

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS PROGRAMME: STRENGTHENING SOCIO-EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE OF FOUNDATION PHASE LEARNERS

Liza-Mari Rawlins¹

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3920-4813>

Lynne Damons²

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0712-671X>

Elsa Etokabeka³

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1110-2283>

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how an adapted Circle of Friends programme can strengthen socio-emotional intelligence among foundation phase learners living in a South African informal settlement. The objective was to investigate whether this intervention could enhance self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills in vulnerable children. Using participatory action research methodology grounded in social constructivist theory, nine Grade 2 learners (aged 7-8 years) from a nonprofit primary school in Masiphumelele participated in a ten week focus group session. The sessions incorporated interactive activities such as storytelling, drawing, clay work, and reflective exercises designed to develop socio-emotional competencies. Data was analysed using interpretive qualitative methods, to identify emerging themes related to the children's lived experiences. Results revealed four key themes: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. Participants demonstrated marked improvement in emotional vocabulary, ability to identify personal emotional triggers, empathy recognition, interpretation of social cues, self-regulation strategies using breathing and calming techniques, and positive communication including conflict resolution. In the end, the Circle of Friends programme created safe, inclusive spaces where children could practice socio-emotional competencies through peer interaction and guided reflection. These findings indicate that structured, creative social-emotional learning interventions can effectively support emotional regulation and enhance interpersonal skills among vulnerable children in South African educational contexts.

Keywords: socio-emotional intelligence, Circle of Friends programme, social-emotional learning, South Africa.

Programa Circle of Friends: fortalecimento da inteligência socioemocional de estudantes da fase de fundamentação
RESUMO

Este estudo qualitativo explorou como um programa adaptado do Círculo de Amigos pode fortalecer a inteligência socioemocional dos alunos da fase inicial da literacia que vivem num assentamento informal na África do Sul. O objetivo foi investigar se esta intervenção poderia melhorar a autoconsciência, a consciência social, a autogestão e as competências de relacionamento em crianças vulneráveis. Utilizando a metodologia de investigação-ação participativa fundamentada na teoria socioconstrutivista, nove alunos do 2º ano (com idades compreendidas entre os 7 e os 8 anos) de uma escola primária sem fins lucrativos em Masiphumelele participaram numa sessão de focus group com a duração de dez semanas. As sessões incluíram atividades interativas, como a narração de histórias, o desenho, a modelagem em barro e exercícios reflexivos, elaboradas para desenvolver competências socioemocionais. Os dados foram analisados utilizando métodos qualitativos interpretativos, para identificar temas emergentes relacionados com as experiências vividas pelas crianças. Os resultados revelaram quatro temas principais: autoconsciência, consciência

¹ Stellenbosch University, South Africa. lizamarirawlins@gmail.com

² Stellenbosch University, South Africa. ldamons@sun.ac.za

³ Stellenbosch University, South Africa. elsa.marlyse@gmail.com

social, autogestão e competências de relacionamento. Os participantes demonstraram uma melhoria significativa no vocabulário emocional, na capacidade de identificar gatilhos emocionais pessoais, no reconhecimento da empatia, na interpretação de sinais sociais, nas estratégias de autorregulação com recurso a técnicas de respiração e relaxamento, e na comunicação positiva, incluindo a resolução de conflitos. No final, o programa Círculo de Amigos criou espaços seguros e inclusivos onde as crianças puderam praticar competências socioemocionais através da interação entre pares e da reflexão guiada. Estes resultados indicam que as intervenções estruturadas e criativas de aprendizagem socioemocional podem apoiar eficazmente a regulação emocional e melhorar as competências interpessoais em crianças vulneráveis em contextos educativos sul-africanos.

Palavras-chave: inteligência socioemocional, programa Círculo de Amigos, aprendizagem socioemocional, África do Sul.

