

The Study of Social-Emotional Skills and Resilience for

Children aged 4-6 (Taiwan Report)

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I. Introduction

According to CASEL(2021), SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. Activities designed for SEL in educational settings enable children to comprehend emotional fluctuations, consider others' feelings, or express their emotions, enhancing emotional intelligence for smoother interactions in future group settings. Resilience forms the foundation of psychological well-being, referring to one's ability to adapt and recover from negative experiences like stress, adversity, or trauma. When you possess strong resilience, you can bounce back from setbacks while maintaining composure and control, determining your capacity to tackle challenges and influencing your growth and other developmental possibilities, effectively mitigating the risk of burnout.

The concepts of SES (Social-Emotional Skills) and resilience are relatively new in early childhood education in Taiwan. The government-prescribed curriculum for early childhood education only includes teaching social skills. Over the past decade, some higher education institutions have begun to recognize the importance of SES in early childhood education. However, it wasn't until the last five years that some workshops specifically introduced SES to teachers or principals participating in training sessions. They hope to serve as seed teachers and return to their schools to promote SES education. In contrast, resilience is a concept that very few people know how to properly explain. So far, the early childhood education community in Taiwan remains largely unfamiliar with resilience.

In Taiwan, children typically start attending kindergarten from the age of 2 to 5 and engage in over 8 hours of learning each day. This prolonged duration is often due to the prevalence of dual-income households, where parents opt to enroll their children in kindergarten to foster holistic development and cultivate positive attitudes toward life. As a result, apart from parental influence, kindergarten education plays a significant role in shaping children's personalities, worldviews, and values.

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Child Research Net(CRN) coordinated a group of Asian countries to process the study of SES and resilience in early childhood education. It was an important research to help ECEC and kindergarten teachers understand more about children, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

This project conducted two surveys; the preliminary survey from managers of ECEC(Early Childhood Education and Care) facilities and the main survey from teachers. The following paragraphs demonstrate the research findings.

II. Focus group Interviews and case interviews

#From the interviews to ECEC Facility managers and senior ECEC teachers (Preliminary Survey)

Attributes of the participants

We invited 4 ECEC managers and 2 senior ECEC teachers to help us understand how “SES” and “resilience” were practiced in Taiwan. These 6 experienced ECEC teachers had over 10 years of experience in the field. Thus, they demonstrated an understanding of policy and trends nowadays.

Word perception of "social-emotional skills" by ECEC Facility managers and senior ECEC teachers

Most interviewees had heard of and know the meaning of social-emotional learning since the government and higher education settings promote social-emotional learning. However, it seems the interviewed managers and senior teachers interpret SES as social-emotional learning (SEL), which is the understanding of the learning aspect without an operational definition. Managers are engaged in public policies and work hard to gain knowledge of new trends. Compared to managers, teachers knew little about the concept.

All interviewees identified the importance of SES. Three out of the four ECEC managers could identify SES's key and influential social factors. Managers know SEL well and can indicate the key elements: (1) Self-awareness: the ability to understand and manage emotions. (2) Self-management: the ability to set and achieve positive goals. (3) Social awareness: the ability to perceive and express empathy towards others. (4) Relationship skills: the ability to build and maintain positive relationships. (5) Responsible decision-making: the ability to make responsible decisions. It shows that the manager training workshops are successful.

All managers thought the essential abilities of SES for kids are the awareness of

emotions, care, and communication; those are the main concepts they devoted to leading faculty, building up culture, and educating students.

Word perception of "resilience" by ECEC Facility managers and senior ECEC teachers

The term 'resilience' is new to ECEC practitioners in Taiwan. Most interviewees couldn't define resilience well except for 2 managers studying in graduate schools. Almost all preschools and kindergartens have no programs or curriculum designed for resilience.

1. How do you understand the term "resilience"?

Managers and senior teachers interpret "resilience" as

- (1) "Psychological resilience" and combine it with "tolerance for setbacks."

Psychological resilience is the ability to reflect on adversity and, at the same time, to learn to think positively and mindfully in the face of adversity.

- (2) "Resilience" means persistence, not easily giving up in adversity.

