

Designing a Curriculum Model Based on the Social and Emotional Competencies of Secondary School Students for Engagement in Virtual Spaces

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

Section:

Educational Counseling

How to cite this article:

Fakhri, S. V., Baghaee, H., & Badri Gargari, R. (2025). Designing a Curriculum Model Based on the Social and Emotional Competencies of Secondary School Students for Engagement in Virtual Spaces. *KMAN Counseling and Psychology Nexus*, 3, 1-9.
<http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ec.psynexus.3.5>



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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to design a curriculum model based on the social and emotional competencies of secondary school students for engagement in virtual spaces. This research was applied in its purpose and employed a qualitative-exploratory approach. Data were collected and analyzed through semi-structured interviews with curriculum planning experts and senior educators in sociology and psychology. To ensure validity and reliability, the study used participatory validation, triangulation, and coding by multiple researchers. The method of data analysis was thematic analysis. Based on the findings, 273 codes were extracted from interviews with 13 participants. Of these, 33 codes were duplicates and were removed, leaving 240 codes for final analysis. After merging the foundational themes, 78 sub-themes were identified and categorized under seven main themes or components: objectives, content, teaching methods, materials and resources, teaching-learning opportunities, learning environment conditions, and evaluation. The results indicated that one of the essential components of education for engagement in virtual spaces is a curriculum specifically designed to teach the social and emotional competencies required for such activities.

Keywords: *model, curriculum, social competence, emotional competence, virtual space.*

1. Introduction

In today's world, with the advancement of technology and increased internet usage, virtual spaces are recognized as vital platforms for communication and education. The utilization of such spaces for teaching and learning has significantly increased compared to previous years. With the expansion of these technologies, students are increasingly engaging in virtual activities, as they are born in the internet era, making digital life an integral part of their daily reality (Rodríguez-Álvarez et al., 2021). As information and communication technologies continue to evolve, our need for education and training to comprehend the new world and utilize its tools and resources also grows (Korona, 2024; Suryani, 2023). A lack of education and awareness about the communication world and its requirements leads to stagnation and exacerbates vulnerabilities (Rogow, 2019). In this context, students' activities in virtual spaces demand specific competencies, including social and emotional competencies. These competencies encompass emotional skills, understanding, and attitudes on the one hand, and social skills on the other (DePaoli et al., 2017; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2023; Soleymani et al., 2023).

Given that in the digital age, virtual spaces have emerged as key arenas for communication, education, and commerce, these spaces, while offering numerous opportunities to users, can also pose social and emotional challenges. These challenges include managing digital identities, fostering healthy interactions, and coping with anxiety. Social and emotional skills play a critical role in maintaining mental health and enabling effective participation in such spaces (Greenberg et al., 2020). With the expansion of virtual spaces and social networks, the need to develop social and emotional skills is more pressing than ever, as virtual spaces, serving as platforms for communication, information exchange, and even education, can significantly impact individuals' behaviors and personalities. Thus, addressing social and emotional competencies in these spaces is essential for preserving and enhancing users' mental and social health (Driscoll, 2021). Social and emotional competencies include the ability to perceive, use, feel, and manage emotions in ways that contribute to mental health and effective communication. In virtual spaces, these skills can prevent issues such as online abuse, social isolation, and depression (Cohen, 2021; Cohen et al., 2021).

Despite the increasing focus on the role of virtual spaces in daily life, research indicates that many users, particularly

adolescents and young adults, are not adequately prepared to face the challenges of these environments. A lack of sufficient social and emotional competencies can lead to negative experiences and even lasting harm to one's online personality and identity (Abdollahnejad et al., 2022).

Since the curriculum is the essence of any educational system, its integration with more effective methods ensures the system's efficiency and effectiveness (Nateghi et al., 2017). Thus, the use of a curriculum based on social and emotional competencies is imperative. Curriculum design involves identifying curriculum components and determining the relationships among them. Curriculum designers must first identify the general factors influencing the curriculum and then examine their specific or technical impacts on its elements. The greater the consistency between decisions at these two levels, the more effective and higher-quality the curriculum will be (Costa et al., 2017).

