

PROMOTING STUDENT EMPATHY THROUGH CASEL-ALIGNED SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract. Empathy is a multidimensional capacity that includes understanding another person's perspective, sharing or responding to another person's emotional state, and expressing empathic concern. Although social and emotional learning (SEL) is frequently proposed as a school-based pathway for strengthening empathy, the evidence base includes heterogeneous interventions, implementation, assessment, and conceptual studies. This systematic review examined how school-based SEL interventions that were explicitly or transparently aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework addressed student empathy. Searches of Scopus and ScienceDirect identified 1,709 records. Following database filtering, screening, and retrieval, 26 reports were retained in an evidence map. Thirteen evaluated student interventions, including five studies with direct empathy, perspective-taking, or empathic-concern outcomes; the remaining reports provided implementation, assessment, or contextual evidence. A narrative synthesis distinguished direct empathy outcomes from closely related interpersonal constructs, behavioral proxies, and distal school outcomes. Direct intervention studies reported promising short-term changes in empathy or in closely specified empathy dimensions, but heterogeneous designs, measures, cultural settings, and follow-up periods limited the generalizability of the findings. Proxy outcomes such as prosocial behavior, school connectedness, or reduced bullying were informative but did not independently demonstrate increased empathy. Implementation evidence emphasized educator preparation, leadership support, contextual adaptation, time, resources, and program coherence. CASEL-aligned SEL may provide a useful framework for empathy-focused school counseling, provided that interventions explicitly target and directly measure empathy.

Keywords: CASEL framework, social and emotional learning, empathy, school-based intervention, guidance and counseling, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

Empathy is central to students' social development because it supports understanding of others' experiences, responsive concern, constructive peer interaction, and participation in diverse communities. It is not a single outcome. Multidimensional accounts distinguish cognitive processes, such as perspective-taking, from affective responsiveness and empathic concern (Davis, 1983; Decety & Jackson, 2004). Developmental and measurement research further indicates that empathy should be separated from, although it may be associated with, compassion, prosocial behavior, aggression, and interpersonal functioning (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). This distinction is important in intervention research: a reduction in bullying or an increase in helping behavior may be compatible with empathy development, but it does not demonstrate a change in empathy unless empathy is directly assessed.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) provides a broad educational framework for developing intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies. The CASEL framework identifies five interrelated domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). Social awareness most directly encompasses perspective-taking, empathy, appreciation of diversity, and understanding of social norms. In contrast, relationship skills translate interpersonal understanding into communication, cooperation, conflict management, and help-seeking or help-giving behavior. The framework is therefore conceptually relevant to empathy-focused programming, but CASEL alignment should not be inferred solely from a study's mention of SEL, compassion, or prosocial behavior.

Evidence from broad school-based SEL research is generally favorable but heterogeneous. An influential meta-analysis of 213 universal school-based interventions found improvements in social-emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance, particularly when programs used sequenced, active, focused, and explicit practices (Durlak et al., 2011). Follow-up evidence suggested that benefits can persist beyond program completion (Taylor et al., 2017). A more recent meta-analysis of 424 studies from 53 countries also reported positive average outcomes while emphasizing substantial variation in content, implementation, context, and measurement (Cipriano et al., 2023). These meta-analyses support SEL as a broad approach, but they do not establish that all SEL programs specifically improve empathy.

The literature reviewed in the present study includes direct empathy-focused interventions, compassion-oriented curricula, technology-mediated perspective-taking activities, anti-bullying programs, whole-school implementation studies, psychometric work, and conceptual sources. Treating these sources as a single evidentiary group would obscure major differences in design and inferential strength. Randomized and quasi-experimental student interventions can contribute to questions about outcome change; implementation studies can identify barriers and facilitators; psychometric studies can inform measurement; and conceptual or review sources can provide context. They should not be used interchangeably.

Accordingly, this review aimed to synthesize the student-intervention evidence while separately mapping implementation, assessment, and contextual literature relevant to CASEL-aligned empathy development. In this review, CASEL-aligned refers to an intervention that (a) explicitly used the CASEL framework; (b) explicitly targeted one or more CASEL competencies, particularly social awareness or relationship skills; (c) contained activities or outcomes that could be transparently mapped to CASEL competencies; or (d) used another SEL framework with a clearly articulated conceptual correspondence to CASEL. The term does not imply that CASEL developed, endorsed, or certified the program.

