A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF COUNSELOR-LED SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) INTERVENTIONS TO ENHANCE RESILIENCE IN AT-RISK YOUTH

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Abstract. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) plays a vital role in supporting at-risk youth by enhancing emotional regulation, resilience, and positive behavior. However, existing interventions often lack a structured model that reflects the interdependence of SEL components. This study develops a conceptual model of counsellor-led SEL interventions using Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis. Expert input identified eight key strategies: Emotional Awareness Development, Self-Regulation Coaching, Empathy Enhancement Training, Positive Relationship Skills Building, Goal-Setting and Responsible Decision-Making, Counsellor as a SEL Role Model, Family Involvement, and Trauma-Informed Approaches. ISM was used to determine the hierarchical structure among these components, revealing that Positive Relationship Skills Building and Family Involvement are primary drivers. MICMAC analysis classified the variables into four categories, highlighting Self-Regulation Coaching and Trauma-Informed as dependent elements, while Emotional Awareness, Empathy Training, and Goal-Setting were found to be dynamic linkage variables. The role of the counsellor emerged as a culminating outcome influenced by other strategies. This model offers a structured, evidence-informed framework to guide counsellors in designing effective SEL interventions. It highlights the importance of prioritizing foundational relational and family elements to support emotional growth and behavioral change in at-risk youth.

Keywords: Counsellor, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Resilience, at-risk youth.

1 Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a foundational framework in addressing the developmental needs of children and adolescents, particularly those identified as at-risk. SEL encompasses five core competencies self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making that support students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and social functioning (Lawson et al., 2019).For at-risk youth, who often encounter trauma,

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instability, or socio-emotional disruptions, SEL-based interventions can foster resilience, reduce risk behaviours, and cultivate adaptive coping mechanisms (Panayiotou et al., 2019).Within this context, the role of counsellors becomes particularly crucial, as they are strategically positioned to deliver structured and targeted SEL strategies in both school-based and institutional settings (Brigman et al., 2017; Molina et al., 2022). Despite widespread advocacy for SEL integration, many current intervention models lack structural coherence, often treating SEL components as isolated skills rather than as part of an interdependent system. As such, there is a need for a structured framework that maps the relational influence among various SEL strategies, particularly in counselor-led interventions. Addressing this gap requires an analytical approach that captures the complexity and dynamic interactions within the SEL ecosystem.

This study applies a combined Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and MICMAC (Cross-Impact Matrix Multiplication Applied to Classification) approach to develop a conceptual model of counselor-led SEL interventions for enhancing resilience in at-risk youth. ISM enables the identification and hierarchical mapping of relationships among SEL elements through expert input and systematic pairwise comparisons. MICMAC complements this by analyzing each element's driving power and dependence power, thus classifying them into four categories: autonomous, dependent, linkage, and independent variables. This dual approach not only clarifies the role of each SEL component but also guides practitioners in prioritizing strategies based on systemic influence and stability. By integrating expert insights with structural modelling, the study offers a practical and evidence-informed framework that can support more effective counselling interventions tailored to emotionally and behaviorally vulnerable youth.

The purpose of this paper is to mapping counsellor-led social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions to enhance resilience in at-risk youth. This study adopts an empirical analysis by utilizing Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) to identify the counsellor-led social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions. Hence, the objectives of this study are:

i. To determine counsellor-led social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions to enhance resilience in at-risk youth based on expert consensus.
ii. To propose counsellor-led social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions to enhance resilience in at-risk youth based on experts' consensus.

2 Literature Review

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained increasing empirical support as a critical framework for fostering emotional regulation, social behaviour, and academic performance among youth (Ahmed et al., 2020; Gimbert et al., 2023; Schonert-Reichl, 2022). According to a meta-analysis by Ahmed et al. (2020), students who participated in SEL programs demonstrated an 11% gain in academic performance, with significant reductions in emotional distress and conduct problems. Similarly, Evans (2017) reported that SEL interventions produced long-term benefits, with effects sustained up to 18 years later, including improved mental health and reduced risk behaviours. These findings underscore the importance of SEL in

promoting resilience, particularly among at-risk populations who face heightened exposure to trauma, instability, or social disadvantage (Cherewick et al., 2021; Franck et al., 2020). In the Malaysian context, studies show that approximately 1 in 5 adolescents report experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety (IPH et al., 2019) and the prevalence of behavioural issues among institutionalized or at-risk youth remains a growing concern. However, despite the need, the integration of SEL into structured counselling practice especially in institutional settings remains inconsistent and often lacks a systemic framework. Many interventions are implemented in a fragmented manner, focusing on isolated skills without understanding the interrelationships between key SEL elements.