Curriculum studies aim to understand the curriculum as influenced by origins, contexts, identities, and emerging changes tied to social, political, cultural, and emotional competencies. Without attention to research in these areas, deep and authentic understanding in curriculum studies cannot be achieved. Examining students' social and emotional competencies for virtual space activities also falls within this domain (Ahmadi, 2019). Social and emotional competencies in virtual spaces can address many of the problems and challenges encountered in these environments. These competencies offer numerous benefits to students. Students with strong social and emotional competencies can use virtual spaces to enhance their communication skills, including the ability to express thoughts and feelings effectively and to listen actively (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Emotional competence helps students demonstrate greater empathy in virtual spaces, which can foster positive relationships and reduce conflicts (McDonnell et al., 2024). Moreover, students with strong social and emotional skills can use virtual spaces to develop problem-solving abilities, enabling them to address daily challenges more effectively (Odak et al., 2023; Smith, 2023). On the other hand, virtual spaces can serve as sources of social support. Students with social and emotional competencies can utilize these spaces to establish and maintain supportive relationships, contributing to improved mental health (Garaigordobil et al., 2022; Liew & Spinrad, 2022).

The absence of social and emotional competencies in virtual spaces can also have significant drawbacks for students. These include psychological harm, reduced academic performance, and challenges in social

relationships. A lack of social and emotional competencies can increase anxiety and depression among students. Research indicates that improper use of social networks can lower self-esteem and heighten feelings of loneliness (Twenge et al., 2018). Additionally, students who spend excessive time in virtual spaces without adequate social and emotional skills may struggle to concentrate on their studies, leading to lower grades and overall academic performance (Jenkins, 2018). Furthermore, an inability to manage relationships and emotions in virtual spaces can result in conflicts and challenges in friendships and family relationships. Such issues may arise from misunderstandings, poor communication, or even cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014). Virtual spaces may also encourage students to create and display unrealistic identities, potentially causing difficulties in understanding their true selves (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2019).

Various studies have examined the relationship between socio-emotional competence and experiences of bullying and victimization in cyberspace. Abdollahnejad et al. (2022) found a significant relationship between socio-emotional competence and cyberbullying and victimization, with four out of five components—self-awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making—being significantly related, while social awareness showed no meaningful correlation. Moreover, no significant gender differences were observed (Abdollahnejad et al., 2022). Heidari and Dehghani (2021) explored curriculum design tailored to virtual learning environments and concluded that instructor-centered programs are not sustainable and should transition to interactive and participatory environments. They emphasized that student participation and timely feedback facilitate independent and self-directed learning (Heidari & Dehghani, 2021). Rodríguez Álvarez et al. (2021) found that low socio-emotional skills, particularly poor relationship skills in boys and low self-management in girls, were associated with increased experiences of traditional and cyberbullying (Rodríguez-Álvarez et al., 2021). Similarly, the study by Martín López et al. (2020) indicated that high levels of socio-emotional competence serve as a protective factor against cyber harassment, whereas excessive use of emotional content online was identified as a risk factor (Marín-López et al., 2020). Lastly, Zych et al. (2018) reported significant differences in socio-emotional competence based on age and gender, revealing that individuals involved in bullying and cyberbullying, whether

as perpetrators or victims, scored lower in socio-emotional skills. However, no significant differences were observed between victims and non-involved students. Additionally, low responsible decision-making was linked to being a cyberbullying victim and perpetrator (Zych et al., 2018).

Therefore, given that no cohesive and effective model for a curriculum based on students' social and emotional competencies for virtual space activities has been presented thus far, and considering the need for diverse training in schools, this type of program has not received sufficient attention in formal education. This study seeks to address the question: What is the model for a curriculum based on social and emotional competencies for virtual space activities?

2. Methods and Materials

This study is applied in its purpose and employs a qualitative-exploratory approach. To design the intended model, the directed qualitative thematic analysis method was used. This method involves a process in which researchers immerse themselves in the data to extract relevant themes from raw data. In directed qualitative content analysis, data coding begins with existing theories or related findings, followed by the extraction of new themes from the data.

The statistical population included curriculum planning specialists and senior educators in sociology and psychology specializing in virtual spaces, selected through purposive sampling. The sampling criterion was achieving theoretical saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, during which the research topics were examined from multiple perspectives. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher provided explanations about the study's objectives and process. Interviews were conducted in person, via phone, or online, depending on the participants' preferences. Data were transcribed and analyzed in written form.

To ensure validity, participatory validation (presenting findings to participants for confirmation), triangulation (data collection from various sources), and the use of other researchers for data review were applied. For reliability, data coding was conducted by two or more researchers, and the results were compared. Data analysis encompassed both primary and secondary themes.