The review addressed four questions: (1) How have CASEL-aligned school-based SEL interventions been used to promote student empathy? (2) What direct and proxy empathy-related outcomes have been reported? (3) What implementation conditions support or constrain these interventions? and (4) What implications can be drawn for school guidance and counseling practice?

METHODS

Research Design and Reporting Framework

The study used a systematic literature review design and was reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). Because the records differed substantially in intervention type, research design, participants, outcome constructs, and measurement, a narrative evidence synthesis

was used rather than meta-analysis. The revised approach separated primary evidence on student interventions from secondary evidence on implementation, assessment, and context.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The search was conducted in Scopus and ScienceDirect using combinations of terms referring to SEL or CASEL, empathy-related constructs, student populations, school settings, and interventions. The Scopus search string was: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("social emotional learning" OR "social and emotional learning" OR SEL OR CASEL OR "CASEL framework") AND (empath* OR "perspective taking" OR "empathic concern" OR compassion OR "prosocial behavior" OR "prosocial behaviour") AND (student* OR pupil* OR adolescent* OR youth) AND (school* OR classroom* OR "school-based") AND (intervention* OR program* OR programme* OR curriculum OR training)). The ScienceDirect search string was: ("social emotional learning" OR "social and emotional learning" OR SEL OR CASEL) AND (empathy OR "perspective taking" OR "empathic concern" OR compassion) AND (student OR students OR adolescent OR school) AND (intervention OR program OR curriculum OR training).

Operational Definition and CASEL-Alignment Coding

Each record was classified as explicitly aligned, transparently mapped, or contextual. Explicit alignment was assigned when the authors named CASEL or an intervention model that formally incorporated CASEL competencies. Transparent mapping was assigned when the intervention's stated content, activities, or outcome domains clearly corresponded to one or more CASEL competencies, especially social awareness or relationship skills. Contextual sources discussed related constructs but did not evaluate a CASEL-aligned student intervention. Coding was based on the information available in the manuscript extraction matrix.

Eligibility Criteria

Primary inclusion criteria for the intervention synthesis were: (a) school-age students in elementary, middle, or secondary education; (b) a school-based program, curriculum, structured activity, or intervention; (c) post-intervention data; (d) explicit or transparently mapped CASEL alignment; and (e) a direct empathy outcome or an outcome closely related to empathy. Studies that evaluated student interventions but measured only behavioral proxies or distal school outcomes were retained as supporting evidence for the intervention and were not treated as direct proof of change in empathy.

Secondary supporting evidence was considered eligible when it addressed implementation, educator readiness, leadership, sustainability, empathy/SEL assessment, or conceptual context directly relevant to the review questions. These records were categorized as implementation, assessment, or contextual/conceptual evidence. Reviews, conceptual papers, psychometric studies, correlational studies, and teacher-education studies were not used to support claims about intervention effectiveness.

Records were excluded from the intervention synthesis if they lacked a school-based student intervention, post-intervention outcome data, or a defensible CASEL mapping. Unavailable full-text reports and duplicate records were excluded from the review process.

Study Selection

The database searches identified 1,709 records: 238 from Scopus and 1,471 from ScienceDirect. A total of 1,538 records were removed through database inclusion filters, leaving

171 records for title and abstract screening. Of these, 125 were excluded. Forty-six reports were sought for retrieval, 20 could not be retrieved, and 26 were assessed for eligibility. The review included 26 studies represented by 26 reports.

Data Extraction and Evidence Classification

Data were extracted on author, year, country, participants, design, intervention or focus, CASEL alignment, direct empathy outcomes, related constructs, proxy or distal outcomes, and principal findings. Each record was assigned to one of five categories: core direct-intervention evidence, supporting intervention evidence, implementation evidence, assessment evidence, or contextual/conceptual evidence. The intervention synthesis was based on core and supporting intervention studies; other categories informed only implementation, measurement, and practice discussions.

