PATHWAYS SHAPING EARLY CHILDHOOD SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE: EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL INTERACTION, AND SOCIOECONOMIC INFLUENCES

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Abstract

This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical evidence on the pathways shaping socio-emotional competence (SEC) in early childhood, with particular attention to educational programs, social interactions, and socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Although SEC has been widely recognized as a foundational aspect of early development, existing studies often examine its determinants in isolation, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how multiple social and contextual factors jointly influence SEC among children aged 3–6 years. To address this gap, the review systematically screened 123 articles retrieved from Scopus and Google Scholar, of which 19 peer-reviewed studies met the inclusion criteria following a PRISMA-guided selection process. The included studies employed diverse methodological approaches, including longitudinal, cross-sectional, experimental, observational, and qualitative designs. The findings indicate that structured Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs consistently enhance emotional regulation, empathy, and social competence in early childhood. Beyond formal interventions, high-quality parent–child, teacher–child, and peer interactions emerge as critical proximal processes that support children's emotional understanding, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills. Moreover, socioeconomic status and cultural norms shape the quality and availability of these interactions, contributing to disparities in SEC development, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Overall, the review highlights that early childhood SEC develops through a dynamic and interdependent system involving educational practices, relational experiences, and broader socioeconomic and cultural environments. Future research is encouraged to adopt integrative and culturally sensitive to capture the complexity of SEC development and to inform inclusive interventions that reduce social inequalities while strengthening socio-emotional outcomes in early childhood.

Keywords: Ramsar Convention Principles, Mangrove Conversion, South Sulawesi Coast

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood socio-emotional competence (SEC) is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of healthy development, influencing both academic success and social adaptation. The ability of young children to understand and manage their emotions, form positive relationships, and navigate social situations effectively is integral to their well-being (Zuluaga, 2024). The importance of SEC extends far beyond the early years, as it is foundational for children's later emotional regulation, mental health, and academic achievement. However, while cognitive development and biological factors have been extensively studied, the social interactions that foster these competencies remain complex and not fully understood (Sorrenti et al., 2025).

Recent research has highlighted the vital role of early childhood experiences in shaping SEC. It is well-established that family dynamics, peer interactions, and early

educational settings significantly influence children's emotional and social development (Schapira & Grazzani, 2025). Similarly, supportive peer relationships during play allow children to practice social-emotional competencies such as empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Schapira & Grazzani, 2025). These early interactions provide essential opportunities for children to learn how to express their emotions and navigate social challenges in a safe, supportive environment (Greco & De Ronzi, 2020).

Despite these findings, gaps remain in understanding the specific mechanisms through which different social interactions influence SEC. While much research has focused on the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, studies that examine how various types of social interactions such as those between parents, peers, and teachers, contribute to SEC are still limited (Yang et al., 2025). Additionally, many studies have not fully addressed the role of broader contextual factors, such as socioeconomic status and cultural norms, in shaping children's social interactions and, consequently, their SEC development. This lack of focus on the interplay between social interactions and contextual factors leaves important questions about how best to foster SEC in diverse educational and social contexts unanswered.

There is also an urgent need for research that explores how different types of social interactions ranging from family environments to peer relationships affect SEC development across various sociocultural and economic contexts (Jung et al., 2023). This is especially important given the growing disparities in early childhood educational opportunities, particularly for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or marginalized communities. Understanding how these factors intersect with social interactions can help design more targeted interventions to support SEC development in children who may face additional challenges due to their social or economic environment (Piqueras et al., 2019). This research will provide valuable insights into how early social interactions shape socio-emotional competence, helping to inform the design of more effective educational and intervention programs aimed at supporting young children's emotional and social development.

2. METHODOLOGY

The type of research used is normative, namely examining the normative elements in the Ramsar Convention regarding various cases of mangrove land conversion on the South Sulawesi coast. The approach used is a legal approach or Legal Approach (Ramdhan, 2021). The international legal approach to the form of local cases.

The process of article screening for the systematic literature review begins with the identification phase, where a total of 123 articles were initially identified through Scopus and Google Scholar. In the first step of screening, 30 articles were excluded because they were not published in English, resulting in 93 articles remaining. Subsequently, an additional 25 articles were removed due to duplication, bringing the total number of articles down to 68. In the next phase, full-text evaluation was conducted on 33 articles to determine their relevance and quality. After this evaluation, 14 articles were excluded based on a quality assessment, leaving 19 articles that met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the final review. This process ensures that only the

most relevant and high-quality studies are included, following a rigorous screening procedure as outlined in the PRISMA method.

