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# Between the Teacher's Heart and the Student's Mind: The Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Social Skills in Primary School

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates the association between Turkish primary school teachers' emotional intelligence (EI) and students' social skills (SS). Data were collected from 12 teachers and 321 students and analysed using a multilevel linear mixed-effects model to account for students nested within classrooms. Teachers' total EI scores were positively associated with students' SS scores ($B = 0.079$, $p = 0.006$), indicating a modest effect. The findings provide initial multilevel evidence from Turkey and suggest that EI-focused professional learning may be relevant for supporting students' social functioning in primary school. Given the small number of classrooms/teachers (Level 2, $n = 12$), the evidence should be interpreted as exploratory and warrants replication with larger, more diverse teacher samples. The study contributes novel multilevel evidence and may inform the integration of EI-focused components into teacher education and professional development in Turkey.

## 1 | Introduction

Primary school education is a multifaceted process that supports children's cognitive, affective and social development. In this process, teachers contribute not only to their students' academic achievements but also to their social and affective development (Krishnan and Awang 2020; Prepelita and Voinea 2023; Rao et al. 2024). The relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence competencies and their students' social skills is of great importance during the primary school years; indeed, this relationship is directly evident in the definitions of the two concepts: Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to an individual's ability to understand, manage, and use their own and others' emotions (American Psychological Association [APA] 2015; Mayer et al. 2011; Mayer and Salovey 1995), while social skills (SS) encompass abilities such as effective communication, empathy, cooperation and problem-solving (APA 2015; Caldarella and Merrell 1997).

EI plays a significant role in various aspects of life, such as decision-making, maintaining healthy social relationships and career planning (Brackett et al. 2004; Izzarelli 2022; Nazari 2013; Sarkar and Senapati 2016; Subramaniam 2022). It encompasses abilities such as understanding one's own and others' emotions, regulating one's own emotional responses and helping to regulate the emotional processes of others (Bar-On 2010; Goleman 1998; Mayer et al. 2000). EI is considered a set of skills that can be developed through life experiences and learning, in addition to innate traits (Arias et al. 2022; Basiuk 2022; Garbenis and Palujanskienė 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that developing and supporting teachers' EI skills will have positive effects on the social and emotional development of students.

Social skills (SS), in turn, are a set of learned abilities that enable an individual to interact harmoniously and successfully within society (Csoti 2001; Greene 2016). These skills are grouped under five dimensions: (a) Peer Relations

Skills, (b) Self-Management Skills, (c) Academic Skills, (d) Compliance Skills and (e) Assertion Skills (Caldarella and Merrell 1997). It is recognised that the development of SS, which begins in early childhood, is influenced by various factors such as family, school and the social environment, and is developed through lifelong learning (Greene 2016; Malkić Aličković 2017). In this respect, the primary school age is a critical period for children to develop and reinforce their SS. During this age, by designing supportive learning environments and activities for their students' SS, teachers help them establish healthy social relationships, cope with emotional difficulties, and increase their academic success (Ezechinyere et al. 2021; Fermoso et al. 2019).

Studies indicate that teachers' EI levels can impact the SS development of their students: it is understood that teachers with high EI improve relationships among students and can positively influence their students' acquisition of SS by modelling student–teacher communication based on mutual respect and understanding (Buyanova 2022; Juniar et al. 2023; Prepelita and Voinea 2023). In parallel, the development of EI in teachers is thought to be effective in enhancing empathy, self-management and learning motivation in students (Jennings and Greenberg 2009) and to contribute to reducing conflict situations among them (Vila et al. 2021).

In Turkey, it is noted that research on the relationship between EI and SS in primary school has predominantly focused on students, with the teacher-student interaction not yet being sufficiently examined. For example, while some studies have focused on the effects of current curricula or various educational practices on the EI levels of primary school students (Çelikten 2024; Demirci and Kartal 2024; Kasapoğlu and Güneysu 2016; Özoğlu and Yüksel 2018; Yorulmaz and Kıraç 2019), others have concentrated on scale development processes for the relevant age group (Mumcuoğlu 2002; Tanrıöğen and Türker 2019; Vural and Kocabaş 2011).