Programa Circle of Friends: fortalecimiento de la inteligencia socioemocional en estudiantes de la fase de fundamentación

RESUMEN

Este estudio cualitativo exploró cómo un programa Circle of Friends adaptado puede fortalecer la inteligencia socioemocional en estudiantes de la fase de fundamentación que viven en un asentamiento informal de Sudáfrica. El objetivo fue investigar si esta intervención podía mejorar la autoconciencia, la conciencia social, la autogestión y las habilidades de relación en niños en situación de vulnerabilidad. Mediante una metodología de investigación-acción participativa, sustentada en la teoría del constructivismo social, participaron nueve estudiantes de segundo grado (de 7 a 8 años) de una escuela primaria sin fines de lucro ubicada en Masiphumelele, quienes formaron parte de un grupo focal durante diez semanas. Las sesiones incorporaron actividades interactivas como narración de historias, dibujo, modelado con arcilla y ejercicios reflexivos, diseñados para desarrollar competencias socioemocionales. Los datos fueron analizados mediante métodos cualitativos interpretativos, con el fin de identificar temas emergentes relacionados con las experiencias vividas por los niños. Los resultados revelaron cuatro temas clave: autoconciencia, conciencia social, autogestión y habilidades de relación. Los participantes demostraron una mejora significativa en el vocabulario emocional, la capacidad para identificar detonantes emocionales personales, el reconocimiento de la empatía, la interpretación de señales sociales, el uso de estrategias de autorregulación mediante técnicas de respiración y calma, así como una comunicación positiva que incluyó la resolución de conflictos. Finalmente, el programa Circle of Friends creó espacios seguros e inclusivos donde los niños pudieron practicar competencias socioemocionales a través de la interacción entre pares y la reflexión guiada. Estos hallazgos indican que las intervenciones estructuradas y creativas de aprendizaje socioemocional pueden apoyar eficazmente la regulación emocional y fortalecer las habilidades interpersonales en niños vulnerables dentro de los contextos educativos sudafricanos.

Palabras clave: inteligencia socioemocional, programa Circle of Friends, aprendizaje socioemocional, Sudáfrica.

Introduction

The development of socio-emotional intelligence (SEI) in children is critically important as it equips young learners with essential skills to navigate their learning and social environments successfully, establishing foundations for long-term personal and interpersonal success (De Klerk & Le Roux, 2003). Children who possess strong socio-emotional competencies demonstrate numerous advantages across multiple developmental domains. They enjoy better physical and mental health, perform above average academically, build positive peer relationships, exhibit fewer behavioural problems, and show deeper understanding of both their emotions and others' perspectives (Louw & Louw, 2020). Furthermore, these children demonstrate higher levels of self-confidence and self-acceptance, possess sound decision-making skills, and cope more effectively when faced with challenges. Research by Petrides et al., (2006) supports these findings, revealing a strong connection between SEI and healthy relationships in school settings. Socio-emotional competencies such as empathy, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills serve as protective factors against common behavioural and disciplinary problems including aggression and violence (Schultz et al., 2021; Blalock et al., 2019). This protective function plays a critical role in promoting social and behavioural adjustment across various environments and in achieving positive life outcomes.

Despite the clear benefits of SEI, there exists a notable gap in the research literature. While quantitative studies have established correlations between SEI and various positive outcomes, there remains a lack of qualitative studies focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes—initiatives designed to support children's SEI development. A qualitative study would offer a unique opportunity to explore the nuanced processes through which children develop socio-emotional competencies, capturing the lived experiences and meaning-making that occur within intervention contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring an SEL intervention designed to promote personal and interpersonal skills. The South African educational context presents particular challenges and opportunities for SEL interventions. Many children in informal settlements face significant socio-economic adversities such as poverty, community violence,

and limited access to resources; these factors that can impede socio-emotional development. Therefore, understanding how to adapt and implement SEL programmes in these contexts is of importance to support vulnerable children's development in resource-constrained settings.

The Circle of Friends programme has emerged as a promising intervention that can enhance SEI development. This peer-mediated approach incorporates interactive activities such as focus groups, visual tasks, games, and peer observation opportunities. According to Cefai and Cooper (2009: 120), the approach "encourages the practice of social-emotional skills in an inclusive, caring and democratic climate," making it particularly suitable for fostering social competencies such as listening, paying attention, and awareness of non-verbal communication. Central to the programme is the concept of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978), which involves supportive learning experiences that enable children to experience success and build mastery. The scaffolding process is both active and engaging, allowing learners to develop essential SEI skills that ultimately enable children to become "agents of change".