Figure 1. Prisma Method
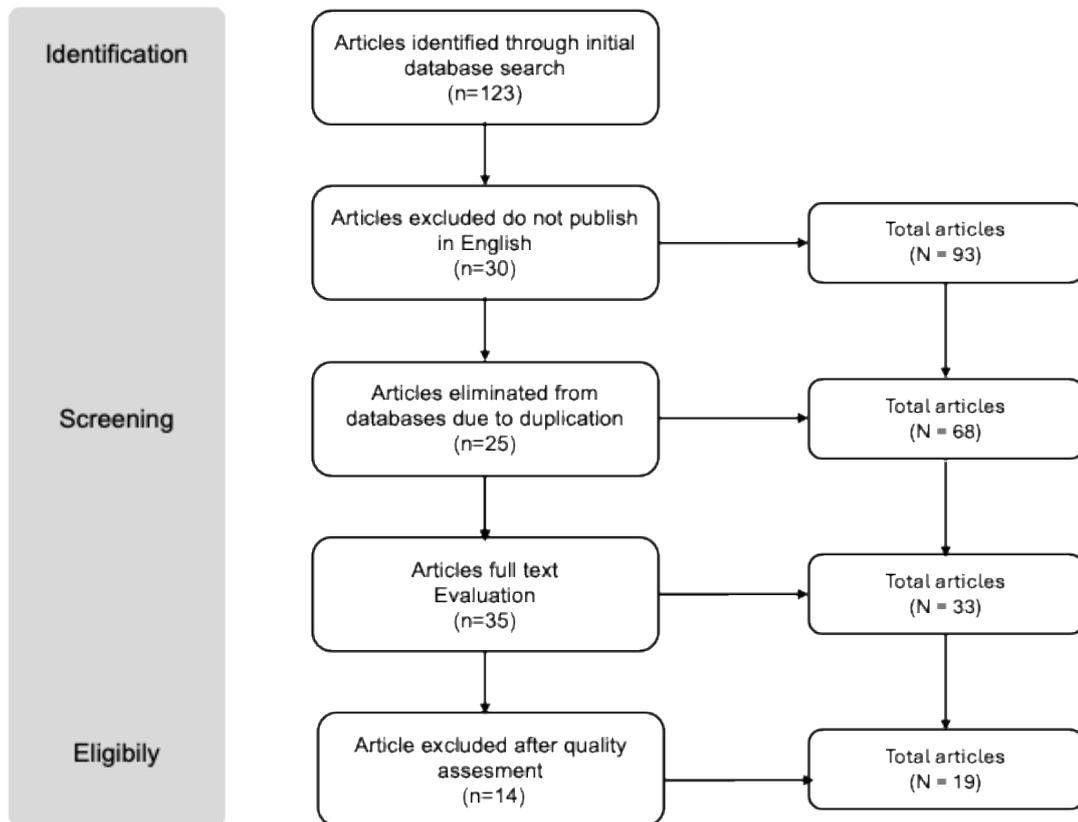
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Enhancing Social-Emotional Competence through Educational Programs

A growing body of research has demonstrated the significant benefits of structured SEL interventions in enhancing children's socio-emotional competence (SEC), which refers to the ability to understand and manage emotions, form positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Studies by Schapira & Grazzani (2025) have highlighted the transformative impact of these programs on children's ability to regulate their emotions, develop empathy, and engage in positive social interactions with peers and adults alike. Research indicates that when children are taught strategies to recognize and regulate their emotions, they are more likely to succeed in interpersonal interactions and manage conflict in a constructive manner (Zagni et al., 2025). SEL programs often focus on developing empathy. Programs that cultivate empathy encourage children to recognize and respond to the emotional cues of others, a critical skill for developing strong peer relationships. For instance, children who are empathetic are more likely to engage in cooperative play, share resources, and offer

help to peers in distress (Schoon et al., 2021). Children with strong empathetic skills tend to cope more effectively with challenges by seeking social support and maintaining positive connections with others (Wubishet, 2025).

The development of social competence is another core aspect of SEL programs, as these skills are essential for forming healthy, reciprocal relationships. Through structured SEL activities, children learn how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and work collaboratively with others (Ghirardi et al., 2023). Research has shown that children who undergo SEL interventions demonstrate improved social competence, which manifests in their increased ability to work in groups, express themselves clearly, and manage interpersonal conflicts in a non-aggressive manner (Asyari et al., 2025).