3. Findings and Results

Based on the results obtained, 273 codes were extracted from interviews with 13 participants. Among these, 33

duplicate codes were eliminated, leaving 240 codes for the final analysis.

Table 1

Main and Sub-Themes Extracted from Expert Interviews

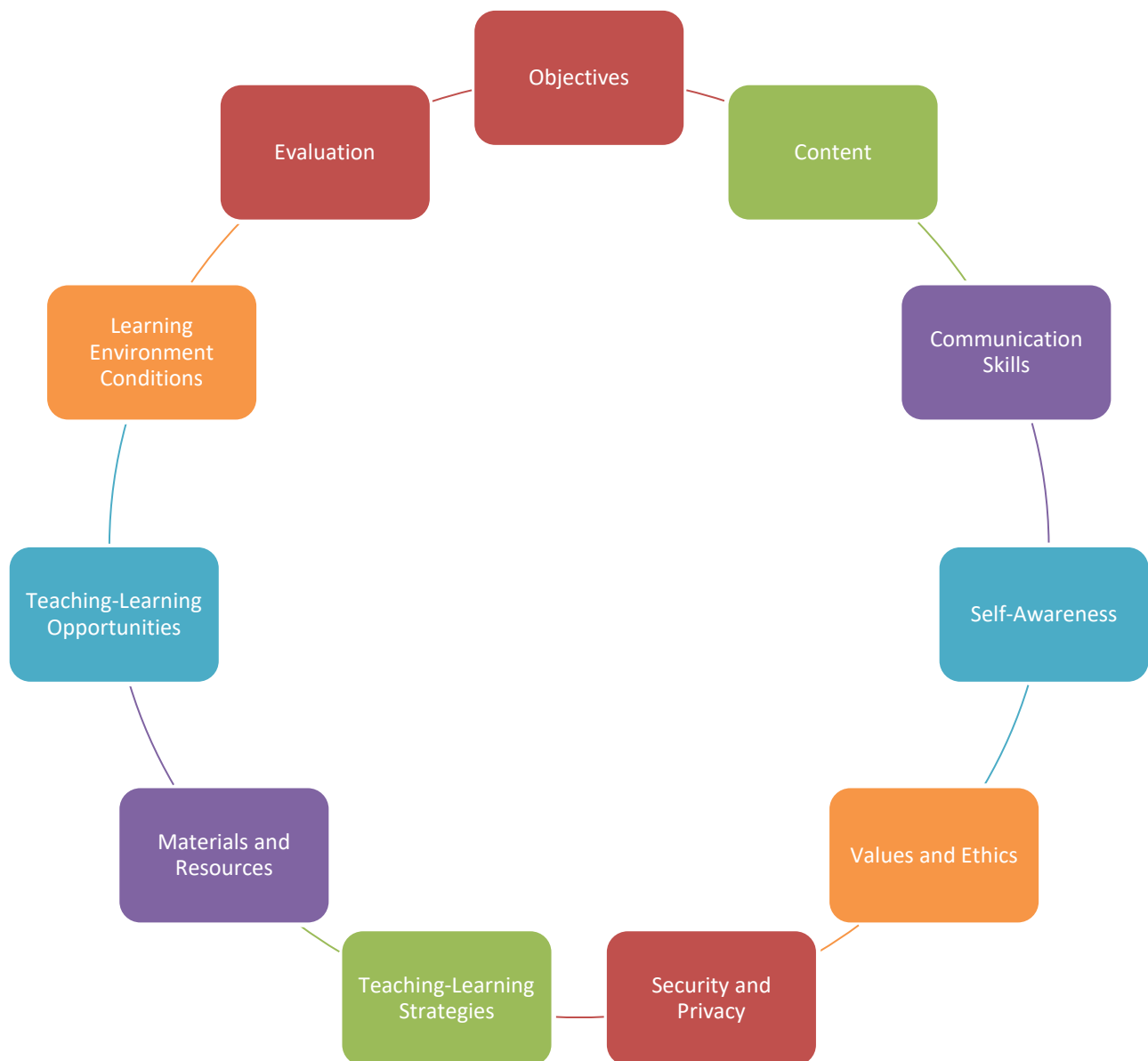
Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Objectives	- Objectives based on social competence - Objectives based on emotional competence - Measurable objectives - Attainable objectives - Objectives related to students' needs - Objectives relevant to virtual space needs - Specific and measurable objectives - Importance of competencies in virtual spaces
Content	- Respect and empathy - Respect for diversity - Respect for others' rights - Respect for opposing views - Respect and empathy in virtual spaces - Opposing deviant behaviors - Enhancing empathy and adaptability - Empathy in virtual spaces
Communication Skills	- Effective communication with others - Communication skills - Communication skills in virtual spaces - Establishing effective connections - Active listening
Self-Awareness	- Enhancing self-awareness - Improving emotional self-awareness - Social awareness - Awareness of oneself and emotion management - Awareness of virtual space characteristics - Awareness of digital identity
Values and Ethics	- Ethics in virtual spaces - Personal values and worldview - Promoted values in virtual spaces - Values and ethics in virtual spaces - Observing ethics and regulations in virtual spaces - Respecting intellectual property
Security and Privacy	- Internet security - Protecting privacy and online security - Maintaining privacy
Teaching-Learning Strategies	- Appropriate teaching methods and tools - Using tools suitable for students' age - Utilizing workgroups - Using printed and visual resources - Teaching brainstorming - Teaching responsible decision-making - Teaching social support - Competency-based teaching - Stress management training - Training in social and emotional skills - Teaching digital communication skills - Teaching problem-solving skills - Teaching empathy skills - Online educational games - Collaborative games - Group discussions - Conducting workshops - Technology-based teaching methods - Suggested teaching methods - Interactive teaching methods - Active teaching methods - Project-based teaching methods
Materials and Resources	- Social and emotional competency-based educational materials - Printed and visual resources for teaching social and emotional skills - Online educational games - Workshops for emotion management
Teaching-Learning Opportunities	- Online group activities - Group discussions - Online teamwork - Online group projects - Positive and effective activities with peers
Learning Environment Conditions	- Online learning environment - Security and privacy in virtual spaces - Respect and empathy in virtual spaces - Communication skills in virtual spaces
Evaluation	- Assessment and management of negative emotions - Stress and anxiety management - Coping with stress and pressure - Managing emotion expression and regulation - Managing emotions in virtual spaces - Managing emotions when faced with online content - Coping with digital stress and anxiety - Addressing emotional challenges in virtual spaces