Outcome Taxonomy

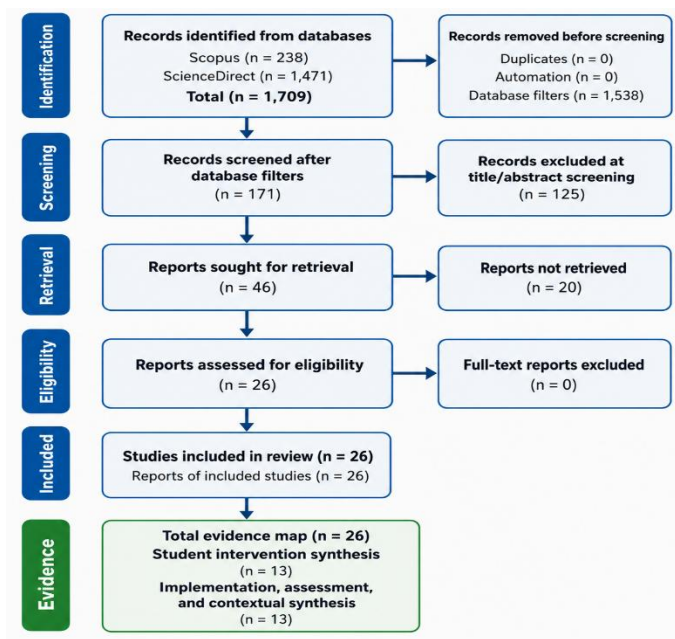
Outcomes were coded into four non-equivalent groups. Direct empathy outcomes comprised total empathy, cognitive or affective empathy, perspective taking, and empathic concern. Closely related interpersonal outcomes included compassion, social awareness, common humanity, relational competence, and digital empathy. Behavioral proxies included prosocial behavior, helping, peer support, social responsibility, and bystander behavior. Distal school outcomes included bullying or cyberbullying, classroom climate, school connectedness, student–teacher relationships, academic engagement, and problem behavior. Proxy and distal outcomes were interpreted as potentially relevant consequences or correlates, not as substitutes for direct empathy measurement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study Selection

The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram is shown in Figure 1. Twenty-six reports were retained in the evidence map. Of the 13 evaluated student interventions, five were classified as core direct-intervention evidence and eight as supporting intervention evidence. The remaining 13 reports comprised four implementation studies, two assessment studies, and seven contextual or conceptual sources. Thus, the final review did not treat all 26 reports as equivalent evidence of intervention effectiveness.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram on study identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion



Characteristics and Evidence Classification

The core direct-intervention group included ASE in Ireland, immersive or documentary-based empathy experiences in Taiwan and Australia, EmPeCemos-Universal in Spain, and SEE Learning in India. Supporting intervention studies evaluated broader SEL, character education, physical activity, cooperative games, listening, or anti-bullying programs but relied mainly on related constructs, behavioral proxies, qualitative perceptions, or distal outcomes. Implementation studies examined whole-school uptake, crisis-context delivery, principal perspectives, and educator professional development. Assessment and contextual sources were used to inform measurement and interpretation, rather than to assess effectiveness.