To address this gap, systems-based modelling approaches like Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis have been used effectively in other social science fields to structure complex, interrelated components (Warfield, 1974; Raj et al., 2008). Though underutilized in SEL research, these approaches offer significant potential to classify and prioritize key components in counsellor-led interventions. For example, a recent study by Basak et al. (2022) (Chen, 2021; Patel et al., 2010; Shinde et al., 2013) applied ISM-MICMAC in educational leadership to identify core competencies in teacher development, demonstrating its flexibility and strength in revealing systemic hierarchies. Applying these techniques to SEL can help clarify which components (e.g., empathy, family involvement, and trauma-informed practices) act as drivers and which are dependent outcomes. This evidence-based modelling can support counsellors in designing more strategic interventions that are not only holistic but also aligned with the dynamic emotional needs of at-risk youth.

3 Methodology

This study adopts Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis to explore and understand the interrelationships among counsellor-led strategies that support social and emotional learning (SEL) to enhance resilience in at-risk youth. Through expert input and structured analysis, a hierarchical model of key SEL components is constructed to identify both direct and indirect influences among variables. Originally developed by Warfield (1974) and later refined by Sage (1977), ISM is particularly effective in addressing complex social systems where multiple interdependent elements exist. Techniques such as the Nominal Group Technique (NGT), Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and structured brainstorming are commonly used to facilitate consensus among expert participants in the ISM process (Gorane & Kant, 2013). ISM enables the development of a clear, interpretive model that visually represents the layered structure of SEL strategies employed in counselling. Each model or diagraph reflects how these strategies interact to shape resilient outcomes. MICMAC analysis further complements this by classifying the variables based on their driving power and dependency, offering deeper insight into which strategies hold the greatest influence. The ISM-MICMAC framework has been effectively applied across disciplines such as education (Kaushik & Kaushik, 2024), policy development (Krishnan et al., 2021), and social services, making it a suitable methodological approach for modelling counselor-led interventions in SEL contexts.

The Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) methodology was employed in this study to explore the interrelationships among counselor-led Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies aimed at fostering resilience in at-risk youth. The structured ISM and MICMAC process in this study involved several systematic steps to model and analyze counselor-led SEL interventions for at-risk youth. First, key SEL competencies such as emotional awareness, empathy, and self-regulation were identified through a structured literature review and expert consultations using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). Next, the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) was developed by conducting pair-wise comparisons among variables, using the symbols V, A, X, and O to denote directional or mutual influence. This was followed by the construction of the Final Reachability Matrix (FRM), where the SSIM was converted into binary form using specific logical rules to capture influence directionality between variables. Based on the FRM, level partitioning was carried out to group variables according to their hierarchical influence, leading to the construction of an ISM-based hierarchical model (digraph) that visually mapped the structure of relationships among SEL strategies. To deepen the analysis, MICMAC (Cross-Impact Matrix Multiplication Applied to Classification) was performed, which classified the variables into four categories autonomous, dependent, linkage, and independent based on their driving and dependence power. This classification provided valuable insights into which components were foundational drivers, which were sensitive linkages, and which were outcome-oriented. Overall, this integrated ISM-MICMAC methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of the complex interrelationships among SEL elements and supported evidence-based decision-making in designing targeted, strategic counselling interventions that build emotional resilience in vulnerable youth populations.