The derived model consists of seven components: objectives, content, teaching methods, materials and resources, teaching-learning opportunities, learning

environment conditions, and evaluation, as illustrated in the following:

Figure 1

Curriculum Model Based on Social and Emotional Competencies for Secondary School Students' Activities in Virtual Spaces



4. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results, the curriculum model for enhancing social and emotional competencies among secondary school students for engagement in virtual spaces consists of seven elements: objectives, content, teaching methods, materials and resources, teaching-learning opportunities, learning environment conditions, and evaluation. Educational objectives in this model emphasize strengthening students' abilities in effective communication, empathy, respect for others, and problem-solving. These objectives include improving interpersonal and emotional regulation skills,

enabling students to engage positively in virtual spaces while respecting others and fostering constructive interactions. For instance, enhancing empathy and communication skills helps students create constructive online relationships rather than fostering tension or misunderstandings (Durlak et al., 2015; Durlak et al., 2011).

Curriculum planning must ensure that objectives are measurable and attainable, tailored to students' needs, and aligned with the characteristics of virtual spaces. These objectives should enable students to exhibit desirable behaviors such as emotion regulation, responsible decision-making, and respect for others' rights. Specific and relevant objectives enhance the effectiveness of learning and prepare

students to navigate complex digital environments (Collaborative for Academic Social-Emotional Learning, 2021).

In a curriculum based on social and emotional competencies, objectives are defined to support both the development of these competencies and their measurability and accessibility. For example, objectives based on social competence include the ability to establish effective communication, respect diversity, and honor others' rights. On the other hand, objectives related to emotional competence might include stress management and emotional regulation when faced with online content. These objectives must be designed for measurability, such as using standardized scales to assess empathy or communication skills, and they should align with real-life student needs and the demands of virtual spaces to ensure their practical application.

Educational content should focus on fostering respect and empathy among students. Respect for cultural diversity, differing opinions, and others' rights is a foundational value for healthy interactions in virtual spaces. Students should learn how to respect opposing views and create a space for dialogue instead of escalating conflicts (Goleman, 2006, 2020). Respect and empathy are key components of a curriculum focused on social and emotional competencies. Respect for diversity, others' rights, and differing opinions is crucial not only in physical environments but also in virtual spaces (Jenkins, 2018). This content empowers students to oppose deviant behaviors in virtual spaces and enhances their empathy, which contributes to adaptability and positive interactions in online settings.