Table 1. Concise evidence classification of the 2026 included reports

Author/year	Country	Participants	Design	Intervention/focus	CASEL alignment	Empathy outcome type	Evidence category	Main finding
Silke et al. (2024)	Ireland	539 secondary students	Randomized intervention evaluation	Activating Social Empathy (ASE)	Explicit empathy-based SEL; maps to social awareness and relationship skills	Direct empathy; prosocial behavior as proxy	Core direct-intervention evidence	Higher post-test empathy; empathy mediated selected prosocial outcomes.
Min et al. (2024)	South Korea	348 Grade 3–4 students	Pre–post with follow-up	Six-week SEE Learning	Alternative SEL model with transparent mapping to compassion, social awareness, and self-management	Closely related competencies; direct empathy measure not confirmed	Supporting intervention evidence	Improved resilience and broader social-emotional competencies; empathy-specific measurement requires verification.
Pan et al. (2025)	Taiwan	504 children aged 9–10	Quasi-experimental/mediation analysis	Immersive social-conflict simulations	Construct-level mapping to social awareness and perspective taking	State empathy; prosocial intentions	Core direct-intervention evidence	Presence supported state empathy and prosocial intentions; causal interpretation should remain limited.
Phillips et al. (2025)	Australia	Secondary students aged 13–15	Comparative intervention study	VR versus 2D empathy-provoking documentary	Construct-level alignment through perspective taking and social awareness	Direct empathy	Core direct-intervention evidence	Empathy rose immediately but was not sustained at the two-week follow-up.
Al-Qallaf (2025)	Kuwait	404 high-school students	Cross-sectional correlational/SEM	Digital empathy and cyberbullying	No evaluated CASEL-aligned intervention	Digital empathy; cyberbullying as a distal outcome	Contextual or conceptual evidence	Digital empathy and emotional intelligence were associated with lower cyberbullying; there is no evidence of intervention.
Gkatsa & Giannopoulou (2026)	Greece	56 middle-school students; 42 completers	Qualitative/acceptability evaluation	Brief CASEL/RULER-informed activities	Explicit CASEL/RULER alignment	Perceived empathy, social awareness, and relationship skills	Supporting intervention evidence	Participants reported improved social-emotional skills; standardized effect estimates were not reported in the manuscript summary.
Aguilar-Raab et al. (2026)	Germany	Educators, staff, and school leaders	Qualitative implementation study	EmS whole-school empathy initiative	Explicit empathy-based whole-school SEL	Implementation outcomes	Implementation evidence	Identified facilitators and barriers related to values, flexibility, workload, scheduling, and staff engagement.
Couto & Alves (2026)	Portugal	87 students in Years 2–3	Quasi-experimental	Adapted Step-by-Step SEL program	Competencies mapped to CASEL; social awareness measured	Social awareness; empathy in open responses	Supporting intervention evidence	Immediate gains in social awareness and other competencies; empathy was not established as a separate standardized outcome.
Piñeiro-Dosil et al. (2026)	Spain	365 first-grade students	Quasi-experimental preliminary evaluation	EmPeCemos-Universal	SEL curriculum mapped to CASEL competencies	Empathy competency	Core direct-intervention evidence	Greater improvement in empathy and emotion regulation than comparison students; preliminary evidence.

Author/year	Country	Participants	Design	Intervention/focus	CASEL alignment	Empathy outcome type	Evidence category	Main finding
Merle et al. (2026)	United States	726 middle-school students	Multi-site cluster randomized trial	CharacterStrong Secondary Curriculum	SEL and character education are mapped to CASEL	Prosocial behavior, problem behavior, student-teacher relationships	Supporting intervention evidence	Improved behavioral and relational outcomes; direct empathy was not reported.
Frazier et al. (2026)	India	Students across nine urban elementary schools	Large-scale exploratory mixed-methods evaluation	SEE Learning	Alternative SEL framework mapped to social awareness, compassion, and self-management	Perspective taking and empathic concern; self-compassion	Core direct-intervention evidence	Reported increases in perspective taking and empathic concern, alongside implementation challenges.
Frazier et al. (2025)	Ukraine	23 implementing teachers	Qualitative interviews	SEE Learning during conflict	Alternative SEL framework mapped to empathy and compassion	Teacher-perceived emotional understanding and classroom safety	Implementation evidence	Teachers described the feasibility and perceived classroom benefits; no direct estimate of student effect.
Nishioka et al. (2026)	United States	253 students, 29 parents, 10 teachers	Mixed-methods program evaluation	NaliniKIDS	Program mapped to SEL competencies and school connectedness	Prosocial behavior; school connectedness	Supporting intervention evidence	Small prosocial change and implementation lessons concerning training, time, resources, and adaptation.
Kuspratiwi et al. (2026)	Indonesia	192 Grade 4–5 students	Cluster-randomized controlled trial	Cooperative Circuit Games	Activity-based mapping to relationship skills and responsible decision-making	Prosocial behavior; total difficulties	Supporting intervention evidence	Improved prosocial behavior and reduced difficulties; empathy was not directly measured.
Li & Hesketh (2026)	China	230 intervention; 325 controls	Mixed-methods quasi-experimental trial	SEL-based anti-bullying program	Explicit CASEL-based rationale	Understanding of empathy in interviews; victimization and bullying outcomes	Supporting intervention evidence	Reduced self-reported victimization and improved qualitative understanding; no validated direct empathy outcome reported.
Han et al. (2026)	United States	494 seventh-grade students	Observational pre-post assessment	Listening with Curiosity Project	Maps to social awareness and relationship skills	Common humanity, connection to others, and academic engagement	Supporting intervention evidence	Listening and curiosity were associated with relational outcomes; lack of a controlled effect design limits causal claims.
Ciszek (2026)	Scotland	Upper-primary students and school materials	Qualitative instructional case study	LGBT-inclusive curriculum analyzed through CASEL	Retrospective CASEL mapping	Perspective-taking and social awareness in qualitative evidence	Contextual or conceptual evidence	Illustrates transformative and inclusive SEL practices but does not establish intervention effectiveness.
Stubbs & Sorensen (2025)	K–12 contexts	Not applicable	Conceptual/practice review	Tabletop role-playing games	Potential mapping to relationship skills and social awareness	No empirical empathy outcome	Contextual or conceptual evidence	Provides program-design rationale rather than direct evidence of effectiveness.
Thayer et al. (2026)	United States	19 principals	Qualitative interviews	Sustaining SEL implementation	System-level CASEL/SEL implementation	Leadership, coherence, sustainability	Implementation evidence	Emphasized leadership commitment, coherent curriculum use, and implementation support.
Sharma et al. (2024)	India	2,097 teachers	Scale development and validation	Teacher beliefs about classroom SEL	Assesses conditions related to SEL delivery	No student empathy outcome	Assessment evidence	Useful for educator readiness measurement, not evidence of student intervention effects.
Jennings et al. (2024)	Educator SEL	Not applicable	Conceptual/review article	Educator's emotional schemas and competencies	Theoretical alignment with systemic SEL	No direct outcome	Contextual or conceptual evidence	Provides theoretical context for educator readiness and co-regulation.
Akamatsu & Gherghel (2025)	School and broader contexts	Not applicable	Perspective review	Failure beliefs through an SEL lens	Primarily self-management/resilience	No empathy outcome	Contextual or conceptual evidence	Peripheral to empathy-focused intervention evidence.

