 2022, p. 1182). However, self-control remains unstable during adolescence, influenced by various factors that can affect its development (Kim et al., 2022). SES is one such factor that has been broadly associated with self-control (Brieant et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2022) further suggests that family functioning plays a crucial role in shaping an adolescents' self-control. Supporting this, a study by Hostinar et al. (2015) found that lower SES was often related to a harsher family environment, increasing adolescents' stress and mental health problems, and, in turn, declining their self-control.

Researchers have discussed that adolescents exhibiting lower levels of self-control are more prone to risk-taking behavior (Brieant et al., 2021; Urdan & Pajares, 2003). Neurobiological changes play a significant role, as the socioemotional system develops rapidly during puberty,

increasing the drive toward stimulation and reward, while the cognitive control systems lag, resulting in poorer self-control (Jia et al., 2021).

In Lebanon, adolescent risk behaviors primarily include addiction to cigarettes, waterpipes, alcohol, the internet (Nakhoul et al., 2020) as well as anti-social behavior (i.e. aggression, rule-breaking, and neglect,) (Mahfoud et al., 2011). "Studies on adolescents' own motivations for engaging in risky behavior (i.e. cannabis use, alcohol use, and tobacco smoking) show that the most frequently mentioned motives by adolescents were being cool/tough, enjoyment, belonging, having fun and experimenting and coping" (Defoe et al., 2022, p.1). In addition, the risk of suicide is also common during adolescence (Chahine et al., 2020). Even through there is insufficient data on suicidality in the eastern Mediterranean region (Baroud et al., 2019), still, a national study indicated that 16% of 5115 Lebanese students aged 13–15 considered suicide (Mahfoud et al., 2011). In a more recent study, researchers have found a high prevalence of suicidal thoughts (28.9%) among 1810 Lebanese adolescents attending private schools across the Lebanese Mohafazat (Beirut, Mount Lebanon, North, South, and Bekaa) (Chahine et al., 2020). Purdie et al. (2004) highlighted the importance of parent-adolescent relationships in developing adolescent self-control. In agreement with Purdie et al. (2004), Balocchini et al. (2013) stated that parents can aid their adolescents to overcome this sensitive phase by listening, offering support, and guidance.

In their study, Nakhoul et al. (2020) found that a secure attachment style is significantly associated with lower addiction to alcohol, cigarette, and water pipe. Within the Lebanese context, research has shown that adolescents coming from middle SES exhibited higher impulse control and ethical values due to their parents, who were excellent role models in emotional control and following good manners (Urdan & Pajares, 2003).

The study's conclusion aligns with the findings from applying the Tukey HSD test to assess self-control across three SES levels: (1) High SES, (2) Middle SES, and (3) Low SES. As depicted in *Table 5*, the increase in the participant's family status leads to the increase in the mean average of the participant's acquisition of self-control competency.

Table 5: Tukey HSD: Average of Self-Control by Participant with Different SES

Classification made based on the participants' responses to the indirect (proxy) indicators of SES (size of house, number of cars, vacations, etc.)	Subset for alpha = 0.05
	1
Participants coming from low SES	3.1162
Participants coming from middle SES	3.2439
Participants coming from high SES	3.5000
Sig.	.535

The data in Table 5 reveals a positive trend between an adolescent's socioeconomic status (SES) and self. Participants from low SES showed lower self-control (Mean= 3.1162) compared to those from middle SES (Mean= 3.2439) and high SES (Mean = 3.5000). Raver (2004) emphasized the role of economic context in shaping self-control, suggesting that both risk and protective factors within and outside the family influence social and emotional development (Raver, 2004). As mentioned, parents from different SESs tend to practice

different parenting styles, which, in turn, affects adolescents' development of self-control and other SEL competencies.

Self-awareness, which is closely related to self-control (O'donoghue & Rabin, 2001 showed a significance of 0.055, which is slightly higher than >0.05; therefore, it is not significantly interrelated to family income with n >0.05. However, self-control affects self-awareness, SES indirectly influences self-awareness. The more adolescents understand themselves (self-awareness), the higher their self-esteem, which positively impacts other SEL competencies within the interpersonal sphere (i.e., relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making). This may be the reason we did not find any significant direct correlation between family SES and the interpersonal SEL competencies of adolescents, namely, responsible decision-making (Mean = 0.130), relationship skills (Mean = 0.419), and social awareness (Mean = 0.723). At this stage of understanding, we can conclude that self-control significantly correlates with family SES and sequentially influences one's self-awareness on the intrapersonal level. On the interpersonal SEL level, self-control also influences one's relationship skills, social awareness, and decision-making competencies.