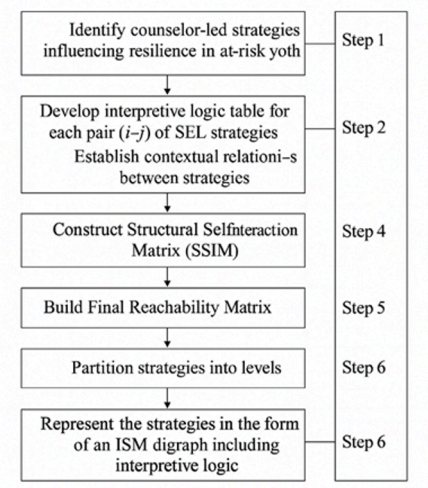

Fig.1. Step Developing ISM

3.1 **Sample**

This study engaged a total of five professionals with expertise in the field of education to participate in the ISM sessions. These individuals, all of whom agreed to be part of the research process (Prasad et al., 2020), were selected from various educational sectors and public institutions. Detailed information about each expert including their specialization, academic qualifications, and professional experience is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Information the Expert

Expert	Academic Qualification	Field Expertise
Expert 1	Master	Guidance and Counselling
Expert 2	Master	Counselling
Expert 3	Master	Counselling
Expert 4	Ph.D.	Family and Marriage Counselling
Expert 5	Ph.D.	Counselling in Mental Health

4 Data Analysis

In the first step of this study, the researcher interviewed a group of experts in counselling and reviewed related literature to identify important elements for implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions for at-risk youth. From this process, eight key approaches were selected. These approaches were then analyzed using Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) to understand how each element is related and which ones are most influential. After that, MICMAC analysis was used to classify the elements based on their level of influence and dependence.

The findings helped to develop a clear and structured model to guide counsellors in applying SEL strategies to build resilience in at-risk youth.

Table 2. Approach and Key Action

No.	Approach	Key Action
1	Emotional Awareness Development	Facilitating clients' ability to recognize, label, and understand their own emotional experiences as a foundation of SEL ("Strength. Students' Soc. Emot. Ski. Lessons from Six Case Stud. Sch. Out-of-School-Time Progr. Partners (Volume 2, Part 1)," 2022)
2	Self-Regulation Coaching	Supporting youth to manage impulses, stress, and emotional responses through mindfulness and cognitive reframing techniques (Adams et al., 2022)
3	Empathy Enhancement Training	Engaging clients in activities that promote perspective-taking, compassion, and emotional understanding of others (Carpio de los Pinos et al., 2020)
4	Positive Relationship Skills Building	Teaching communication, conflict resolution, and social cooperation skills within peer or family interactions (Elmi, 2020).
5	Goal-Setting and Responsible Decision-Making	Encouraging youth to set personal goals and evaluate the outcomes of their choices using structured decision-making tools (Feuerborn & Gueldner, 2019).
6	Counsellor as a SEL Role Model	Demonstrating emotional intelligence, active listening, and respectful interactions as part of therapeutic modelling (Espelage et al., 2022)
7	Family Involvement	Integrating parents or caregivers in sessions to reinforce SEL values and promote emotional resilience at home (Deerin, 2005)
8	Trauma-Informed	Applying SEL strategies that consider past trauma, using safe, supportive, and empowering approaches to healing (Kim et al., 2021).

4.1 Finding from step 2

The Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) shown in the image identifies the contextual relationships among eight key variables involved in counselor-led Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions to enhance resilience in at-risk youth. The matrix uses the notations V, A, X, and O to represent the direction and presence of influence between variables. For instance, "Emotional Awareness Development" (Variable 1) influences all other variables, as indicated by the "V" direction, suggesting it is a foundational element. In contrast, "Trauma-Informed" (Variable 8) is largely influenced by other elements, indicating it is more dependent. This matrix forms the basis for further ISM modeling to map out a hierarchical structure of these

elements, helping to understand how foundational SEL components support the development of higher-level counseling strategies.

