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RESEARCH

Social and Emotional Learning for Students with Special Learning Needs

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in an inclusive higher education setting, focusing on undergraduate students with Special learning Needs (SEN) enrolled in a Critical and Creative Thinking (CRITHNK) course. Grounded in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, the study examines how SEL competencies are experienced and applied by neurodiverse learners. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that integrating SEL within course activities supported students in managing emotions, improving communication, and engaging actively in collaborative tasks. Students reported increased self-awareness, confidence, and participation in leadership roles. However, challenges related to communication, social interaction, and emotional regulation persisted during unstructured tasks. Flexible accommodations, structured activities, and supportive teaching strategies were critical in enabling effective SEL application. Overall, findings suggest SEL is most impactful when intentionally embedded within discipline-based course design and supported by responsive, inclusive pedagogy.

Keywords: *Social and Emotional Learning, Inclusive Higher Education, Special Learning Needs, Critical Thinking, Emotional Regulation, Student Engagement, Inclusive Pedagogy.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

In recent decades, educational paradigms have increasingly recognized the vital role of non-academic competencies alongside subject-based knowledge. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning *(CASEL, 2020)* as the process of acquiring skills to manage emotions, set goals, show empathy, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions, has emerged as a vital pillar of student development. While meta-analyses confirm that SEL significantly enhances student well-being and academic performance in K–12 settings *(Amholt et al., 2020; Bucker et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011),* its application within higher education remains limited. Undergraduate students face elevated academic demands, increased autonomy, and complex interpersonal dynamics. These challenges are heightened for neurodiverse students, such as those with hearing impairments, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These learners frequently experience difficulties with emotional regulation, time management, peer interactions, and sustained motivation *(Kwon et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).* Proactive coping and targeted SEL competencies are essential for mitigating stress and fostering social-emotional adjustment among students with learning disabilities *(Deepthi et al., 2022).* Inclusive learning environments that promote collaborative engagement yield cognitive and socio-emotional benefits for both neurodiverse students and their neurotypical peers *(Molina Roldán et al., 2021).* In the Philippine context, tertiary institutions face concerns regarding deficiencies in essential 21st-century skills, specifically critical thinking, collaboration, and emotional intelligence, among graduates *(ACTR, 2021).* Although the Commission on Higher Education advocates for holistic, inclusive education *(CHED Memorandum Order No. 20, Series of 2013)*, operationalizing socio-emotional support within subject-matter instruction remains inconsistent. Integrating SEL directly into the Critical and Creative Thinking (CRITHNK) course presents an opportunity to

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bridge this gap. CRITHNK requires both intrapersonal skills self-awareness, bias recognition, emotional regulation and interpersonal competencies empathy, collaboration, ethical decision-making. Embedding SEL into tasks such as identifying fallacies, applying intellectual virtues, and executing design thinking projects allows neurodiverse students to apply socio-emotional skills in a structured academic setting.

2. Research Questions

This study explores the integration of SEL in higher education by examining the lived experiences of neurodiverse undergraduate students enrolled in a CRITHNK course. It addresses the following research questions

1. What are the demographic and learning profiles of neurodiverse undergraduate students in terms of diagnosis, accommodations received, and prior SEL exposure?
2. How do these students perceive the role of SEL in supporting their communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and overall learning experience in CRITHNK?
3. What socio-emotional and adaptive challenges do students encounter in engaging with SEL-integrated online course activities?
4. What coping strategies and institutional support systems help students manage these challenges?
5. What recommendations do students offer to enhance the integration of SEL within inclusive higher education classrooms?

3. Significance of the Study

This study contributes empirical insights into how discipline-embedded SEL supports neurodiverse learners in inclusive higher education. For educators, particularly in philosophy and general education, the findings demonstrate how structured reflective tasks and explicit collaboration frameworks can simultaneously develop critical thinking and emotional regulation. For institutional units, such as the Center for Inclusion and Special Needs (CIE), the results emphasize the role of accessible accommodations and faculty mentorship in fostering inclusive environments. Finally, for neurodiverse students, the study validates the utility of SEL in building self-efficacy, agency, and peer connection.