It is important to note that the present evidence further justifies the results on the middle school students' acquisition of the social-control competency at a lower rate than the other competencies (Mean = 3.33). When reflecting on our sample in this study, it must be pointed out that the participants mainly came from low SES (41. 2%) and middle SES (36.3 %), and the rest of the participants came from high SES (22.4%).

Research indicates that Lebanon's current economic crisis is severely impacting children's well-being and development. Barranco (2022) noted that many parents are struggling to pay tuition fees for their children, with many private school students relying on financial aid programs (Barranco, 2022). However, Ray (2022) has claimed that private-sector schools have increased educational inequality by failing to improve access for low-income households. This suggests a need for private schools to actively create an environment that supports the social-emotional development of adolescents from low SES backgrounds.

Social and Emotional Competencies: Differences Among Genders
To determine significant gender differences in socioemotional competencies among middle school students, a *t*-test with α = 0.05 was used, comparing two sub-categories: female and male. While *gender differences* often refer to biological distinctions between sexes (Shannon, 2019); however, this study focuses on variations in socioemotional competencies between genders.

Following the results of the independent *t*-test displayed in *Table 6*, we can conclude that there is a 2-tailed significance lower than >0.01 between the two variables, namely, self-awareness and self-control, meaning they differ in their average means across the genders.

Table 6: Independent Samples Test

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Self-Awareness	Female	-3.803	163	.000

	Male	-3.807	160.027	.000
Social Awareness	Female	1.382	163	.169
	Male	1.384	157.526	.168
Self-Control	Female	-3.371	163	.001
	Male	-3.372	162.998	.001
Relationship Skills	Female	-.835	163	.405
	Male	-.835	162.843	.405
Responsible Decision Making	Female	-1.167	163	.245
	Male	-1.166	162.219	.245

As shown in the above *Table* 6, self-awareness shows a statistically significant difference of 0.3769 (conveying ≈38%) between males to females; likewise, in self-control, a statistical significance level difference of 0.3434 (conveying ≈34%) is evident. These findings demonstrate that the male gender is prone to better develop and possess the self-awareness and self-control competencies of the SEL intrapersonal sphere during adolescence, compared to the female gender.

The significant 2-tailed test of the other factors showed a result significantly higher than the male gender has 0.05; thus, conveying no significance in gender differences, or the difference is not statistically far from the other mean. In other words, there is a slight and, in some cases, a negligible difference. From the short review above, key findings emerge, including the absence of a significant difference between the genders in possessing relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and social awareness skills—all of which lie under the interpersonal sphere.

That being noted, the results demonstrated in this section exactly match what prior studies have stated concerning the gender differences of middle school students in possessing social and emotional competencies within the intrapersonal sphere. This outcome perfectly aligns with previous studies wherein male adolescents were inferred to be more intelligent in emotional self-regulation and self-awareness factors than female adolescents (Ali et al., 2021; Balakrishna Acharya, 2014). In other words, male adolescents have higher intrapersonal awareness due to their cognition of their strengths and weaknesses, a better understanding of their emotions, and control of themselves in different situations compared to female adolescents. Considering what Tetering & al. (2020) have suggested, such a result depicts that male adolescents are more capable of concentrating at school, organizing homework, and developing stable and healthy friendships than their female counterparts in private schools in Lebanon. For example, on the level of concentration, Sarouphim and Chartouny (2017) have emphasized that male adolescents were very successful at a vital subject matter in middle school due to their ability to concentrate, reason, and think. Besides, male adolescents are more competent in not surrendering to temptations with their brave self-control, contrary to female adolescents in private middle schools in Lebanon.

Female adolescents showed higher anger than males in some unpleasant situations they countered (Haddad et al., 2021), leading them to have concentration problems at school and poor academic performance. According to a recent article, adolescent females use verbal and social manipulation to harm a target more than boys (Reed, 2023), which may take a lot of

their energy and threaten their relationships with peers, leading them to go through mental health problems. Besides, as stated earlier in the literature review section, female adolescents have difficulty differentiating their emotions from others, leading them to undergo stress and unpleasing states compared to males (Trentini et al., 2021). These findings support the notion that male adolescents exhibit higher intrapersonal skills than female adolescents in private middle schools in El Metn region.