Furthermore, it is understood that studies addressing the EI-SS relationship in the adult-student context are limited in number, having either examined parent–child interactions (Gündüz 2021) or focused on teachers' EI levels in isolation (Akan 2020; Erdil 2018; Özmen 2009). Therefore, it is thought that this study, by focusing on the relationship between the EI levels of teachers and the SS levels of primary school students, can fill a significant gap in the relevant literature and offer a new perspective on enhancing the quality of teacher–student interaction.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the EI levels of primary school teachers and the SS levels of their students. Accordingly, the study investigates how teachers' EI, as a holistic construct composed of various interrelated skills, is related to their students' SS. This study seeks to answer the following primary research question: 'To what extent is teachers' overall EI associated with their students' SS in a multilevel context?'

It is anticipated that the findings of this research will make significant contributions in areas such as placing greater emphasis on EI development in teacher education programmes, increasing teachers' awareness of EI, and designing intervention programmes to improve students' SS.

## 2 | Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 | Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Introduced in 1990 by American psychologists Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, emotional intelligence (EI or EQ) is defined as 'a type of intelligence based on the ability to process affective information and use it in reasoning and other cognitive processes' (APA 2015, 381). Unlike cognitive intelligence (CI or IQ), which essentially focuses on cognitive abilities such as logical reasoning, problem-solving and information processing capacity, EI is considered a type of intelligence that centres more on intuitive and emotional skills based on a person's ability to understand their own and others' emotions, to empathise, and to form social interactions (APA 2015; Goleman 1998; Salovey and Mayer 1990).

Studies show that both CI and EI are necessary for social and professional success, but they contribute in different ways; for example, while individuals with high CI generally excel in tasks requiring analytical thinking and technical skills, those with high EI stand out in areas such as social interaction, leadership, and emotional regulation (Ahmed et al. 2014; Nurhab et al. 2022).

It is generally accepted that there are three models that outline the dimensions of EI (Bar-On 2010; Winter 2016): (1) the Mayer and Salovey (1995) model, which suggests that EI is based on cognitive processes related to the abilities to perceive, understand, regulate and use emotions; (2) the Goleman (1998) model, which proposes that EI is essentially a set of various skills and competencies that constitute effective life performance; and (3) the Bar-On (2010) model, which posits that EI consists of behavioural patterns based on interrelated emotional–social competencies and skills. However, regardless of the model adopted, the dimensions constituting EI are accepted as: (a) self-awareness and acceptance, (b) awareness of others' emotions, (c) the ability to regulate one's own emotions, (d) the ability to fulfil work and responsibilities from a realistic perspective and (e) adopting a positive and optimistic attitude (Bar-On 2010; Lopes et al. 2004).

#### 2.1.1 | The Importance and Development of EI

EI is important for individuals to recognise their own emotional and thought processes and to establish healthy social relationships. According to Goleman (1998), individuals with developed EI, being aware of their emotional states, better manage their reactions and behaviours, and are thus more successful in understanding and responding to the emotions of others and in establishing meaningful and effective interactions. Consequently, EI promotes empathy by making it easier for people to understand and share the feelings of others, enables the more effective and constructive resolution of potential conflicts, and contributes to the development of their academic and professional performance by equipping them

with skills for positive thinking and resilience to stressful situations (Ahmad and Nawaz 2019; Habib et al. 2023; Keidar and Yagoda 2014).

The contributions of adults with high EI are significant during childhood, a period of intense cognitive, affective and moral development. Adults with high EI serve as healthy role models for children, demonstrating how to manage and express emotions effectively. Such modelling helps children learn appropriate emotional responses and coping mechanisms (Goleman 1998). By creating a peaceful and understanding atmosphere, these adults help reduce anxiety and stress in children, thereby contributing to their mental health and overall well-being (McPheat 2010). Adults who understand the importance of EI encourage children to express their emotions rather than suppress them, thus supporting the development of their self-awareness and self-management skills (Goleman 1998).