- (3) "Resilience" is the ability to bounce back from setbacks and adversity.

2. What are your thoughts on children who have resilience?

Managers and senior teachers thought children with resilience will

- (1) approach people and things with mindfulness, optimism, and a proactive attitude; they tend to have a sense of happiness in society.

- (2) have a higher tolerance for setbacks and better recovery ability. They find solutions to difficulties and work to solve problems.

- (3) actively seek solutions and face challenges with a positive attitude.

3. Do you think it's important to cultivate resilience in children?

Most interviewees agreed that cultivating resilience in children is important.

- (1) Cultivating resilience in children helps them positively cope with the challenges of adolescence and adulthood, making it easier to overcome obstacles and reducing the risk of developing related psychological disorders due to stress.

- (2) Resilience is essential and should be systematically cultivated through systems like the family and school together.

#From the interviews to ECEC teachers (Main Survey)

Attributes of the participants

From December 28, 2023, to January 18, 2024, we had the honor of interviewing 10 currently employed kindergarten teachers. Among these ten teachers, 6 served in public kindergartens while 4 worked in private kindergartens. One was a male teacher, while the remaining nine were female.

Among the ten teachers, 2 had less than 7 years of teaching experience, while there were 7 teachers with over 20 years of experience. Regarding educational qualifications, 3 out of the ten teachers had graduate degrees or higher, with one even possessing a doctoral degree, while the rest had completed undergraduate studies. All ten kindergarten teachers interviewed were full-time educators without administrative roles. They spend their days interacting with students and are also responsible for communicating with parents.

Word perception of "social-emotional skills" by ECEC teachers

Based on the interview results, it was found that currently employed teachers have inconsistent understandings of the concept of SES (Social-Emotional Skills). Most teachers only have a vague understanding of social-emotional skills because such theoretical knowledge was not taught during their university education. Two teachers said they had never heard of SES and shared the common characteristics of being younger and having less work experience. On the other hand, more experienced teachers who had heard of SES attribute their awareness to the emphasis on social skills in their past learning and work experiences, as "social skills" are a significant part of the kindergarten curriculum. Teachers tend to use their understanding of social skills to comprehend SES. Additionally, the research findings also indicate that teachers not only interpret social-emotional skills through the lens of social skills but also draw from their past knowledge of emotional management to explain social-emotional skills. Through in-depth discussions, it was discovered that although teachers may not provide precise operational definitions of social-emotional skills, a combined understanding of emotional management and social skills can still elucidate the concept of SES.

Therefore, this study can summarize the definition of SES by most teachers: **Social-emotional skills refer to students' ability to have proficient interpersonal interaction skills, demonstrate empathy towards others, and be aware of and manage their emotions.**

Word perception of "resilience" by ECEC teachers

Among the ten currently employed teachers, only half truly grasp the concept of resilience. The term "resilience" is often confused with the concept of "flexibility." Teachers also closely link resilience with the ability to withstand pressure. The interview results show that teachers significantly associate resilience with coping with and perceiving stress, emphasizing personal traits and skills in dealing with pressure. Moreover, teachers recognize that the

demonstration of resilience is manifested through experiences of stressful environments or adversities. This perception effectively explains the core essence of resilience, although it may not necessarily clearly acknowledge that resilience is also supported by the environment, not just the individual characteristics of children. Furthermore, some teachers highlighted that resilience is about demonstrating the ability to withstand pressure and emphasized resilience in children's behavior when attempting to solve problems. Some teachers expressed that resilient children continuously attempt various methods to solve problems.

Therefore, this study summarizes the definition of resilience by most teachers as follows: **Resilience is an attitude toward facing setbacks and actively attempting to solve problems.**

If the ECEC teachers have heard of the word "social-emotional skills" or "resilience," where they learned about it.

The study found that the understanding of SES and resilience among preschool teachers in Taiwan is not widespread, and these concepts are not yet core content in Taiwanese early childhood education. Some teachers who have heard of SES and resilience mentioned that they came across these educational concepts through introductions in some parenting magazines or through discussions with principals in their workplaces. Only a minority acquired knowledge of these concepts through formal schooling or professional workshops.