Table 3. SSIM matrix
** Output from SmartISM software

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Emotional Awareness Development		V	V	A	A	V	A	V
Self-Regulation Coaching			A	A	A	V	A	A
Empathy Enhancement Training				A	V	V	A	V
Positive Relationship Skills Building					V	V	V	V
Goal-Setting and Responsible Decision-Making						V	A	V
Counsellor as a SEL Role Model							A	A
Family Involvement								V
Trauma-Informed								

4.2 Finding from step 3 (Reachability matrix)

The Reachability Matrix (RM) displays the relationships and influence levels among the eight variables of counsellor-led Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions. Each "1" indicates that a variable either influences or is influenced by another, while "0" indicates no direct influence. The Driving Power column shows how many other variables a particular element can influence, with “Positive Relationship Skills Building” (Variable 4) having the highest driving power of 8, indicating it plays a central role in influencing all other elements. “Family Involvement” and “Emotional Awareness Development” also show strong driving power (7 and 5, respectively), meaning they are foundational components in the SEL framework. Conversely, “Counselor as a SEL Role Model” has the lowest driving power (1), suggesting it is more dependent than influential. The Dependence Power row shows which variables are most influenced by others, with “Self-Regulation Coaching” and “Empathy Enhancement Training” having the highest dependence scores (4), indicating that these elements rely heavily on the functioning of other components. This matrix helps prioritize intervention components and understand how they interrelate in building resilience among at-risk youth.

Table 4. Reachability Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Driving Power
Emotional Awareness Development	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	5
Self-Regulation Coaching	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Empathy Enhancement Training	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	5
Positive Relationship Skills Building	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Goal-Setting and Responsible Decision-Making	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	5
Counsellor as a SEL Role Model	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Family Involvement	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	7
Trauma-Informed	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	3
Dependence Power	4	7	4	1	4	8	2	6	

4.3 Finding from step 4 &5

The Level Partitioning table and corresponding digraph illustrate the hierarchical structure of eight key components in counsellor-led SEL interventions. Based on reachability and antecedent sets, elements are grouped by levels of influence, with Level 1 (Counsellor as SEL Role Model) being the most dependent, and Level 6 (Positive Relationship Skills Building) as the highest-level outcome. Middle levels include foundational components such as Self-Regulation Coaching (Level 2), Trauma-Informed (Level 3), and key influencers like Emotional Awareness, Empathy Enhancement, and Goal-Setting (Level 4). This layered structure guides counsellors on the sequence and priority of SEL elements, emphasizing that foundational skills must be developed before higher-level competencies can be achieved effectively.

Table 5. Level partitioning

Elements(Mi)	Reachability Set R(Mi)	Antecedent Set A(Ni)	Intersection Set R(Mi)∩A(Ni)	Level
1	1, 3, 5,	1, 3, 4, 5, 7,	1, 3, 5,	4
2	2,	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8,	2,	2
3	1, 3, 5,	1, 3, 4, 5, 7,	1, 3, 5,	4
4	4,	4,	4,	6
5	1, 3, 5,	1, 3, 4, 5, 7,	1, 3, 5,	4
6	6,	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8,	6,	1
7	7,	4, 7,	7,	5
8	8,	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8,	8,	3

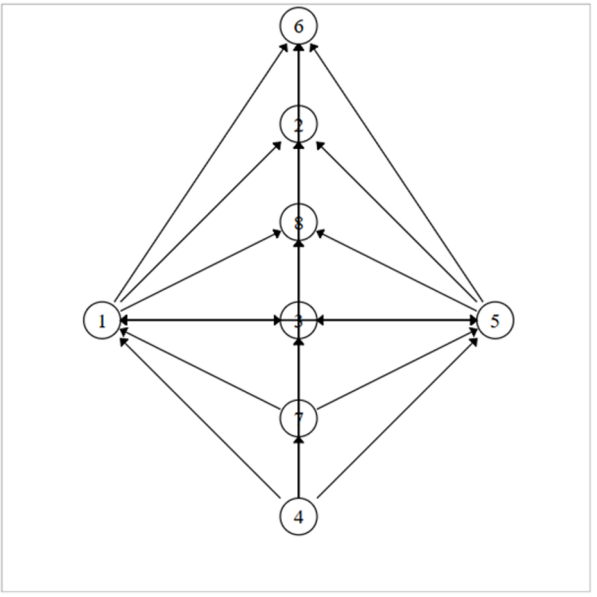

Fig. 2. Model Digraph (SmartISM output)