Author/year	Country	Participants	Design	Intervention/focus	CASEL alignment	Empathy outcome type	Evidence category	Main finding
Araya Navarro et al. (2025)	Ibero-American secondary contexts	Five studies in a scoping review	Scoping review	Emotional education programs	Broad SEL-related alignment	Emotional competence and interpersonal skills	Contextual or conceptual evidence	Secondary synthesis should not be pooled with primary intervention studies.
Bordea et al. (2026)	Romania	367 school-age children	Psychometric validation	SIER-C instrument	Empathy subscale relevant to assessment	Direct empathy subscale	Assessment evidence	Provides an assessment option but does not evaluate an intervention.
Rosa (2024)	Sweden	Pre-service teacher curriculum	Qualitative curriculum study	SEL in teacher education	Educator-preparation context	No student empathy outcome	Contextual or conceptual evidence	Relevant to educator preparation, not direct school-student intervention evidence.
Chernicoff et al. (2025)	Mexico	521 educators and 126 leaders	Large-scale pilot/implementation evaluation	Educating for Well-being professional development	Systemic and culturally responsive SEL	Educator competencies and implementation outcomes	Implementation evidence	Supports feasibility and educator capacity; student empathy was not directly assessed.

Direct Evidence of Changes in Student Empathy

Five studies provided the most direct evidence because they assessed empathy, state empathy, perspective-taking, empathic concern, or empathy competency following a student intervention. Silke et al. (2024) reported higher post-intervention empathy among students receiving ASE than among comparison students and identified empathy as a mediator of selected prosocial outcomes. This study most closely matched the review’s focal question because the program and outcome were explicitly empathy-centered.

Technology-mediated studies produced more qualified findings. Pan et al. (2025) reported relationships among immersion, presence, state empathy, and prosocial intentions, but the pathway from immersion to empathy was not uniformly direct. Phillips et al. (2025) found an immediate increase in empathy after both immersive and non-immersive documentary experiences, but the effect did not persist at two weeks. These findings indicate that brief emotionally evocative experiences may change short-term responses without demonstrating durable empathy development.

In early elementary settings, Piñeiro-Dosil et al. (2026) reported greater gains in empathy and emotion regulation for students receiving EmPeCemos-Universal than for comparison students. Frazier et al. (2026) reported increases in perspective taking and empathic concern in an exploratory mixed-methods evaluation of SEE Learning in India. Both findings are promising, although their interpretation depends on the properties of the measures used and the adequacy of the comparison or implementation design.