There are contrary findings to what this study has shown regarding adolescents' possession of one of the intrapersonal social and emotional factors—self-control. Other researchers (Ajayi et al., 2022; Camarata & Woodcock, 2006; Hamama & Hamama-Raz, 2019) have confirmed that female adolescents have higher self-control than males. Nevertheless, females' self-control fluctuates with the changing hormonal environment of their menstrual cycle (Hosseini-Kamkar & Morton, 2014). Under certain assumptions, it can be stated that parent-adolescent relationships also play a vital role in the extent of the possession of the intrapersonal factors across genders. Moreover, SES is another essential factor in adolescents' intrapersonal social and emotional development. Thus, this distinct pattern in the findings implies that personal factors and environmental factors may influence adolescents' intrapersonal skills. Therefore, it remains unclear whether male adolescents possess better intrapersonal skills compared to female adolescents in private middle schools in El Metn area only, or across Lebanon.

Even though the results did not show any significant difference in the level of interpersonal skills across genders, several findings state that female adolescents have higher social awareness within the interpersonal sphere compared to male adolescents. Female adolescents in Lebanon are known for being optimistic and motivated to make any change on the level of the social, political, and cultural issues that affect the lives of their community (Plan International, 2019). Female adolescents are competent in social awareness skills and can cooperate to solve problems in social situations better than male adolescents (Jones et al., 2017). As for the two other competencies (i.e., relationship skills and responsible decision-making) on the subscale of the interpersonal sphere, female and male adolescents possess the same levels, unless different factors are involved, which influences their acquisition and creates a gap between the two genders. To conclude, gender differences in retaining socio-emotional competencies in middle school students can be attributed to varying factors ranging from neurobiological conditions, SES, parent-adolescent relationships, culture and many more.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledging the importance of adolescence as the critical period for the development of social and emotional competencies, focusing on middle school students in Lebanon. This study had three primary research questions related to the middle schools' students' possession and implementation of the social and emotional competencies. The three questions extended from the middle school students' possession and implementation of social and emotional competencies to the SES factor throughout their development to gender differences in possessing these competencies. Such questions were raised to mediate the missing gap in the literature of the social and emotional field within the Lebanese context. In general, the findings in this study showed that private middle school students (n = 165) in

private schools in Lebanon possessed social and emotional competencies to varying extents, relationship skills (Mean = 3.82) being the highest and self-control (Mean = 3.33) being the lowest and the other three competencies (i.e., decision making, social awareness, and self-awareness) lie somewhere in between these two. Importantly, the results provide further evidence for the association of SES factors on an adolescents' acquisition and development of social-emotional competencies, especially self-control. The present findings also pointed out that personal and environmental factors, including community and culture, also play a significant role. The results mostly aligned with the literature and were compatible with it.

Collectively, findings indicated that Lebanese private middle school students are yet to reach their utmost potential in acquiring and implementing social and emotional competencies within their daily life. "In Lebanon, there are several initiatives to improve education at the middle school level in private schools" (Mertens et al., 2009, p. 42). However, only a few of these initiatives are being intentionally implemented today. One of these initiatives is Lebanon's National Social and Emotional Learning Framework (Cefai et al., 2020). It is unfortunate that until today, no accurate and valid statistical analysis has been conducted due to the delinquency of schools in Lebanon.

This fact adds to a growing body of research showing the importance of advocating for students' holistic education and development, whether cognitively, socially, or emotionally. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (n.d.) has confirmed that although middle school students in their first year may be particularly receptive to SEL, its implementation in this phase can be challenging. With this rapid technological growth and social media platforms, self-awareness, empathy, social awareness, respect for the environment, and moral values are essential to enable our students to make good decisions in adverse contexts and positively contribute to the Lebanese community. On this basis, it can be confirmed that adolescent social-emotional development cannot be left to chance! As Franklin D. Roosevelt once said: "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build the youth for our future." Social-emotional development of an adolescent needs intentional planning with relevant, realistic, and attainable goals. Ultimately, if we educate and guide our adolescents on the right path, we would be working towards a better future with fair and gender-equal education in Lebanon.

Recommendations
To address the gaps identified in the study, recommendations are offered at four levels: (1) Lebanon's Educational Policymakers; (2) Private Educational Institutions; (3) Educators; and (4) Parents. These suggestions aim to improve the social-emotional development of middle school students in Lebanon.