What do ECEC teachers think "difficulties" or "adversities" are for children aged 4-6

In kindergarten, teachers have found that the most significant difficulty or adversity for children aged 4-6 is primarily related to "expression." Teachers observed that children in this age group often feel anxious and challenged when others don't fully understand their intentions. Insufficient communication skills often lead to emotional conflicts among children. Through interviews with teachers, it was revealed that teachers believe children need to learn to interact with others and express their emotions and opinions clearly as part of their growth process.

In addition to difficulties in expression, teachers also noted that learning new things poses varying degrees of challenge for children, often leading to feelings of anger or frustration. Furthermore, some teachers mentioned that interpersonal difficulties in daily life, such as adults arguing or blaming each other, also affect children's emotions because these challenges arise from interactions with others. Children's limited understanding of interactions contributes to their difficulty in dealing with such

situations.

What do ECEC teachers consider it would be like for a child, aged 4-6 to "adapt successfully" or "bounce back"

When faced with difficulties, 4-6-year-old children exhibit different attitudes. Teachers believe that some children may avoid facing challenges by altering their persistence to soothe their emotions. However, there are also children who, when confronted with adversity, persistently seek solutions through trial and error. Therefore, for kindergarten teachers, resilience is more about successful adaptation, whether actively facing challenges or “adapting successfully” instead of “bouncing back.”

Specific activities, practices, and interactions ECEC teachers implement to develop resilience in children

Although teachers may not be familiar with the term "resilience," they unanimously recognize the importance of resilience and adaptability to stress for children. Currently, no specific teaching materials or assessment tools are aimed at enhancing children's resilience in Taiwan's educational system. However, teachers utilize various activities to foster resilience in children. Some teachers mentioned providing companionship to students when encountering difficulties because they found that children's emotions are more likely to stabilize with adult companionship during challenging times. They also discovered that students are more willing to attempt problem-solving through close companionship. Additionally, some teachers emphasize the importance of building a group behavior model to strengthen students' resilience. They observed that students are more likely to give up or lack persistence during independent tasks than in group activities. In other words, with group support, students demonstrate better resilience. The most common educational method teachers employ is to create simulated scenarios where students can experience emotional changes and then guide them to develop resilience by tolerating setbacks.

Since resilience research in Taiwan is still in its early stages and has not matured yet, there is currently no set of teaching materials available for use. Most often, teachers rely on their own judgment and adapt to daily occurrences to provide opportunities for students to develop resilience. However, many teachers express that regardless of whether students demonstrate resilience on a given day, they communicate students' positive behaviors through communication notebooks or inform parents during pick-up times. They hope that parents can also encourage and praise students when they are at home for their good behavior at preschool.

About answers to the scenarios. Selected scenario + "how she/he would interact as a childcare worker" and "why"

In this study, we provided four scenarios for teachers to choose from and asked them to explain how they would interact as childcare workers and why.

Scenario 1) He/she was left out (he/she was not included in the group of friends).

Some teachers think choosing friends is not a problem for children; therefore, introducing her/him to another group will be the treatment when the child is not included in the group of friends. However, not all teachers agree with the treatment; some teachers will build up a kind and supportive class and teach the child to care about others' needs.

Scenario 2) He/she had a fight with his/her friend.

Teachers reflected that children aged 4-6 always care about themselves first, leading to conflicts. Teachers will encourage conversations between children to practice their communication skills.

Scenario 3) A person in a close relationship with him/her moved away (his/her favorite teacher, a close friend, etc).

When some friends move away, teachers teach children how to keep in touch and have longer friendships. Teachers try to lead children out of sadness and teach them to look forward to the future, which will be the best way to solve the problem from the lost emotion.

Scenario 4) An upsetting incident occurred at home (he/she was scolded by his/her parents, parents had a fight, the atmosphere at home is negative, etc.).

Most teachers will give the child emotional support and a hug because the child has not done anything wrong. Teachers will help children figure out the solution and teach them strategies for the situation. Children must learn to protect themselves first, then ease their parents' pain.