Although some fundamental emotional responses exhibited in social relationships are influenced by genetically-rooted factors such as temperament and by early childhood experiences, it is accepted that EI is largely structured through life experiences (Arias et al. 2022; Basiuk 2022; Garbenis and Palujanskienė 2021). Indeed, findings in the relevant literature reveal that healthy interactions with family, peers and educators play a crucial role in shaping a person's EI over time (Goleman 1998; McPheat 2010), and show that EI is not a fixed trait and can be significantly developed through educational programmes, professional training and social relationships (Basiuk 2022; Ishii and Horikawa 2019).

#### 2.1.2 | The Relationship Between EI and CI

EI and CI are generally viewed as complementary types of intelligence: while CI encompasses cognitive abilities such as logical reasoning, problem-solving, and analytical skills, EI focuses on emotional and social competencies like self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management (Keefer et al. 2018). Therefore, it can be said that CI is more related to intellectual tasks and academic performance, whereas EI is concerned with effectively managing and sustaining emotions and social interactions. This distinction highlights that while both types of intelligence are critical to human life, they are influential in different domains.

Together, EI and CI provide a holistic perspective on an individual's abilities and are considered important for personal development. For example, effective decision-making requires a strong balance of CI and EI. While CI aids in analysing and evaluating information, EI ensures that decisions are made constructively with regard to their empathetic and social outcomes (Fiori and Vesely-Maillefer 2018). Due to its role in managing emotions and interpersonal relationships, EI is considered a trait that can be developed over time, unlike the relatively stable CI (Srivastava and Jaiswal 2022). Nevertheless, both contribute to an individual's overall success and together offer a more complete picture of their capabilities (Kabir et al. 2021; Nuthanapati and Battini 2024). Therefore, it can be argued that emphasising both types of intelligence in educational and personal development processes helps individuals maximise their potential.

#### 2.1.3 | EI and the Teaching Profession

The importance of EI for the teaching profession stems from its influence on both teachers' attitudes and awareness towards themselves and their profession, and on the quality of the communication and interaction they establish with their students. Teachers with high EI are aware of their strengths and areas for improvement and tend to exhibit greater self-confidence, creativity and adaptation in the face of changing conditions (Bahman and Maffini 2008; Goleman 1998; Sparrow and Knight 2006). This situation encourages them towards continuous development and positive change, while also helping them to coordinate better with colleagues, acquire motivation to become more equipped, and consequently gain a positive outlook on their professional roles (Sparrow and Knight 2006).

The primary benefit that a high level of EI provides to individuals is the development of self-awareness (Goleman 1998; McPheat 2010); indeed, self-awareness is defined as 'an individual's consciousness and evaluation of him- or herself' (APA 2015, 952). Teachers who possess self-awareness can cope with stressful situations they may encounter, particularly in educational processes, maintain their composure, and serve as healthy role models by adopting an open, empathy-based communication style with their students (Bahman and Maffini 2008). Furthermore, teachers who understand and manage their emotions well can conduct dynamic lessons that capture students' interest, increase their enthusiasm, alleviate boredom, and maintain high levels of participation (Goleman 1998).

Teachers' EI levels play a significant role in matters such as managing the classroom environment, communicating effectively with students, increasing learning motivation, and supporting students' social and emotional development (Krishnan and Awang 2020; Prepelita and Voinea 2023; Rao et al. 2024). Furthermore, some research indicates that teachers with high EI increase their students' academic achievement, reduce behavioural problems, and generally create a more positive classroom climate (Listiyawati et al. 2022; Voulgaraki et al. 2023).