This study aims to contribute to the limited body of knowledge regarding innovative and creative strategies for implementing SEL programmes in the South African learning context, particularly focusing on communities that face significant social challenges. The research question that guided this study explored: How can the Circle of Friends programme be adapted to strengthen socio-emotional intelligence in foundation phase learners? This study examines the processes through which participation in an adapted Circle of Friends programme influences children's self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and decision-making—key skills necessary to handle everyday challenges children face in their surroundings.

Literature body

Socio-emotional intelligence

To gain comprehensive understanding of SEI, it is essential to first examine the foundational concepts of emotional and social intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EI) was initially defined by Mayer and Salovey (1997: 10) as:

"the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotions; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth".

This definition emphasizes individual differences in the ability to recognise, process, and express one's own emotions, as well as understand and respond to others' emotions (Petrides & Furnham, 2003). UlutAŞ et al., (2021) extended this perspective by defining EI as the capacity to manage both personal emotions and interpersonal relationships effectively; whereas Humphrey et al., (2010) outlines emotional awareness of self and others, coupled with the ability to regulate emotional experiences and engage in constructive interpersonal interactions. Similarly, Brackett et al., (2004: 1389) define EI as "the ability to perceive and accurately express emotions, to use emotions to facilitate thought, to understand emotions, and to manage emotions for emotional growth".

Now in relation to social intelligence (SI), the term closely relates to EI. Cantor and Kihlstrom (2000) defined it as a person's ability to understand the social world. The theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2000) further advanced this concept by incorporating interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence. Gardner defined interpersonal intelligence as the ability to understand people—their motivations, working styles, and collaborative approaches—whereas intrapersonal intelligence represents the capacity to form an accurate, realistic model of oneself (Gardner, 2000).

Taken together, SEI represents a holistic understanding of how individuals perceive, express, and regulate emotions in both personal and social contexts. It enables individuals to manage themselves while simultaneously building and sustaining meaningful relationships with others. SEI is fundamental to personal growth, social cohesion, and effective functioning across various life domains. Developing SEI in children is not merely beneficial but essential for their holistic development and lifelong success (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

The Development of Social-Emotional Learning in the learning environment

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which individuals develop and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and regulate emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate empathy, build healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions (Brush et al., 2022). SEL can be taught through various methods that embed these competencies into daily classroom activities. When implemented systematically, SEL has been shown to enhance prosocial behaviours, strengthen social connections, and improve academic outcomes.

Structured lesson plans that incorporate children's literature provide an effective way to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) into classroom settings (Heath et al., 2017). This is because the stories present relatable characters and situations that help learners engage with and internalize social-emotional concepts (Morton & Akram, 2022). By connecting emotionally with narratives, children develop a deeper understanding of complex feelings and social interactions. This is why teachers play a crucial role in guiding discussions and facilitating activities after reading, as it enables learners to meaningfully practice and apply the competencies (Aerila et al., 2021).

The broader school environment also plays a critical role in developing socio-emotional skills. Schools can nurture children's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and essential social and academic abilities by fostering positive relationships among teachers, peers, and families. Effective school-based SEL programmes adopt holistic approaches, creating supportive school climates that promote resilience, psychosocial well-being, and strong sense of belonging. These programmes often involve collaboration among teachers, mental health professionals, and parents to provide comprehensive support systems for students (Stavrou & Kourkoutas, 2017). An important strategy within these programmes involves cultivating inclusive and emotionally supportive school cultures. This includes promoting student voice, developing clear behavioural expectations rooted in empathy and respect, and providing educators with professional development in SEL competencies (Barnes et al., 2023). When these elements are present, students are better equipped to manage emotional challenges and engage positively with their peers and communities.

Then there is also the practice of bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy involves the intentional use of stories to support emotional and social development. Teachers can select books that align with SEL competencies outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Following reading activities, children can participate in discussions, creative exercises, and reflective activities to reinforce key themes such as empathy, self-regulation, and decision-making (Ulutaş et al., 2021). Supplemental resources that include inspirational posters, discussion prompts, and age-appropriate video clips can further enhance the lessons and encourage deeper reflection on emotional and interpersonal dynamics (Devis-Rozental, 2018; Herrera et al., 2017).