4. Scope and Limitations

This study examined the lived experiences of seven neurodiverse undergraduate students diagnosed with ASD, ADHD, or hearing impairments enrolled in the CRITHNK course at De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB) during Academic Year 2024–2025. Data collection relied on semi-structured personal interviews evaluating SEL integration across core course topics, including intellectual standards, logical reasoning, ethical decision-making, and design thinking. Limitations include the small sample size ($n = 7$) from a single institution, which restricts statistical generalizability. Additionally, data collection occurred in an online/blended format, meaning findings may not fully reflect face-to-face classroom dynamics. Reliance on qualitative self-reports also introduces potential participant subjectivity, which was addressed through rigorous coding and member-checking.

5. Literature Review

5.1. Theoretical Frameworks Underlying SEL

Social and Emotional Learning is anchored in three primary theoretical paradigms

1. *Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986):* Asserts that cognitive processes, emotional regulation, and behaviors are acquired through observational modeling and reciprocal environmental interactions.
2. *Emotional Intelligence Theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995):* Establishes self-awareness and empathy as prerequisites for adaptive decision-making and social functioning.
3. *Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979):* Demonstrates that socio-emotional development is continually shaped by nested micro-systems, such as university learning environments.

Together, these frameworks emphasize that deep cognitive learning depends on a stable socio-emotional foundation.

5.2. Efficacy of SEL: K–12 vs. Post-Secondary Settings

Extensive research confirms that structured SEL interventions in primary and secondary education yield significant gains in academic performance, prosocial behavior, and emotional regulation, while reducing

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conduct problems *(Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Elmi, 2020).* In post-secondary education, emerging research indicates that SEL adaptations enhance resilience, stress management, and course engagement *(Bamber & Morpeth, 2019; Pidgeon et al., 2020; Mukhemar et al., 2025).* However, systematic integration into university curricula remains uncommon.

6. Gaps in Current Literature

Two key gaps exist in post-secondary SEL literature

1. Most university SEL studies evaluate general student populations, largely overlooking neurodiverse undergraduates who face distinct executive functioning, communication, and emotional regulation challenges *(Kwon et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Elias et al., 2019).*
2. SEL is frequently implemented as a standalone, co-curricular intervention rather than embedded within core academic coursework. Integrating SEL directly into discipline-specific instruction-particularly high-cognition courses-deepens both critical thinking and emotional growth *(Elmi, 2020).*

In the Philippines, national policies mandate inclusive, holistic education *(CHED Memorandum Order No. 20, Series of 2013; DepEd, 2019),* yet faculty often lack structured frameworks to support neurodiverse learners within specialized coursework. This study addresses these gaps by evaluating discipline-embedded SEL within a CRITHNK course.

7. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study synthesizes the *CASEL (2020)* model with neurodiversity and social-model disability frameworks. While CASEL outlines five core competencies, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, a neurodiversity lens acknowledges conditions like ASD, ADHD, and sensory impairments as natural variations in human cognition. Thus, SEL development is reconceptualized as an interactive process shaped by environmental design, flexible communication, and pedagogical accommodations rather than individual deficit correction (Figure 1).