Taken together, direct evidence suggests that school-based SEL activities can support short-term empathy-related change when empathy is explicitly targeted and measured. The available evidence does not yet permit a definitive conclusion about long-term effects, comparative superiority of program types, or generalizability across settings.

Related and Proxy Outcomes

Eight intervention evaluations contributed supporting rather than direct evidence. Min et al. (2024) reported broader social-emotional and resilience outcomes after SEE Learning, but the supplied extraction did not confirm the presence of a discrete, validated empathy measure. Gkatsa and Giannopoulou (2026) documented perceived changes in social awareness, empathy, and relationship skills after a brief CASEL/RULER-informed intervention; however, the evidence was qualitative and based on completers’ reports.

Couto and Alves (2026) assessed social-emotional competencies using the Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire and found immediate gains in social awareness, self-awareness, and self-management. Empathy appeared in open-ended responses but was not established as a separate standardized outcome. Han et al. (2026) linked listening and interpersonal curiosity with common humanity and connection to others, which are relevant to relational empathy but are not identical to empathy.

Other intervention studies focused on behavioral or school-level proxies. Merle et al. (2026) reported changes in prosocial behavior, problem behavior, engagement, and student–teacher relationships. Nishioka et al. (2026) reported a small increase in prosocial behavior alongside implementation lessons. Kuspratiwi et al. (2026) found improved prosocial behavior and reduced difficulties after cooperative circuit games. Li and Hesketh (2026) reported reduced self-reported victimization and qualitative improvements in understanding empathy and emotion management. These outcomes may reflect useful social-development effects, but they should not be described as direct evidence that empathy increased.

The correlational study by Al-Qallaf (2025) associated digital empathy with lower cyberbullying, but its cross-sectional design cannot establish that increasing digital empathy would reduce cyberbullying. Similarly, assessment, review, and conceptual sources provide measurement or theoretical context rather than intervention effects.

Implementation Conditions

Implementation evidence consistently indicated that curriculum content alone was insufficient. Aguilar-Raab et al. (2026) identified alignment with school values, flexible use, psychologically safe professional learning, and collegial dialogue as facilitators of whole-school empathy implementation; workload, rigid schedules, limited collaboration time, competing priorities, and variable staff engagement as constraints on implementation.

Frazier et al. (2025) showed that teachers could adapt SEE Learning in a conflict-affected context. They perceived improvements in classroom safety and emotional understanding, but these were teacher accounts rather than direct student effects. Thayer et al. (2026) emphasized leadership commitment, curriculum coherence, stable support, and protection against initiative fatigue. Chernicoff et al. (2025) similarly highlighted culturally responsive professional development and leadership capacity.

Across intervention studies, implementation considerations included educator training, time, resources, developmental fit, cultural adaptation, fidelity, opportunities for repeated practice, and integration into ordinary school routines. These conditions should be treated as explanatory context rather than as proof of effectiveness.

Quality and Certainty of the Evidence

The evidence base shows several sources of uncertainty, including heterogeneous designs, inconsistent definitions of empathy, varied measures, frequent reliance on self-report or qualitative perception, short follow-up periods, and the inclusion of studies without controlled counterfactuals. Only a minority of studies directly measured empathy, and some direct studies reported immediate rather than sustained effects. Therefore, the synthesis supports a judgment of promising but not definitive evidence.

RQ1: Uses of CASEL-Aligned SEL to Promote Empathy

CASEL-aligned school interventions approached empathy through explicit empathy curricula, compassion-oriented SEL, perspective-taking simulations, instruction in emotions and relationships, cooperative learning, listening practice, anti-bullying activities, and whole-school implementation. The most defensible alignment occurred when programs explicitly named CASEL, directly targeted social awareness or relationship skills, or measured perspective taking, empathic concern, or empathy. More indirect alignment occurred when programs focused on broad SEL, prosocial behavior, or school climate. This distinction should remain visible because construct-level resemblance does not establish that a program was designed or endorsed by CASEL.