Applying the Circle of Friends Programme to Build Socio-Emotional Skills

The Circle of Friends programme is a peer-mediated intervention designed to enhance socio-emotional skills among children, particularly those experiencing social and behavioural difficulties. Mosley (2009) explains that this approach creates structured opportunities for children to build and practice essential interpersonal competencies within supportive, inclusive environments. This intervention has been implemented across the United Kingdom and has proven effective for learners facing various challenges, including those at risk of exclusion due to behavioural and social adjustment difficulties (Whipple et al., 2018).

According to Schlieder et al., (2014), the Circle of Friends programme's primary objective is fostering safe and cooperative spaces where children with socio-emotional difficulties can strengthen their social interaction skills. Within this setting, children are encouraged to support one another in addressing commonly identified difficulties, thereby fostering community sense and mutual responsibility (Schlieder et al., 2014). The intervention typically operates through weekly meetings where children engage in collaborative and inclusive dialogue. A central programme component is circle time—an interactive and inclusive practice where children gather in circles to engage in discussions, activities, and reflections. This format promotes caring and democratic environments, allowing participants to express their thoughts and feelings openly. During circle time, children may discuss various topics, participate in games, share experiences, and learn to listen to one another, fostering EI, empathy, and social skills. This practice aims to create community sense among participants, encouraging them to support each other and develop healthy relationships (Mosley, 2009).

Mosley (2009) notes that the Circle of Friends model has potential to positively influence how children perceive and interpret both their own behaviour and that of others. This can be achieved through self-reflection, collaboration with others, discussing feelings, and providing feedback on various topics. Specific emphasis is placed on emotional awareness, self-regulation, prosocial behaviour, and cooperative problem-solving. This study aimed to empower participants by adapting the Circle of Friends approach to allow them to draw upon their lived experiences while learning from their peers. Stimulus materials for focus group discussions were carefully selected to evoke authentic responses and foster meaningful engagement. The researcher used open-ended questions, prompting, and probing techniques to facilitate conversation

and reflection. The ultimate goal of this approach was fostering measurable shifts in socio-emotional competence among participants.

Apart from verbal discussions, the Circle of Friends programme integrates various interactive and creative activities. These activities are intended to support self-reflection and the exploration of new social behaviours practically and experientially. For successful Circle of Friends intervention, researchers should curate diverse toolkits of purposeful exercises tailored to specific group needs. Researchers need to consider participants' language proficiency, cognitive abilities, and emotional readiness. To safely and effectively implement these activities, researchers must remain flexible, have access to adequate resources, and remain sensitive to group dynamics (Garfat et al., 2013; Mosley, 2009). Ultimately, the Circle of Friends programme offers holistic and engaging pathways for promoting social and emotional growth. By creating opportunities for shared learning and self-discovery, the intervention supports the development of emotionally resilient and socially competent children capable of navigating interpersonal relationship complexities both within and beyond classrooms.

Theoretical framework

The study was grounded in social constructivist theory, which emphasizes knowledge co-construction through human interaction and experiential understanding. A social constructivist view acknowledges that reality is neither fixed nor objective. Rather, individual reality consists of multiple, fluid interpretations shaped by individual perspectives and social engagement. This study explored how participants actively constructed their realities and meanings based on their lived experiences within specific socio-cultural contexts. This approach is underpinned by the epistemological belief that creative exploration enables children to participate more authentically, actively, and collaboratively in research processes. Central to this study was recognition that participants, particularly child participants, are active agents in meaning-making processes. This study engaged participants in conversations, collaborative activities, and reflective dialogue with the purpose of capturing participants' perceptions, emotional responses, and learning processes in authentic and respectful manners, generating insights into child-participants' socio-emotional worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods using participatory action research methodology. This approach created space for creative exploration that allowed children to participate more authentically, actively, and collaboratively in the research process. The data reflected participants' perceptions and experiences (Christensen & James, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.1 Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to gain insight into the research problem—exploring whether an adaptation of the Circle of Friends intervention programme can enhance SEI competencies of primary-school learners within informal settlements. This was achieved by selecting participants best positioned to contribute meaningful information. This technique involves selecting individuals from whom knowledge can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Nine Grade 2 learners, aged seven and eight years were included in this study. The age group falls within the middle childhood developmental stage, a critical period for developing social-emotional competencies. All participants attended the same nonprofit organisation (NPO), an independent primary school located in the informal settlement of Masiphumelele in the Western Cape.