4.4 Finding from step 6 (MICMAC Analysis)

The MICMAC analysis diagram categorizes the eight SEL intervention variables into four quadrants based on their driving and dependence power. In Quadrant I (Autonomous Variables), there are no elements present, indicating that all components in the model are meaningfully connected and contribute to the system's structure. Quadrant II (Dependent Variables) includes Variable 2 (Self-Regulation Coaching) and Variable 8 (Trauma-Informed), both of which are highly dependent on other elements but have low influence themselves. These are typically seen as outcomes of upstream interventions and should be addressed after core strategies are in place. Quadrant III (Linkage Variables) includes Variables 1 (Emotional Awareness Development), 3 (Empathy Enhancement Training), and 5 (Goal-Setting & Responsible Decision-Making). These have both high driving and high dependence power, making them dynamic and sensitive components in the system. Changes in these areas can both impact and be impacted by others, so they must be managed carefully to maintain model stability. Finally, Quadrant IV (Independent Variables) includes Variable 4 (Positive Relationship Skills Building) and Variable 7 (Family Involvement), both of which exhibit high driving power but low dependence. These serve as foundational drivers that initiate influence throughout the system and should be prioritized in intervention planning. This distribution reinforces the model's logic that relationship and family factors are essential drivers of emotional and behavioral resilience in at-risk youth.

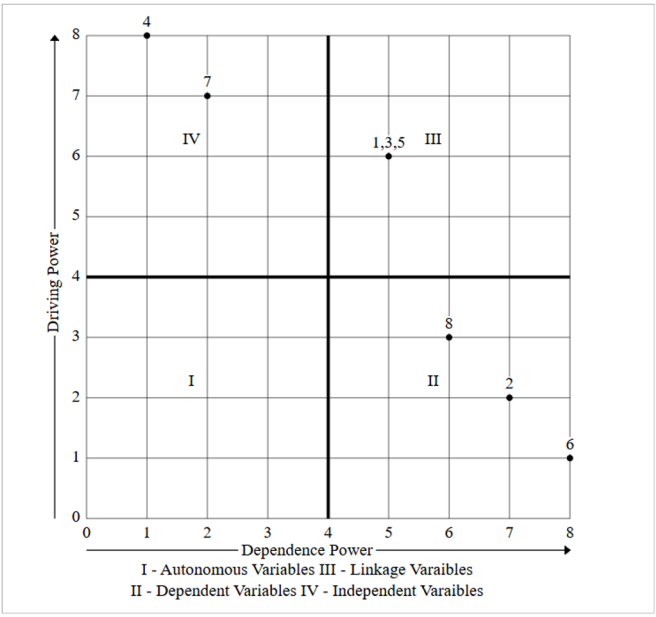

Fig.3. MICMAC Analysis

5 Key Finding

The MICMAC analysis presented in this study offers a compelling perspective on the interrelationships among eight core components of counsellor-led Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions aimed at enhancing resilience in at-risk youth. By mapping each variable according to its driving power and dependence power, the analysis allows for a deeper understanding of which elements serve as key influencers within the intervention model and which ones are more outcome-dependent. The findings are not only theoretically informative but also practically useful for designing effective and structured counselling interventions. One of the most significant insights is the identification of two independent variables Positive Relationship Skills Building (Variable 4) and Family Involvement (Variable 7) positioned in Quadrant IV. These elements hold high driving power but low dependence power, indicating that they act as foundational enablers in the system. Their influence cascades through other variables, making them essential starting

points in any SEL intervention framework. This finding reinforces long-standing research emphasizing the centrality of relationship-building and family systems in supporting emotional development and behavioural regulation among vulnerable populations. It suggests that interventions should begin by fostering supportive environments, both relationally and at the family level, to ensure long-term impact.