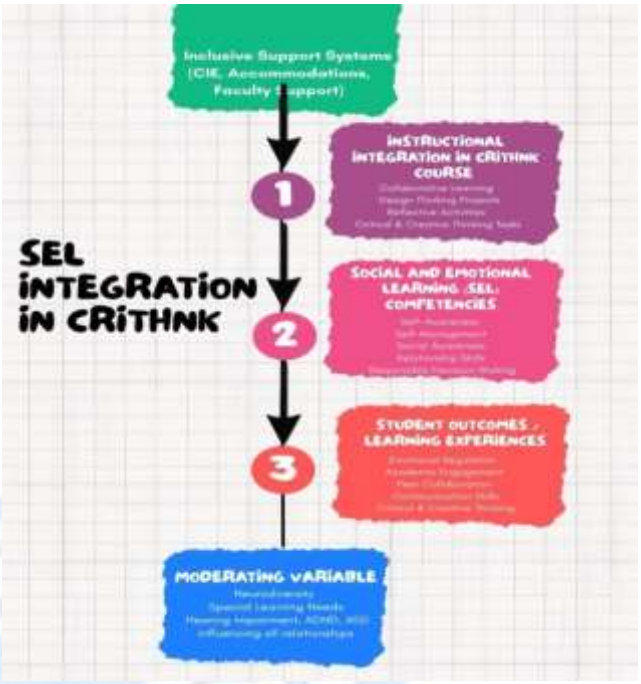

Figure 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

8. Research Methodology

8.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design *(Smith et al., 2009)* to examine how embedding SEL within a CRITHNK course influenced the lived learning experiences of neurodiverse undergraduates. A phenomenological approach prioritizes idiographic depth, capturing the subjective interpretations of students navigating academic and socio-emotional demands.

8.2. Participants and Contextual Setting

Participants were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling *(Patton, 2015).* Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be enrolled in CRITHNK at De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde during Academic Year 2024–2025 (2) be formally registered with the Center for Inclusion and Special Needs (CIE) and (3) consent to online semi-structured interviews. The final sample comprised seven undergraduate students ($n = 7$), an optimal size for detailed phenomenological analysis *(Smith & Nizza, 2021)* (Table 1).

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Table 1: Participant Profiles and Instructional Accommodations

Participant ID	Disclosed Diagnosis / Profile	Enrolled Term & Program	Provided Instructional Accommodations	Primary Communication Adaptation
P1	Hearing Impairment (Cochlear Implant)	Term 1, BS Tourism Mgt.	Advance learning resources, detailed written feedback	Live Zoom Captions + Visual Prompts
P2	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Term 1, AB Animation	Strategic seating, task breakdown, structured check-ins	Break Timers + Written Outlines
P3	Hearing Impairment (Bilateral)	Term 1, AB Photography	Test modifications, advance visual aids, close monitoring	Live Captions + Text Verification
P4	Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Term 2, AB Photography	Strategic seating, sensory rest periods, audio recording	Advance Prompts + Camera-Optional
P5	ASD / ADHD Co-occurrence	Term 3, AB Multimedia Arts	Alternative output formats, rest breaks, peer assistant	Structured Timers + Task Lists
P6	Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Term 3, AB Multimedia Arts	Assessment modification, scheduled breaks, monitoring	Advance Question Prompts
P7	Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Term 3, AB Multimedia Arts	Advance syllabus resources, modified curriculum pacing	Visual Aids + Chat Fall back

8.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered via individual semi-structured interviews conducted synchronously over zoom lasting 45–75 minutes $M = 58$ minutes. The interview protocol was content-validated by a panel of experts in special education, psychology, and curriculum design. To accommodate neurodiverse needs, specific protocols were implemented

1. Question prompts were provided 48 hours in advance to ASD participants to reduce anxiety.
2. Automated live captions and chat clarification were provided for students with hearing impairments.
3. Micro-breaks and visual text prompts were integrated for participants with ADHD.
4. All sessions were recorded with written informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and de-identified.

8.4. Data Analysis and Rigor

Transcripts were analyzed using *Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019)* reflexive thematic analysis framework across six phases familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final narrative. Research rigor was established through

1. Member-checking transcripts and thematic summaries with participants.
2. Maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and analytical memos.
3. Keeping reflexive logs to mitigate researcher bias.
4. Providing detailed descriptions of the institutional setting and participant contexts (Table 2).

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Table 2: Methodological Alignment Matrix

Research Question	Data Source	Analytical Focus	Methodological Output
RQ1 & RQ2: SEL Perception & Cognitive Synergy	Semi-Structured Interview (Section A)	Inductive coding of utility, self-awareness, critical thinking, and collaboration	Theme 1 & Theme 2
RQ3 & RQ4: Challenges & Coping Mechanisms	Semi-Structured Interview (Section B)	Coding of sensory load, communication barriers, and adaptive coping tools	Theme 3
RQ5: Recommendations for Inclusion	Semi-Structured Interview (Section C)	Structural categorization of instructional and policy suggestions	Theme 4 & Recommendations

9. Results and Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis generated four main themes capturing the impact of embedded SEL on neurodiverse undergraduates.