Educational Policymakers in Lebanon
1. Update the Lebanese curriculum to incorporate real-life examples and promote critical thinking about social and emotional norms.
2. Enhance the implementation of the Lebanese Social and Emotional Learning Framework by addressing existing political, economic, and social challenges, ensuring cohesive strategies across private and public schools.

3. Promote SEL awareness among schools, teachers, and parents through planning and implementing free workshops, equipping them with the necessary skills to guide adolescents in developing healthy connections, resolving conflicts, handling their emotions, and making responsible decisions.

Private Educational Institutions in Lebanon

1. Encourage continuous professional development for educators, bolstering their ability to implement effective SEL strategies.
2. Foster an environment that nurtures both academic and social-emotional growth, adopting SEL measurements tools to assess progress.
3. Raise awareness among teachers, students, and parents about the importance of social-emotional competencies, hence creating a holistic approach to private education.

Educators in Lebanon

1. Teachers must strive to develop supportive and healthy relationships with their students, boosting students' SEG, especially those who have difficulties with peers and family. Teachers exhibiting supportive and caring interactions, positive feelings, a shared sense of cohesion and respect, and sensitivity to their students' needs will positively impact students' SEG.
2. Teachers must endorse social teaching practices such as delivering student-centered discipline and controlling their language, besides practicing instructional teaching practices such as delivering balanced instruction, enforcing self-assessment, and self-reflection (Yoder, 2014). Jointly the social and instructional teaching practices will help all students attain mastery of academic standards and allow them to develop their SEL skills further.
3. Teachers must intentionally work to close the social-emotional acquisition gap between the two genders by targeting the flaws in their acquisition of socio-emotional competencies.

Parents in Lebanon

1. Parents must ensure healthy relationships with their adolescents to avoid the dilution of their social-emotional competencies, even if they are undergoing a challenging phase such as divorce. The parent-adolescent relationship is fundamental to nurturing the adolescents' intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. Steady and healthy experiences with parents or family members help adolescents learn about ethical relationships and explore emotions in predictable interactions.
2. Parents must be aware of respecting their adolescents' decisions and not dilute their autonomy skills as long as their decisions do not have any adverse effects.
3. Parents need to follow up with their adolescents' performance at school by being involved in their education and spending quality time with them.

Different stakeholders are active partners in supporting SEL by providing various services in a safe and nurturing environment. In the end, education is a shared responsibility where each person has a unique role to play in helping students fulfill their fullest potential academically, emotionally, or socially.

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APPENDIX
Middle School Students' Perception of Social and Emotional Learning

Dear Respondent/Student,
I am inviting you to participate in a research study titled "**Assessing Middle School Student's Understanding and Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning: A Study Conducted in Private School in Mount Lebanon**" about middle school students' conception of the importance of having the competencies of mindfulness, empathy, self-esteem, kindness, and more.

This study will contribute towards the partial fulfillment of my academic study requirements at Middle School University.

Participation in this Research Project
- Participation in this project is voluntary. You are free to withdraw anytime without having to give any reason for your withdrawal.
- If you choose to participate in this research study, you will be asked to fill in a questionnaire. Your participation will involve completing a survey that entails statements that you will have to rate based on agreement and a demographic form for approximately **15-20 minutes**. Participation in this study does not involve any physical risk or emotional risk to you beyond the risks of daily life.
- You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research; your cooperation in evaluating the statements in this questionnaire will be greatly appreciated.

Participant rights
- Participation in this study is completely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Your name or any other identifying information will not be asked. No individual information will appear.

Please answer the following questions as best as you can:
Gender:

☐ Female ☐ Male

Grade Level:

☐ Grade 7   ☐ Grade 8   ☐ Grade 9

How many people live in your home including yourself?

☐ 2 or less   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5   ☐ More than 6

Living in a(n):

☐ Owned house

☐ Rented house

☐ Other; living in someone else's house (i.e., relative, friends, etc.)

Living in a type of house:

☐ with 5 or more bedrooms

☐ with 3 to 4 bedrooms

☐ with 1 to 2 bedrooms

Do your parents OWN a vehicle (car, truck, van, etc.) now?
☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, how many vehicles?
☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4 or more

During the last year, did you take an out-of-town vacation?
☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, how many times?
☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3 or more

Your father's education level:

☐ Doctoral degree (PhD., MD, etc.)