Informed Consent and Ethical Considerations

Both parents and children agreed to participate in this study before commencing. As required by the University's ethical clearance and the Department of Basic Education, parents or legal guardians provided informed consent for their children's participation, while children gave assent, indicating their willingness to participate in the research study (Republic of South Africa, 2005; Gravetter & Forzano, 2003). Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and risks. This was communicated in age-appropriate language, and learners were encouraged to ask questions to ensure full comprehension. Lastly, their rights to anonymity, voluntary participation, and withdrawal without consequence was explained.

Focus Group

In applying the Participatory Action Research approach, data were generated through focus groups. Focus groups are socially oriented methods that foster interaction and co-construction of meaning among participants (Kitzinger, 1995, as cited in McDonald, 2014). The researcher included prompts, probing questions, and scaffolding to facilitate discussion and reflection. The study also used and adapted a version of the Circle of Friends programme, which helped create safe, inclusive, and supportive spaces. This nurtured the development of socio-emotional competencies including self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and relationship-building. The researcher focused on creating environments where participants felt comfortable sharing their lived realities and learning from each other.

Data collection, research Activities

Data for this study was collected through a series of planned activities. Ten sessions were conducted over 10 weeks, with each session lasting between 40 minutes to an hour. These sessions allowed enough time to explore the study themes in depth. The activities included drawing, working with clay, read-aloud storytelling, and reflective exercises, which were used during focus group discussions. The activities were chosen to help participants practice managing their emotions and developing self-regulation skills. All sessions were carefully planned and structured to encourage active participation and meaningful interaction. This interactive approach helped children feel comfortable and confident in sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using an interpretive qualitative approach, which focuses on carefully exploring and understanding participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis followed four main steps. First, the recordings were transcribed. Next, the researcher read through the data to identify early ideas and emerging themes. Notes were made on patterns, comments, key ideas, and important concepts, and these were used to code the data. Related ideas were then grouped together, and appropriate codes were assigned to each group. This repeated and careful process resulted in developing themes that were directly linked to the research question. The themes reflected participants' lived experiences, particularly their socio-emotional development, emotional language, relationships with others, and self-regulation skills.

Findings/Results

In this study, nine participants provided answers to the research question. The study aimed to explore how an adapted version of the Circle of Friends programme could strengthen socio-emotional competencies. Participants were coded according to numbers (participant 1 = P1; participant 2 = P2; participant 3 = P3, and so forth). In total, nine children aged seven and eight years participated in this study. Since the researcher implemented discussions and exercises during focus groups to develop socio-emotional competencies, the findings indicate that self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills contributed toward strengthening SEI. See table 1 outlined in the section below.

Table 1. Themes of the study

Themes of the study	What the theme entails	Example of participants' verbatim responses
Self-awareness	1. Awareness of emotions 2. Self confidence 3. Knowledge of self	P1: happy ... It was my brother's birthday P3: Cross is the same as angry P5: I feel sad when somebody is not listening, also when they hit me
Social awareness	1. Empathy 2. Considering others 3. Reading social cues	P3: This guy looks calm, like he is happy. P4: He was scared of the water. P5: Maybe he felt worried? P9: Teacher, he has a sad feeling
Self-management	1. Manage emotions 2. Effective decision making	P2: Sometimes, you cannot control yourself ... You cannot help but calm down
Relationship skills	1. Positive communication 2. Resolving interpersonal conflict	P5: We listen and we talk nicely ... We also listen to somebody when she's talking, and when she is finished talking, you can talk

Note: Rawlins (2022).