2. Role of Parent-Child Interactions on Socio-Emotional Competence

The relationship between children and their parents is a fundamental factor in the development of socio-emotional competence (SEC). This relationship, often referred to as attachment, has a significant influence on how children learn to manage emotions, form relationships, and navigate social environments. Secure attachment is critical aspect of how parent-child relationships foster SEC. Children who develop secure attachment to their parents are more likely to feel emotionally secure and confident, both of which are essential for social competence. Secure attachment provides children with a safe base from which they can explore the world, interact with others, and face challenges. Research consistently emphasizes the importance of this bond in the early years of a child's life, as it serves as the foundation for emotional regulation, social interaction, and the development of empathy, all of which are crucial elements of SEC (Asyari et al., 2025). Moreover, the way in which parents communicate with their children can have a profound effect on the development of social skills. Parental communication styles, including how parents express emotions and engage in conversation, serve as the first models for children to learn how to interact with others (Ghirardi et al., 2023). The ability to listen, empathize, and resolve conflicts constructively, skills that are cultivated through positive parent-child communication, are critical components of SEC (Greco & De Ronzi, 2020).

Additionally, the parent-child relationship influences how children respond to social challenges and conflicts. Children who receive consistent emotional support from their parents are better equipped to handle social setbacks, such as peer rejection or misunderstandings. This emotional security enables children to approach social interactions with a sense of confidence and trust in their ability to navigate complex social situations (Qayyum et al., 2024). By modeling appropriate conflict resolution strategies and offering guidance on how to manage social tension, parents play a key role in teaching their children how to maintain healthy relationships and address issues constructively. The impact of the parent-child relationship on SEC is not confined to the home environment. The emotional and social skills that children develop at home often transfer to their interactions with peers, teachers, and other

members of their community. For instance, children who learn effective emotional regulation and empathy from their parents are more likely to demonstrate these skills in school settings, where they are expected to interact with a wider range of people (Wubishet, 2025).

3. Role of Teacher-Child Interactions on Socio-Emotional Competence

Another significant theme emerging from the reviewed studies is the profound impact of teacher-child interactions on children's socio-emotional competence (SEC). Research Zhang et al. (2025) underscores the critical role that positive and supportive teacher-child interactions play in enhancing children's SEC. Teacher-child interactions are often considered a fundamental part of the emotional landscape of early childhood education. Studies have shown that when teachers engage with children in a warm, supportive manner, they create an environment that fosters trust and emotional security, which is essential for the development of socio-emotional competence (Lechner et al., 2019). Children who feel emotionally supported by their teachers are more likely to express themselves freely, seek help when needed, and engage positively with their peers. These supportive interactions help children regulate their emotions, as they learn how to navigate their feelings with the guidance and modeling provided by their teachers (Schapira & Aram, 2020). Teachers who respond to children's emotional needs with empathy and understanding promote emotional resilience, teaching children to manage frustrations, cope with disappointment, and navigate conflicts effectively.

Additionally, the quality of teacher-child interactions plays a pivotal role in the development of emotional regulation. Zhang et al. (2025) emphasize that high-quality teacher-child interactions, where teachers actively model positive coping strategies and encourage children to verbalize their emotions, can lead to significant improvements in emotional regulation. For example, teachers who model calmness during moments of stress or frustration provide children with practical examples of how to manage difficult emotions (Qayyum et al., 2024). Moreover, the empathic engagement of teachers with children plays a vital role in fostering SEC. Empathy in teacher-child interactions involves not only understanding and responding to children's emotional needs but also acknowledging their feelings and providing appropriate responses. This empathetic engagement creates a safe space for children to explore their emotions and form healthy, positive relationships with their peers. It also teaches children the importance of empathy in their own social interactions, which is crucial for developing social competence (Greco & De Ronzi, 2020).