III. Discussion

From this approximately 7-month study, which included focus group discussions with experienced teachers and principals and interviews with 10 current teachers, several key findings emerged in the research on social-emotional skills (SES) and resilience education in early childhood in Taiwan. It was discovered that certain behaviors exhibited by children serve as prototypes for resilience. Moreover, children's social-emotional skills influence adaptive behaviors based on these

resilience prototypes. Children with stronger social-emotional skills tend to demonstrate better resilience development. Below are some key findings from the research:

1. Children must recognize their emotions before adequately expressing their opinions and resolving communication difficulties.

The application of social-emotional skills occurs within interactions. Children practice recognizing others' emotional expressions through interactions, which helps them become aware of their emotions. This awareness enables them to accurately understand communication content and the problems to be addressed, facilitating smooth interaction processes.

2. Regarding social-emotional skills, the two most important skills are understanding one's emotions and controlling behavior.

According to responses from principals and teachers, children aged 4-6 must understand their emotions as a primary step for successful communication. Once children comprehend emotions such as anger, fear, or happiness, they approach problem-solving by first attempting to calm their emotions rather than directly reacting with negative behaviors. Therefore, teachers should teach children to first recognize their emotions and understand that negative emotional or behavioral expressions may lead to social rejection. Subsequently, they can learn to control negative behaviors during social interactions.

3. Resilience is not about returning to the original state but moving forward smoothly.

The interviews show teachers believe children aged 4-6 are constantly evolving individuals. Many things are new stimuli for them, continuously changing their schemas. Therefore, unlike adults, children's resilience is not about returning to the original state but is about moving forward smoothly, because they do not have a pre-existing, matured "original state" to revert to. This perspective provides an interesting explanation for understanding resilience in children aged 4-6 and reminds researchers not to perceive children through the lens of adults. Furthermore, continuous growth should also apply to resilience research in adults.

4. Cultivating resilience is a process children must undertake, with adults providing support and guidance.

Teachers have observed that when children encounter difficulties, they engage in self-talk, continuously dialoguing with themselves and adjusting their thoughts. At

such times, teachers typically allow children to engage in complete self-dialogue, encouraging them to brainstorm solutions rather than giving direct orders. Therefore, giving students time for dialectical thinking and providing supportive companionship allows them to develop a "growth mindset," enabling them to independently address challenges without blaming others.

5. In teaching, judgment plays a crucial role, so teachers must rely heavily on observation.

Most teachers have noted that children's emotional expressions sometimes do not directly stem from experiencing setbacks. Some behaviors are mere attempts to seek attention. Therefore, teachers must skillfully observe to understand whether students are facing difficulties. If exaggerated behaviors or excessive emotions are solely aimed at gaining attention from classmates and teachers, the teacher's approach will lean towards interrupting the emotional connection and providing comfort, encouraging students to interact with others more appropriately.

6. Teachers must scaffold for students by demonstrating how to recognize their emotions, communicate effectively, and overcome difficulties.

Some schools may allocate a designated seat where students can go to if they feel their emotions changing. Other classmates cannot disturb or provoke the student occupying that seat. This allows the child to regulate their emotions while other students learn to show concern for their emotionally distressed peers. Teachers themselves must also adhere to student behavior norms. When teachers experience emotions, they can also use the designated seat to regulate them, which will reduce the negative stigma associated with using the seat.

7. Family education is crucial.

The education provided by schools needs to be reinforced at home by parents to establish resilient behavioral patterns. Family education must align with school education so that children consistently understand emotional expression and behavior. When children exhibit resilient behaviors, parents can continue encouraging them, instilling confidence in facing challenges and demonstrating resilient behavior.

IV. Conclusion

Due to the long-term isolation measures during the pandemic, children returning to school have shown decreased sensitivity in emotional processing and communication abilities. Their resilience in coping with sudden changes is also a cause for concern. The concepts of social-emotional skills and resilience, proposed in

the aftermath of the pandemic, provide deeper teaching content for early childhood education and deepen our understanding of children. Our society is inherently interactive and supportive, and after experiencing the constraints of isolation, promoting social-emotional skills and resilience in early childhood education is indeed a manifestation of resilience itself.

Reference

CASEL(2021). What is the CASEL framework? *CASEL*. Retrieved from:
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