☐ Master's degree (or other graduate training)

☐ Bachelor's degree (BA, BBA, BSS)

☐ 2 Years of College (associate degree or equivalent)

☐ Less than 2 Years of College

☐ Completed High School and/or a technical/vocational program

☐ High School Graduate

☐ Didn't Finish High School, but completed a technical/vocational program

☐ Didn't Finish High School

Your father's occupation:

☐ He is currently employed, please specify _____

☐ He is currently unemployed.

Your mother's education level:

☐ Doctoral degree (PhD., MD, etc.)

☐ Master's degree (or other graduate training)

☐ Bachelor's degree (BA, BBA, BSS)

☐ 2 Years of College (associate degree or equivalent)

☐ Less than 2 Years of College

☐ Completed High School and/or a technical/vocational program

☐ High School Graduate

☐ Didn't Finish High School, but completed a technical/vocational program

☐ Didn't Finish High School

Your Mother's occupation:

☐ She is currently employed, please specify ————————————————

☐ She is currently unemployed.

Thank you for completing this personal profile. Please respond to the attached survey as well.

➡ Using a five-point Likert scale of 1 to 5, put a symbol of X in the appropriate box to rate the extent you agree with each statement mentioned below:

A- Self-Awareness					
Statement	**1: Strongly Disagree**	**2: Disagree**	**3: Neutral**	**4: Agree**	**5: Strongly Agree**
1. I can easily describe my emotions.					
2. I understand my moods and feelings.					
3. I know how my emotions influence what I do.					
4. I am confident that I can successfully complete any school assignment.					
5. I try my best when doing difficult homework or schoolwork, as this is what allows me to improve.					

B- Social Awareness					
Statement	**1: Strongly Disagree**	**2: Disagree**	**3: Neutral**	**4: Agree**	**5: Strongly Agree**
1. I can easily recognize how another person is feeling by their facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.					
2. It is easy for me to understand why people feel the way they do.					
3. If someone close to me is sad or happy, upset, or nervous, I have a pretty good idea why.					

4.	I am respectful of anyone's ideas, even if they are different from mine.				
5.	I find it easy to defend my ideas without putting anyone down.				

C- Self-Control					
Statement	**1: Strongly Disagree**	**2: Disagree**	**3: Neutral**	**4: Agree**	**5: Strongly Agree**
1. I know how to stay calm when I am under pressure.					
2. Whatever happens to me, I can keep calm.					
3. When I am angry with someone, I calm down first and then tell him/her about it.					
4. I am clear about my school goals.					
5. I am able to work effectively to achieve long-term school goals.					
6. I am disciplined (i.e., I follow certain routines to do my homework accurately).					
7. I concentrate easily on the schoolwork I have to do.					
8. I carefully plan my homework according to my goals.					
9. I resist any temptation or distraction while doing my homework.					
10. If I commit to a school assignment, I do it because I know how to motivate myself.					

D- Relationship Skills					
Statement	**1: Strongly Disagree**	**2: Disagree**	**3: Neutral**	**4: Agree**	**5: Strongly Agree**
1. I use appropriate verbal language when conversing with friends, family, classmates, etc.					
2. I am confident in my ability to work as part of a team in class.					
3. I treat all members of my team in class in the same way, politely and respectfully.					
4. I offer help and help others when they need it.					
5. I get on well with my classmates.					

E- Responsible Decision Making					
Statement	**1: Strongly Disagree**	**2: Disagree**	**3: Neutral**	**4: Agree**	**5: Strongly Agree**
1. When I have to make a decision or face a problem… I think of all possible options or coping strategies before I act or decide.					
2. When I have to make a decision or face a problem … I consider the advantages and disadvantages of each option or strategy before acting or deciding.					
3. When I have to make a decision or face a problem . . . I check that my decisions or actions are having positive results.					
4. I care about the welfare of my environment or					

	1	2	3	4	5
community.					
5. I help members of my environment or community.					

F- Other					
Statement	**1: Strongly Disagree**	**2: Disagree**	**3: Neutral**	**4: Agree**	**5: Strongly Agree**
1. Teachers should give more importance to applying activities related to developing mindfulness, empathy, self-esteem, kindness, and more than learning academics.					
2. Teachers should encourage me to work hard to develop skills to better cope with everyday challenges and benefit academically and socially.					
3. Teacher should emphasize SEL in schools to help me develop the broad set of skills I need to succeed as a student, worker, community helper, and citizen.					