Content on communication skills should include active listening, clear expression, and effective communication techniques. These skills enable students to convey their messages accurately in online interactions. Moreover, self-awareness of emotions and the ability to manage them are essential for responsible behavior and understanding one's influence in virtual spaces (Weissberg et al., 2015). These lessons also help students understand their digital identity and become aware of the potential negative impacts of online content. Virtual communication skills encompass effective interaction, active listening, and the proper use of digital tools, which help students establish productive relationships and avoid communication issues in virtual spaces (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2019).

Educational strategies based on social and emotional competencies in virtual spaces should be interactive, active,

and practical. Techniques such as group discussions, online educational games, and project-based activities allow students to experience and practice these skills in a hands-on manner. These methods not only make learning more engaging but also help students practice responsibility and respect in group settings (Cohen et al., 2021). Employing digital tools and modern technologies appropriate to students' age and knowledge level is crucial. Collaborative groups and online discussions in virtual spaces can strengthen communication skills and empathy.

Training in emotion management skills, such as identifying and regulating negative emotions, is critical. These strategies enable students to respond appropriately in stressful virtual scenarios. Problem-solving and responsible decision-making skills are powerful tools for tackling online challenges. These methods are taught step by step through workshops and interactive digital resources (Zins et al., 2016).

Educational materials should include multimedia content such as videos, e-books, and educational games to engage students. These resources can take the form of short stories, case studies, and real-world examples from virtual spaces. Such content helps students grasp abstract concepts of social and emotional competencies and apply them in real life (Collaborative for Academic Social-Emotional Learning, 2021). Online educational games designed to enhance empathy and respect in virtual spaces are particularly effective. These games not only entertain but also provide real-world challenges, fostering problem-solving skills and responsible decision-making. Workshops focusing on emotion management and self-awareness offer an excellent platform for shared learning and dialogue (Goleman, 2006, 2020).

Group learning opportunities in virtual spaces, such as team projects and group discussions, help students improve their social and communication skills. These activities create a safe space for practicing respect, collaboration, and empathy. Moreover, online interactions with peers enhance adaptability and foster positive engagement (Wentzel & Miele, 2016).

Practical projects, such as creating ethical content for social media or launching online campaigns to promote responsible behavior in virtual spaces, encourage deeper and more practical learning. These activities not only enhance digital skills but also foster the development of social and emotional competencies (Zins et al., 2016).

The learning environment for teaching social and emotional competencies must be secure and ethics-centered.

It should be designed to allow students to share their experiences and perspectives without fear of judgment or punishment. In virtual spaces, maintaining privacy and adhering to ethical rules are critical factors for creating an appropriate learning environment. Teachers can use secure tools and reputable educational platforms to provide this environment (Livingstone et al., 2021).

The learning environment should foster positive and empathetic interactions among students. For example, small online groups can facilitate effective communication and constructive engagement. These settings may include activities such as group discussions, debates on social and ethical issues in virtual spaces, and simulations of real-world scenarios, which help students enhance their social skills (Cohen et al., 2021). Learning environment conditions should preserve students' privacy and promote respect and empathy. This includes using security tools, teaching privacy protection skills, and fostering a culture of respect in virtual spaces.

Evaluation in a curriculum based on social and emotional competencies should be continuous and comprehensive. It can include observing students' behavior in group settings, self-assessment questionnaires, and practical activities. For instance, assessing students' ability to manage negative emotions or resolve online conflicts is a suitable metric for evaluating the program's success (Zins et al., 2016).

An essential aspect of evaluation in this curriculum is students' ability to manage emotions when confronted with challenging online content. This includes stress control, anxiety management, and coping with negative feelings from online experiences. Activities such as simulation games and real-life scenarios help teachers accurately assess students' performance and provide constructive feedback.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that curriculum objectives be practical, measurable, and aligned with the needs of learners, society, and virtual spaces. The content should emphasize respect, communication skills, self-awareness, and security. Various methods, such as project-based learning, should be used for content delivery. Diverse educational materials and resources should be employed, and the evaluation of social and emotional competencies for virtual space activities should be considered a key component.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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