Self-Awareness

At the beginning of focus group sessions, some participants had limited emotional literacy and often responded with vague descriptors like "fine" when asked how they felt. Recognising this, the researcher implemented activities tailored to their age and developmental level to support their emotional awareness. Progress in this area was not uniform as some participants demonstrated increased emotional self-awareness earlier than others. This revealed the ability to identify, label, and differentiate emotions. For instance, P3 observed, "Cross is the same as angry", indicating both emotional insight and vocabulary development to articulate it. As sessions progressed, all participants, either verbally or non-verbally, began contributing during activities. They not only started identifying emotions but were also able to recognise personal emotional triggers. P5 shared, "I feel sad when somebody is not listening, also when they hit me", demonstrating emerging ability to link emotions to specific events. This shift suggested that participants were learning to name, express, and reflect on their feelings more effectively. P1, on the other hand, struggled with expressing more uncomfortable emotions like anger or sadness. In situations involving anger or sadness, he/she tended to rely on writing or behaviour rather than verbal expression. This highlights the importance of recognising non-verbal cues in emotional development.

Social Awareness

In this study, evidence from focus group transcripts revealed that participants began demonstrating increased social awareness through both verbal responses and observable behaviour. For instance, P9 recognised when P3 was being unkind and intervened by saying, "P3, stop teasing!" P4 also showed understanding of hurtful behaviour, noting, "While P3 is talking, P6 and P8 are not listening"… P3, too, demonstrated empathy by pointing out that "P7 was laughing at P9 when she was falling".

In addition to recognising emotional cues, participants began using positive communication strategies and displayed improved social behaviours such as respecting personal boundaries and taking turns. For example, P6 stated, "If they say don't touch, don't touch, we have to just stop". Instances of turn-taking included P6 saying, "We can move, and then come back to me", P8 politely asking, "Excuse me, please can I have those colours when you're done?" and P9 waiting her turn before requesting, "Please can I have the pastel?"

Eight of the nine participants showed progress in interpreting others' emotions and responding with empathy, care, and compassion. For instance, several participants began showing concern when peers were visibly upset, offering kind words, hugs, or seeking help on their behalf. These gestures demonstrated affective empathy skills. However, P1 appeared to struggle with social awareness. Notably, P1 laughed when P3 shared a frightening experience and again when P6 expressed his reluctance to discuss overwhelming events. These reactions suggested difficulty in empathising with others and possibly a disconnect from his own emotional world. This observation highlighted the foundational importance of self-awareness in developing social awareness.

Self-Management

Many participants became increasingly aware of effective techniques they could use to regulate their emotional responses in moments of anger, sadness, fear, or anxiety. P5, P6, and P3 frequently contributed to discussions about self-regulation, articulating "calming" or "breathing" exercises they employed during emotionally charged situations. While all nine participants shared similar approaches, many suggested peer influence in developing self-regulatory behaviours. P9 reinforced the emerging sense of emotional ownership by stating, "You in charge of your feelings". This indicates an evolving understanding that individuals are responsible for managing their emotional reactions. This insight reflected a shift toward internalised emotional control, rather than reactive behaviour.

In one instance, P3 became visibly upset when asked to respect P6's need for personal space. Instead of reacting impulsively, P3 chose to step away from the situation and rejoined the group once he had composed himself. This behaviour exemplified his growing ability to self-regulate and use adaptive coping mechanisms in real time. Similarly, P6 and P3 both showed increased capacity to employ calming techniques to de-escalate emotionally challenging interactions; these included breathing and mindfulness activities, which were practised toward the end of each focus group session. While these examples underscore participants' growing self-management abilities, they also highlight the importance of facilitator support and coaching. Throughout the programme, participants benefited from guided reflection, prompting, and encouragement to help them become more aware of their emotions and the strategies available to manage them. The facilitation process played a critical role in fostering this awareness and helping children internalise the tools they need to regulate their emotions effectively.

Relationship Skills

Throughout the focus group sessions, participants demonstrated increasing ability to communicate more positively and interact socially with their peers. Early on, some participants showed emerging awareness of respectful dialogue. For instance, P5 suggested as part of the group agreement: "We listen, and we talk nicely... We also listen to somebody when she's talking, and when she is finished talking, you can talk". This example illustrates early understanding of respectful turn-taking and the importance of attentive listening, which P5 consistently modelled in subsequent sessions.