Theme 1: Cognitive-Emotional Synergy in Critical Thinking

Participants expressed that explicit SEL instruction provided the emotional grounding necessary for complex cognitive tasks, such as argument evaluation and bias identification. Self-awareness functioned as a metacognitive baseline "self-awareness helped me better understand my thoughts and emotions in CRITHNK. It allowed me to recognize my biases, think more objectively, remain open to new ideas, and engage more positively with my group mates, which helped me become a better critical thinker." (P4, ASD) When emotional check-ins and structured pauses were integrated into lessons, participants with ADHD reported reduced impulsivity during analysis "As a student with ADHD, SEL has greatly helped me slow down my impulses. It gives me a structural way to assess my peer interactions and balance my high energy levels. It directly improved my grades in group presentations because I am more conscious of my group's unified objectives" (P2, ADHD).

Theme 2: Navigating Collaboration and the "Chain of Leadership"

Unstructured group work often induced anxiety. However, establishing a transparent "chain of leadership" within CRITHNK transformed collaborative activities into structured opportunities for active participation "Most of the topics were engaging based on my observations during class discussions and group activities. The chain of leadership in the subject encouraged me to participate actively. Since it was my first time becoming a leader, I became more involved and responsible in making decisions and standing up for my group." (P5, ASD/ADHD). When peer engagement faltered, participants utilized proactive SEL communication skills to maintain group progress "When some group mates were unresponsive or submitted outputs late, I took the initiative to actively communicate, clarify tasks, and organize responsibilities to ensure work remained on track" (P1, ASD).

Theme 3: Adaptive Coping Mechanisms for Online Neurodiverse Barriers

Participants faced sensory fatigue, executive functioning challenges, and communication barriers in the online environment. Stress was most acute during uncoordinated group shifts. To manage these demands, students combined embedded SEL tools with institutional accommodations "I try to create a routine or checklist to help me stay on track, especially when group tasks change suddenly. I also prefer communicating through written messages to ensure clarity. When I feel stressed, I take short breaks and reach out to my teacher. These strategies help me reduce anxiety and maintain focus." P3, Hearing Impairment.

Theme 4: Inclusion, Micro-Affirmations, and Sense of Belonging

Embedding SEL cultivated an environment where neurodiverse communication styles were accepted. Structured social awareness tasks helped mitigate fears of social isolation "The emphasis on social awareness helped me navigate team projects without the constant fear of being left behind due to my hearing impairment. It made me realize that communication isn't just speaking, it's

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establishing mutual avenues of understanding." P3, Hearing Impairment. Participants emphasized that meaningful inclusion requires environmental and pedagogical flexibility from faculty and peers "For me, inclusion is very important, being happy with my group and my professor reflects a learning environment where everyone has a role and no one is left behind. Ensuring inclusion helps create a more supportive and collaborative learning experience" (P6, ASD).

10. Discussion

10.1. Interdependence of Cognition and Emotion

The findings demonstrate that cognitive processing and emotional regulation function as interdependent systems in higher education instruction. While traditional post-secondary pedagogy often treats critical thinking as a purely intellectual skill, these results show that for neurodiverse learners, emotional self-regulation serves as a cognitive foundation.

This extends Social Cognitive Theory *(Bandura, 1986)* by illustrating that self-efficacy in complex reasoning depends on an individual's ability to manage internal affective states. By practicing self-awareness, participants mitigated cognitive biases and reduced impulsivity. This supports *Elmi's (2020)* model of discipline-embedded SEL, proving that embedding socio-emotional tools into core academic tasks enhances higher-order thinking.