4. Role of Peers Interactions on Socio-Emotional Competence

Play is not merely an enjoyable activity but a dynamic process through which children practice and internalize behaviors essential for their emotional and social well-being, such as cooperation, empathy, and emotional regulation (Ahmed et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023). One of the primary benefits of play is that it offers peer interactions that allow children to engage with others, experiment with different social roles, and work

together toward shared goals. These interactions are crucial for developing the social skills necessary for success in both the classroom and the broader social environment (Isohätälä et al., 2020). For instance, when children play games with their peers, they learn how to negotiate roles, take turns, share, and collaborate in ways that mirror real-life social interactions. These experiences are vital for social competence, as they provide children with firsthand opportunities to understand and manage social dynamics, make friends, and build positive relationships. Lechner et al. (2019) emphasizes, play allows children to navigate the complexities of group interaction, where they learn to balance their own needs and desires with the expectations of others, which is a key aspect of SEC development.

Through play, children can engage in role-playing activities that encourage them to see the world from different perspectives. For example, during pretend play, children may take on the roles of caregivers, doctors, or family members, allowing them to practice responding to others' emotions and needs. This helps them build empathy by promoting an understanding of how others might feel in various situations. In play, children encounter situations that evoke various emotions, such as excitement, disappointment, or frustration giving them the chance to practice managing these feelings (Qayyum et al., 2024). For instance, in competitive games or activities with peers, children may experience the frustration of losing or the joy of winning (Babar et al., 2024). These experiences provide opportunities for children to practice self-control and coping strategies. Over time, these strategies become integrated into children's behavioral repertoire, helping them manage emotions in more complex real-life scenarios.

Furthermore, both structured and unstructured play offer unique opportunities for promoting SEC. Structured play, such as guided group activities or games with specific rules, helps children develop cooperative behaviors, turn-taking, and problem-solving skills. These activities encourage children to understand and follow social norms, negotiate with others, and work collaboratively (Schapira & Aram, 2020). On the other hand, unstructured play, which often involves free exploration and creative play, allows children to exercise their autonomy, experiment with different roles, and engage in imaginative scenarios that foster creativity and empathy.

5. Socioeconomic and Cultural Factors

The socioeconomic environment in which children are raised has been identified as a key factor influencing their SEC. Children raised in higher socioeconomic settings are often exposed to a range of cognitive and emotional enrichment from an early age. These environments typically offer access to quality early childhood education programs, cultural exposure, extracurricular activities, and parental involvement, all of which contribute to the development of critical SEC. For example, children in higher SES families are more likely to attend early education programs that emphasize SEC development. Moreover, children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often benefit from stable family environments with

adequate financial resources, fewer stressors related to basic needs, and more time for quality interaction between parents and children (Arda Tuncdemir, 2025). On the other hand, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face greater environmental stressors, such as limited access to educational resources, financial instability, and exposure to family or community-related stress. These challenges can hinder their ability to develop strong socio-emotional skills (Palmquist et al., 2025). For instance, children living in disadvantaged circumstances may experience chronic stress or parental conflict, which can lead to difficulties in emotional regulation, increased anxiety, and challenges in forming healthy relationships with peers (Zagni et al., 2025).

Cultural norms and values can shape the ways in which emotions are expressed and managed, influencing the development of SEC. In some cultures, emotional expression may be restricted or discouraged, while in others, it may be more openly encouraged. These cultural differences can impact how children interpret and respond to emotional cues, as well as how they learn to regulate their emotions in social situations (Foerch & Adelman, 2024). For example, in cultures where emotional restraint is emphasized, children may have fewer opportunities to practice expressing emotions in socially acceptable ways, which can affect their ability to navigate social interactions effectively (Ghirardi et al., 2023). In contrast, in environments where cultural norms align with positive emotional expression and social interaction, children may develop SEC (Asyari et al., 2025). For instance, when children are encouraged to communicate openly about their emotions and are supported in developing empathy for others, they are more likely to exhibit well-developed emotional intelligence and social competence. The ability to understand and express emotions in a culturally appropriate manner is crucial for successful social interactions, and this is facilitated by a supportive linguistic and cultural environment that promotes healthy emotional expression and social engagement (Hosokawa et al., 2024).

3.   CONCLUSION

The findings emphasize the importance of nurturing environments in early childhood settings to promote SEC. However, there are gaps in understanding how different social factors, such as family dynamics, specifically interactions between siblings, cultural contexts, and digitalization, contribute to SEC development. Future research should explore how these social settings, shaped by cultural norms, socioeconomic backgrounds and digitalization, interact with SEC development to offer more targeted approaches for supporting children's SEC growth. One key implication is the need for educational and intervention programs to prioritize the integration of SEL and quality teacher-child interactions, ensuring that all children, regardless of background, develop SEC that will benefit them throughout their lives.

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