In contrast, Self-Regulation Coaching (Variable 2) and Trauma-Informed Approaches (Variable 8) fall into Quadrant II (Dependent Variables). These components are highly influenced by others but exert minimal influence themselves. This suggests they function more as results or outcomes rather than initial targets for intervention. Practitioners should therefore approach these areas as beneficiaries of well-implemented core strategies such as emotional awareness and empathy training. Interestingly, Variables 1 (Emotional Awareness Development), 3 (Empathy Enhancement Training), and 5 (Goal-Setting and Responsible Decision-Making) fall into Quadrant III (Linkage Variables). These elements possess both high driving and dependence power, making them critical yet sensitive components within the intervention structure. Their interconnected nature means they can create powerful feedback loops positively or negatively depending on how they are activated and supported. This suggests that while these variables are pivotal, they must be introduced with care, ensuring that the foundational drivers (Variables 4 and 7) are already in place to provide stability. Lastly, Counsellor as a SEL Role Model (Variable 6) is located in the lowest quadrant with low driving and high dependence power, signalling that the effectiveness of the counsellor as a model is a culminating result, rather than a starting point. Overall, this MICMAC analysis reveals a structured, logical progression for implementing SEL strategies in counselling: start with family and relationship foundations, then build emotional competencies, and finally reinforce behaviours through trauma-informed and regulatory support.

6 Future Recommendation

Based on the findings of this MICMAC analysis, several further recommendations are proposed to strengthen future research and practice in counsellor-led SEL interventions for at-risk youth. First, future studies should explore longitudinal impacts of foundational drivers such as Family Involvement and Positive Relationship Skills Building. Since these elements demonstrated strong driving power, understanding their sustained influence over time can offer valuable insight into how early intervention shapes long-term emotional resilience (Colomeischi et al., 2022). Second, it is recommended that researchers conduct qualitative studies involving counsellors, families, and youth to further explore how these key SEL components are perceived and experienced in real-world settings (Özdemir & Bacanli, 2020). Such insights could validate the MICMAC positioning and enrich the model with contextual understanding, particularly within culturally diverse or underserved populations.

Third, the linkage variables Emotional Awareness, Empathy Training, and Goal-Setting should be explored more deeply in terms of their implementation dynamics. As these variables possess both high driving and dependence power, they are sensitive to system changes (Walker & Venker Weidenbenner, 2019). Therefore,

designing flexible and adaptive modules that cater to the unique needs and emotional states of youth may help stabilize the feedback loops they influence. Additionally, future research could incorporate bio psychosocial measures such as physiological indicators (e.g., heart rate variability) or behavioural assessments to empirically track improvements in self-regulation and trauma recovery, especially for the more dependent variables like Trauma-Informed Approaches and Self-Regulation Coaching. Finally, this research model can be replicated across different populations (e.g., children in foster care, youth in juvenile institutions, or refugee adolescents) to examine its generalizability and to refine the SEL framework across contexts. Incorporating digital tools or ramified SEL modules may also be explored as modern enhancements to increase youth engagement. These recommendations aim to bridge theory and practice, and support the evolution of more targeted, impactful counselling interventions.

7 Conclusion

The study presents a conceptual and evidence-informed model that integrates counsellor-led Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies to enhance resilience among at-risk youth. By employing Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis, the research systematically mapped the interrelationships among eight critical SEL components, offering a hierarchical and data-driven framework that can guide counselling interventions. The results underscore the foundational role of Positive Relationship Skills Building and Family Involvement as primary drivers, suggesting that interventions must begin with strengthening relational environments and family systems (de Azúa, 2018). Meanwhile, variables such as Self-Regulation Coaching and Trauma-Informed Practices were found to be dependent outcomes, highlighting the importance of addressing emotional and behavioural needs only after establishing a strong psychosocial foundation (Carr, 2011). The use of ISM-MICMAC proved effective in deconstructing the complexity of SEL elements and reconstructing them into a logical, tiered model. This approach not only elevates the academic understanding of SEL in counselling but also provides practitioners with a strategic tool to design interventions that are sequenced, prioritized, and contextually relevant.

Furthermore, the categorization of SEL variables into driver, linkage, and dependent clusters allows for more intentional decision-making and resource allocation in intervention planning. Critically, this model challenges fragmented or one-size-fits-all approaches to youth counselling by advocating for a systems-thinking perspective—one that recognizes the dynamic interplay between emotional skills, family context, and counsellor influence. While the model is conceptually robust, its applicability across diverse populations and settings calls for further empirical validation through longitudinal and experimental studies. Future research should also explore integrating digital tools and trauma-informed measurement instruments to further strengthen the practical utility of this model. Ultimately, this study advances the field by offering a grounded yet adaptable framework that empowers counsellors to foster meaningful, sustainable change in the lives of vulnerable youth.

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