However, during initial sessions, many other participants struggled with these skills. They often interrupted or became distracted during group discussions. For example, P8 began chanting the days of the week, which P9 joined, disrupting the conversation flow. These moments highlighted the early developmental stage of their relationship skills and the need for structured guidance in communication. But as the sessions progressed, several participants began demonstrating the ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts constructively. Some participants were observed appropriately seeking help when needed, such as P9 asking, "Teacher, can you help me?" and P6 stating, "I need help". These instances reflect an emerging ability to recognise when support is necessary and to verbalise that need appropriately. Conflict resolution also became more evident as participants began using verbal strategies to address problems directly. For example, P6 clearly stated a boundary to a peer: "That is mine". This approach reflects a growing capacity to express discomfort and set limits without resorting to aggression or withdrawal.

Participants also began identifying and reflecting on emotions during conflict, showing signs of emotional insight and empathy. During one session, the researcher prompted P4 to reflect: "I wonder how it made you feel when P3 said those things?" to which P4 replied, "Angry". Similarly, P3 identified his emotional state in a conflict by stating, "I was angry," and shared his coping strategy: "I told the teacher". This exchange indicates P3's growing awareness of his emotional state and his willingness to seek appropriate adult support—a key component of relationship skills. Overall, the data suggest a positive trajectory in the development of relationship skills among participants. While challenges persisted, especially in early sessions, many participants showed increasing competence in communicating respectfully, resolving conflicts constructively, and seeking help when necessary. These developments reflect the potential of structured group interventions like the Circle of Friends programme to support the relational and emotional growth of young children.

Discussion

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness refers to the ability to be mindful of one's internal and external experiences, as well as to recognise and feel prepared to respond to these emotions (Billon, 2017; Devis-Rozental, 2018; Rousse, 2019). In the context of this study, many participants showed marked growth in their understanding and recognition of self—often described as "knowing of self". This aligns closely with Goleman's (1995) framework for EI, in which self-awareness is a foundational component. At the beginning of focus group sessions, some participants had limited emotional literacy and often responded with vague descriptors like "fine" when asked how they felt. Recognising this, the researcher implemented activities tailored to their age and developmental level to support their emotional growth. These activities, rooted in social-emotional development theory, were designed to expand emotional vocabulary and support nuanced understanding of feelings (London et al., 2023; Malik & Marwaha, 2022).

Another notable theme was participants' growing sense of self-confidence. According to Louw and Louw (2020), self-confidence is a key aspect of self-awareness, encompassing belief in one's abilities and sense of competence. At the start of the Circle of Friends programme, participants were provided opportunities to celebrate one another's strengths and teach their peers new skills. These moments of recognition and collaboration fostered sense of competence and self-assurance among participants by creating environments where strengths were acknowledged and valued. When participants celebrated each other's abilities, it encouraged them to take pride in their contributions and feel belonging within the group. This development is especially significant given that middle childhood is a stage in which children begin exploring environments and relationships beyond family contexts (Louw & Louw, 2020; Erasmus, 2019; Sidera et al., 2014).

Social Awareness

Etokabeka and Moen (2025) define empathy as the ability to resonate with people's feelings. This is important because developing social awareness requires recognising others' emotional state (Marková, 2017; Ulutaş et al., 2021). For children to develop empathy, they must first learn to recognise, understand, and communicate their own emotions, to then begin understanding that others also have feelings (Devis-Rozental, 2017; Rochat et al., 2012). Existing research shows that children respond more empathetically when they can relate to others' experiences, particularly those they perceive as similar to themselves (Main & Kho, 2020; Marková, 2017). Sharing these emotional experiences is a key driver in strengthening children's empathetic responses. The results of this study confirmed this when participants became more emotionally attuned to their peers, they also appeared to become more conscious of the impact their words and actions could have on others (Cahill & Greer, 2018).

Self-Management

Literature describes self-management as the ability to regulate emotions, manage stress, control impulses, and express emotions in socially appropriate ways using both intrinsic and extrinsic strategies (CASEL, 2012; Briesch et al., 2019; Ulutaş et al., 2021). In this study, these factors meant applying emotional self-regulation, identifying coping strategies, practicing self-management techniques, as well as integrating better relationship skills. This knowledge aligns with what literature describes self-management to be, helping learners overcome their difficult emotions better (Ulutaş et al., 2021).