RQ2: Direct and Proxy Outcome

The direct outcome evidence was narrower than the original manuscript implied. Five studies assessed empathy or a clearly specified empathy dimension after intervention. Several reported promising short-term improvements, but one technology-mediated study found that gains were not sustained at two-week follow-up. Other studies reported social awareness, compassion, common humanity, prosocial behavior, reduced victimization, better relationships, or school connectedness. These constructs may be theoretically associated with empathy, but they differ in content and measurement. The revised synthesis, therefore, does not treat them as interchangeable.

This distinction has methodological implications. Future evaluations should select validated, age-appropriate measures that differentiate cognitive and affective components, report measurement properties, and, where feasible, combine student self-report with behavioral, peer, teacher, or observational indicators. Measures such as the Interpersonal Reactivity Index or the Basic Empathy Scale illustrate multidimensional assessment traditions, but instrument choice should be developmentally and culturally validated for the target population (Davis, 1983; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

RQ3: Implementation Conditions

Implementation was supported by trained and emotionally prepared educators, leadership commitment, coherent program selection, time for collaboration, culturally responsive adaptation, repeated practice, and integration with school routines. Workload, competing academic demands, rigid schedules, insufficient resources, inconsistent staff engagement, and program turnover were recurring constraints. These findings are consistent with the broader SEL literature, which shows that implementation quality and context moderate outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). However, implementation perceptions should not be confused with student-level effectiveness.

RQ4: Implications for Guidance and Counseling

School counselors can use the CASEL framework as a planning map rather than as a claim of program certification. Empathy-focused guidance should explicitly identify whether the target is cognitive perspective taking, affective responsiveness, empathic concern, compassion, or prosocial action. Classroom guidance and small-group activities may include emotion recognition, perspective-taking narratives, role-play, structured listening, empathy mapping, reflection on digital interactions, cooperative problem-solving, bystander decision-making, and service-oriented projects. The strongest alignment with the evidence would involve sequenced, active, focused, and explicit practice rather than isolated awareness activities.

Evaluation should distinguish proximal from distal outcomes. Proximal outcomes include validated measures of empathy, perspective taking, and empathic concern. Closely related outcomes include social awareness, compassion, and relational competence. Behavioral and school-level indicators, including prosocial behavior, bullying, classroom climate, and school connectedness, can be retained as secondary outcomes. This structure allows counselors to determine whether an intervention changes empathy itself, changes behavior without a measurable change in empathy, or changes both.

In Indonesian schools, counselors may contextualize SEL with values such as gotong royong, mutual respect, care, tolerance, and collective responsibility. Cultural adaptation should modify examples, language, delivery, and measures while preserving the intervention's theory of change. It should not be assumed that a program validated elsewhere will transfer unchanged to Indonesian guidance and counseling settings.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, the search used only Scopus and ScienceDirect, which may have omitted relevant studies indexed elsewhere. Second, the evidence map included heterogeneous primary, implementation, assessment, review, and conceptual sources. However, because these were separated in the synthesis, the retrieval process was broader than that of a conventional intervention-effectiveness review. Third, measurement instruments were not fully reported in the available extraction for several studies. Fourth, many studies were recent, brief, exploratory, or lacked long-term follow-up. These limitations require cautious interpretation of the findings.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should test empathy-focused, culturally responsive SEL using adequately powered randomized or strong quasi-experimental designs, prespecified outcomes, validated multidimensional empathy measures, multi-informant data, implementation-fidelity indicators, and follow-up assessments. Studies should report whether empathy is a primary outcome, mediator, or contextual construct. Comparative work is also needed to determine whether explicit empathy instruction, compassion-oriented curricula, immersive perspective-taking, cooperative learning, or whole-school models produce different patterns of change across developmental stages.

CONCLUSION

The available evidence indicates that school-based SEL interventions may support student empathy, particularly when empathy, perspective taking, or empathic concern is explicitly targeted and directly measured. Five studies provided the most direct evidence, while eight additional intervention studies contributed related, behavioral, or distal outcomes. Implementation research emphasized educator readiness, leadership, contextual adaptation, time, resources, and coherent schoolwide support. However, the strength of the conclusion is limited by heterogeneous designs, varied outcome measures, indirect proxy outcomes, and limited long-term follow-up. CASEL offers a useful organizing framework for empathy-focused guidance and counseling. However, future studies should use rigorous experimental or longitudinal designs and distinguish direct changes in empathy from changes in prosocial behavior, reductions in bullying, or school-climate outcomes.

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