10.2. Reconceptualizing Neurodiverse Leadership

The success of structured group roles demonstrates the value of clear social organization for neurodiverse students. Viewed through Ecological Systems Theory *(Bronfenbrenner, 1979),* the classroom functions as a immediate microsystem where structural adjustments directly alter developmental outcomes. While deficit-centered literature focuses primarily on the social interaction challenges of neurodiverse students *(Kwon et al., 2018)*, these findings reveal that when learning environments provide explicit roles and structured communication channels, neurodiverse students can succeed in leadership positions.

10.3. The Neurodiversity-Affirming Paradigm in Pedagogy

Interpreting student challenges through a neurodiversity-affirming framework shifts the focus from individual student deficits to instructional design. When instructors provided Universal Design for Learning (UDL) adaptations, such as written instruction, visual checklists, and asynchronous processing time, students managed group tasks effectively. SEL integration should not aim to force neurodiverse learners to adopt neurotypical behaviors rather, it should establish flexible, empathetic communication structures for all students.

10.4. Implications for Philippine Higher Education

These findings offer practical insights for implementing inclusive education policies in the Philippines. Although CHED directives mandate accessible education for students with special needs, operational support at the course level remains variable. Tertiary institutions can adopt the following measures incorporate CASEL-aligned competencies directly into General Education syllabi e.g., Ethics, Critical Thinking, Communication. Provide training on UDL principles and neurodiversity-affirming practices, prioritizing flexible assessments and multimodal instruction. Strengthen collaboration between academic departments and campus inclusion units such as DLS-CSB's CIE to ensure accommodations are integrated into daily instruction.

11. Ethical Considerations and Research Integrity

This study followed ethical standards based on the declaration of helsinki and national research guidelines. It was officially approved by the Institutional Review Board of de la salle–college of Saint Benilde. Participants received a plain-language informed consent Form outlining the study's scope, voluntary nature, risks, and benefits. ASD and hearing-impaired participants were provided with visual summaries and asynchronous Q&A channels prior to signing. Participation had no bearing on grades or access to institutional support in compliance with the Philippine data privacy act of 2012 (RA 10173), all personal identifiers were removed and replaced with alphanumeric codes (P1–P7). Cloud-stored data were encrypted and restricted to the primary researcher. Interviews were conducted by researchers who held no evaluative authority over the participants during the study terms. Reflexive logs were maintained to minimize interpretation bias.

12. Recommendations

12.1. For Institutional Leaders and Policy Makers

Transition from viewing SEL strictly as a co-curricular

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initiative to embedding CASEL competencies into General Education Curricula (GEC) syllabi. Formulate clear implementation guidelines to assist faculty in translating inclusive education mandates into course-level practices.

12.2. For Faculty Members and Educators

Structure collaborative tasks with explicit visual checklists, clear rubrics, and predictable timelines. Normalize multimodal communication formats including written and asynchronous channels for group projects to reduce executive functioning overload.

12.3. For Student Support Units and Future Researchers

Offer specialized workshops on neurodiversity-affirming pedagogy for teaching faculty. Conduct multi-site, mixed-methods studies comparing the impact of discipline-embedded SEL across different academic fields and face-to-face learning environments.

13. Conclusion

This study evaluated the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies within a Critical and Creative Thinking (CRITHNK) course for neurodiverse undergraduates. By linking CASEL's socio-emotional framework with higher-order cognitive tasks, the study demonstrates that emotional regulation, self-awareness, and relational skills serve as foundation elements for logical analysis and peer collaboration. When SEL is embedded directly into academic coursework, supported by UDL principles and structured accommodations, neurodiverse students demonstrate improved self-efficacy, reduced anxiety, and increased participation in group leadership. Socio-emotional growth among neurodiverse learners is best achieved not through forced conformity, but through the creation of flexible, neurodiversity-affirming learning environments discipline-embedded SEL represents a practical, scalable model for advancing tertiary inclusive education.

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Data Availability Statement: The qualitative data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality and ethical restrictions protecting vulnerable student populations. De-identified excerpts and thematic summaries are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable academic request.

Ethical Approval Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki and national research guidelines. Ethical review and institutional clearance were granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study prior to data collection.

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