The participants also spoke candidly about their reactive tendencies and self-regulation challenges. Some of these were seen when children feel threatened or endangered (Lunkenheimer et al., 2017). The work of Goleman (1998) explain how threat perception operates as a universal anger trigger. This concept provided a framework for understanding why some children may respond more impulsively in threatening contexts to protect/defend themselves. While the data demonstrated that many participants gained emotional insight and showed progress in employing self-soothing techniques; it also underscores the need for ongoing support. This is why it is essential that more structured interventions, as well as safe and supportive environments foster emotional self-regulation in children (CASEL, 2012; Briesch et al., 2019; Graham & Nutton, 2021).

Relationship Skills

Relationship skills refer to an individual's capacity to initiate, maintain, and manage healthy and rewarding connections with others (Nelson-Jones, 2006). These skills encompass a broad spectrum of competencies, including effective emotional regulation within relationships, clear and respectful communication, constructive conflict resolution, and the ability to seek support when needed (Devis-Rozental, 2017; Rochat et al., 2012). Peer acceptance plays a critical role in children's social and emotional development, particularly during middle childhood (Shehu, 2019). This is why those who experience peer rejection are more likely to exhibit negative social behaviours, academic difficulties, depression symptoms, and other socio-emotional challenges (Lindsey, 2017; Mulvey et al., 2017). Developing strong relationship skills is essential for early childhood learners transitioning into middle childhood (Beazidou & Botsoglou, 2016).

Throughout the focus group sessions, participants demonstrated noticeable growth in their interpersonal and communication skills. Many children began interacting more positively with their peers, displaying effective listening behaviours, turn-taking, and appropriate use of shared materials. Using phrases such as "please," "thank you," and "excuse me" represents critical social behaviours, reflecting the development of courteous and respectful interaction patterns (O'Grady, 2016; Street, 2015). Several participants also demonstrated the ability to manage and resolve interpersonal conflicts constructively. This included expressing their needs clearly, recognising others' emotions, and responding with empathy and understanding (Moldovan & Bocoş, 2021). The participants' relationship skills were often reflected in their verbal and non-verbal communication, indicating emerging awareness of how emotional expressions influence peer interactions (Creed et al., 2015). Encouraging respectful communication, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving can be applied in order to better support children's social-emotional development (Koivula & Huttunen, 2018).

Limitations and recommendations

One limitation of this study was the small sample size, which consisted of a limited number of participants. This limited how extensively the complexities inherent in the topic of SEL could be explored within the scope of this study. Secondly, the findings cannot be generalized to broader populations, as each participant's story must be understood within their unique individual and contextual framework. In future,

conducting research in this area over extended periods could help to better assess the long-term impact of the Circle of Friends programme on the development of SEI. While this study showed growth in participants' socio-emotional competencies, a longer-term investigation would provide deeper insights into the sustainability and broader applicability of interventions like the Circle of Friends programme.

This study holds both theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it contributes to understanding how socio-emotional competencies develop through structured peer-mediated interventions within the South African context. Practically, it informs educators, school psychologists, and policymakers about evidence-based approaches for implementing SEL programmes in resource-constrained settings. By documenting children's experiences and developmental trajectories throughout the intervention, this research provides insights that can guide the design and implementation of culturally responsive SEL programmes to support vulnerable children's holistic development.

Conclusion

This study explored how an adapted version of the Circle of Friends programme can support socio-emotional regulation among foundation phase learners. The findings revealed that participants face a range of personal, contextual, and social challenges that influence the development of their SEI and their ability to navigate educational and social environments effectively. Engagement in the Circle of Friends programme provided children with essential skills for self-awareness, social awareness, emotional self-regulation, self-management, coping, and building positive relationships. Through the integration of participatory action research and the adapted programme, learners were able to recognise, articulate, and manage their own emotions, as well as demonstrate empathy and sensitivity toward others. The findings highlight the value of responsive, learner-centred interventions in promoting emotional regulation and resilience among young learners.

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Data availability: The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly and Chat GPT to edit the writing and coherence of sentences. After using these tools/service, the authors, reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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