



Understanding Gendered Experiences of Social-Emotional Competence among Higher Secondary Students for Equitable and Inclusive Education

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Abstract:

The development of social and emotional competence is a central goal of education, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by significant social, emotional, and academic challenges. NEP 2020 highlights the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL), life skills, and value-based education as essential outcomes of schooling, particularly during adolescence. The present study aimed to explore and understand gendered experiences of social and emotional competence among higher secondary school students within an inclusive educational context. Adopting a qualitative exploratory research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 50 higher secondary students (25 boys and 25 girls) selected using convenience sampling from school in Navi Mumbai. The interview schedule was structured around five dimensions of social and emotional competence: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that boys and girls demonstrated largely similar levels of self-awareness, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making, with differences primarily in modes of emotional expression rather than in competence. A notable gender difference emerged in the domain of self-management. The study concludes that gender differences in socio-emotional competence are minimal during late adolescence, with self-management being the only domain showing distinct gender-related patterns.

Keywords: *Social and Emotional Competence, Gender Differences, Higher Secondary Students, Qualitative Exploratory Study, Social and Emotional Learning.*

Introduction:

The purpose of Education is to develop students socially, and emotionally (UNESCO, 2015; NCERT, 2019). Gender is considered as a main important factor which affects social and emotional development of a child. Therefore, the current study demarcates how gender differentiates various components of social and emotional competence of Higher Secondary school Students. During adolescence, especially in higher secondary school, students face emotional, social, and academic challenges that demand strong emotional skills. Therefore, the present study analyses how male and female higher secondary students differ in Socio -

emotional competence. Social and emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development. Various studies have used quantitative methods to find gender differences in social and emotional competence among students. But it is very important to identify a detailed subjective experience and personal perspectives of students of their emotional lives. Qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of how boys and girls interpret their emotions, navigate peer interactions, and feel included or excluded in their school environments. Understanding gender-based emotional experiences can help teachers, counsellors, and schools create supportive social and emotional learning (SEL) programs that meet the diverse needs of all students. Such programmes support emotional well-being, positive relationships, and self-regulation among all students, thereby strengthening inclusive educational practices and promoting holistic development irrespective of gender.

Aims

- To investigate the perceived experience of girls and boys of Higher secondary grade in the area of social and emotional competence.

Research Questions:

- How do higher secondary school students describe their experiences of social and emotional competence?
- How do boys and girls differ in their expression, regulation, and understanding of emotions in school settings?

Objectives:

- To explore how higher secondary school students perceive and interpret their own social and emotional competence in everyday school life.
- To understand the differences in how boys and girls express, manage, and understand their emotions within the school environment.

Scope:

- The study mainly explores gender differences in social and emotional competence among higher Secondary School Students.
- The study collects data from students' who enrolled in Higher Secondary grade
- Data were collected qualitatively through methods such as interviews.

Limitations:

- This study is limited to Higher Secondary School Students and not includes other grades such as Primary, Middle or undergraduates.
- Data was collected only from selected higher secondary schools in the Navi Mumbai area.
- The study specifically examines gender-related experiences of social and emotional competence. Other factors such as socioeconomic status, academic stream, caste, or family background will not be considered.
- The research exclusively relies on qualitative methods (interviews); quantitative tools or statistical

comparisons are deliberately excluded.

Research Design:

Qualitative exploratory research design ² was used to collect data to understand deeply the gender differences in various components of socio emotional competence of Higher Secondary School Students.

Method of Data Collection

The data was collected through a semi- structured Interview.

Sample and Sampling Technique:

Sr. No.	Sample	Number
1	Boys	25
2	Girls	25

Location: Navi Mumbai

Sampling Technique: Convenient Sampling

Tool

The semi-structured interview schedule was based on the five main dimensions of social and emotional competence:

1. Self-Awareness
2. Social Awareness
3. Self-Management
4. Relationship Management
5. Responsible Decision-Making

The interview schedule included open-ended questions, prompts, and probes to encourage detailed and honest responses from students.

Procedure:

- After obtaining permission from the school administration, students were approached
- Interviews were conducted individually by keeping privacy and openness
- The interviews were later transcribed for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis:

- The qualitative data collected were analysed using thematic analysis.
- Themes were generated based on recurring patterns in student responses across the five SEL dimensions.
- Comparisons were made between boys' and girls' narratives to understand gender-related differences.

Data Analysis:

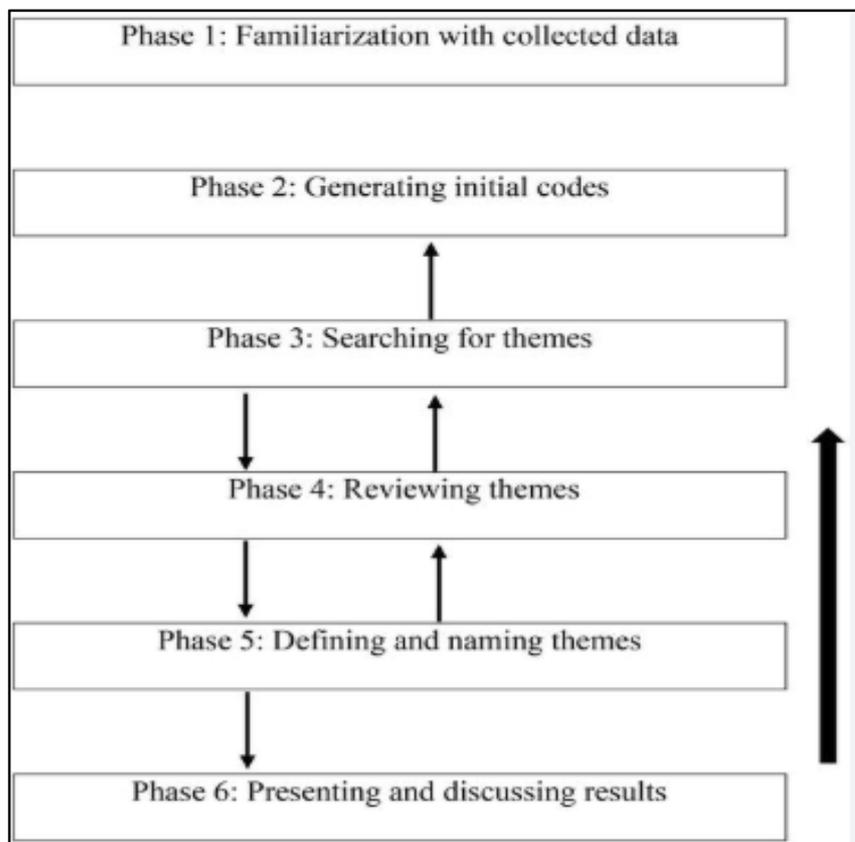


Figure 1

1. Self-Awareness:

Self-awareness among higher secondary students was explored through their ability to identify emotions, reflect on personal strengths and weaknesses, and recognise emotional triggers and responses. Students were asked how they perceived their awareness of thoughts and actions in daily life, whether they understood the reasons behind their behaviour, and how aware they were of their moods and feelings. The findings revealed that both male and female students demonstrated similar levels of self-awareness, with no significant gender-based differences. Students from both groups were able to identify and reflect upon their emotional states. For instance, one student stated, *“I can easily recognise when I am happy, sad, or anxious, especially during exams,”* while another shared, *“I know when my mood changes, like when I am angry or feeling low, even if I don’t express it.”* Although female students tended to use more expressive emotional vocabulary and provided detailed descriptions of their feelings, male students often gave shorter and more factual responses.

2. Social Awareness:

Social awareness was examined through students’ understanding of others’ emotions, empathy in friendships, and sensitivity to social situations. Students described how they recognised others’ feelings, how easy or difficult it was to understand why people feel a certain way, and how they responded when a friend was upset. The findings showed no significant gender differences in social awareness. Both male and female students demonstrated the ability to interpret emotional cues and respond empathetically. A typical response included, *“I observe their facial expressions and body language. If someone is quiet or avoiding others, I feel they might be upset.”* While female students often described empathy in terms of caring and emotional support, male students emphasised helping behaviours and practical support.

3. Self-Management:

Self-management, encompassing coping with stress, regulating intense emotions, and maintaining discipline,

was the only domain where clear gender differences emerged. Students were asked how they dealt with anxiety in new or changing situations, what helped them stay calm when things went wrong, and how they managed emotions during negative experiences. Male students frequently described strategies such as withdrawal, distraction, or engaging in activities like listening to music or playing games to regulate emotions. One boy shared, *“When I feel angry, I usually keep quiet or distract myself by listening to music or playing a game.”* In contrast, female students often reported feeling emotionally overwhelmed and relied more on social support. One girl stated, *“I prefer to talk to someone or write down my feelings when I feel overwhelmed.”* Male students appeared more confident and independent in managing stress, while female students highlighted emotional vulnerability and reliance on interpersonal support.

4. Relationship Management:

Relationship management was explored through themes of friendship maintenance, conflict resolution, and communication patterns. Students discussed how they responded after unintentionally hurting a friend, how they supported friends during emotional distress, and how they stood up for themselves or others respectfully. Both boys and girls exhibited similar levels of competence in maintaining relationships. Female students frequently described resolving conflicts through open dialogue and discussion, whereas male students tended to use avoidance strategies or give space during conflicts.

5. Responsible Decision-Making:

Responsible decision-making was examined through moral reasoning, academic choices, and consideration of consequences. Students reflected on how they assessed situations, thought about the outcomes of their actions, and ensured positive decision-making. Both male and female students showed thoughtful and balanced decision-making abilities. Common strategies included reflecting on long-term consequences, seeking advice from parents, teachers, or peers, and making responsible choices in academic and social contexts.

Findings and Suggestions:

- Both male and female higher secondary students demonstrated similar levels of self-awareness.
- No significant gender differences were found in social awareness.
- Self-management emerged as the only domain showing clear gender-related differences. Male students generally reported confidence in managing stress through distraction, withdrawal, or practical coping strategies.
- Both male and female students exhibited comparable abilities in maintaining friendships, resolving conflicts, and communicating effectively
- Students of both genders demonstrated thoughtful decision-making skills.
- Schools should strengthen SEL programs that teach coping strategies and emotional regulation, especially supporting female students in building confidence and resilience.
- Teachers should adopt gender-sensitive approaches without reinforcing stereotypes.
- Peer group activities and reflective practices can help students navigate emotional challenges more effectively.

Conclusion:

There were no significant gender differences in students’ responses. Both boys and girls showed comparable

understanding, emotional insight, and social skills. The only notable gender difference was in Self-Management, where: Male students reported stronger self-regulation, practical coping strategies, and emotional control. Female students expressed more emotional intensity, vulnerability, and reliance on external support. Therefore, Gender differences are minimal in most social-emotional areas.

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