#### 2.1.4 | The Measurement of EI

Being a relatively new and active area of research has paved the way for the emergence of different approaches to the measurement of EI. These approaches are fundamentally centred on two understandings, based on how EI is defined (Winter 2016): (1) the cognitive ability approach, based on the model by Salovey and Mayer (1990), which focuses on emotions themselves and the interaction of emotions with thoughts in the assessment of EI, and (2) the mixed approach, based on the model proposed by Bar-On (2010) and Goleman (1998), which is founded on the idea that cognitive abilities operate in conjunction with traits such as motivation and social interaction.

1. The cognitive ability approach: This approach argues that EI, like CI, is a general cognitive ability and a measurable capacity. Therefore, this approach predominantly uses performance-based tests for the measurement of EI. The Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), developed as a measurement tool based on

this approach, assesses individuals' performance based on emotional information.

2. The mixed approach: this approach asserts that EI is influenced not only by cognitive abilities related to emotional information but also by traits such as personality, motivation, social skills, and emotional awareness. It suggests that EI extends beyond understanding and managing emotions to include the ability to use emotions to achieve success; consequently, this approach primarily uses self-report tests for EI measurement. Bar-On and Goleman, pioneers of the mixed approach, have presented a model of EI composed of emotional and social competencies. According to this model, EI has five main components: self-awareness, self-management, motivation, social awareness, and relationship management. The Bar-On Emotional–Social Intelligence Inventory (EQ-i) and the Goleman Emotional Intelligence Inventory (EIQ), developed as measurement tools for this model, are used to assess the emotional and social competencies of individuals. Furthermore, the Rotterdam Emotional Intelligence Scale (REIS), which was developed by Pekaar et al. (2018) and is also used in the present study, aligns with this approach due to its self-report format and its assessment of EI across a broader spectrum that includes cognitive abilities, personality traits, and social skills.

## 2.2 | Social Skills (SS)

Social skills (SS) are defined as 'learned abilities that enable an individual to interact competently and appropriately in a given social context' (APA 2015, 1001). These abilities are not only about being polite and considerate but also about clearly communicating one's needs to others; this makes it easier for individuals to be taken seriously and have their opinions respected. SS include showing sensitivity towards others, refraining from bullying, and avoiding intentionally hurtful comments. Being sensitive to one's environment, understanding different perspectives and being able to compromise in conflict situations are also encompassed within these skills (Csoti 2001). Thus, SS can be described as a complex set of interrelated learned abilities that allow an individual to interact harmoniously and successfully within society.

How the skills within SS can be categorised—that is, the dimensions under which they can be grouped—was established in the taxonomic work of Caldarella and Merrell (1997). The findings of their study, which was based on a meta-analysis of scales used to determine SS levels, indicated that these skills could be organised into five dimensions. These dimensions and the skills they represent are as follows:

a. Peer relations skills: These are skills aimed at establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. This dimension includes skills such as cooperation, teamwork, and providing and receiving support within relationships.

b. Self-management skills: These are skills that allow a person to manage their emotions and behaviours in social situations. This dimension includes controlling impulses, staying focused and adapting to changing social environments.

c. Academic skills: These are skills related to working independently and completing assigned tasks. This dimension includes completing assignments, producing quality work and listening to and following instructions.

d. Compliance skills: These are skills for understanding social cues and norms and being aware of the dynamics in social interactions. This dimension includes recognising appropriate behaviour in different social contexts and understanding the impact of one's actions on others.

e. Assertion skills: These are skills that enable a person to advocate for their rights and to express their thoughts and feelings in a respectful and confident manner. They include abilities such as saying 'No' when necessary and responding to criticism constructively.

### 2.2.1 | The Importance and Development of SS

As is clear from its definition, SS is a set of skills that can be developed. Initiatives that contribute to SS development include making a habit of saying 'No' to defend one's rights, participating in role-playing exercises to cope with high-pressure social situations, adopting a clear and empathetic communication approach, and focusing on carrying out daily routines in a planned, organised manner (Caldarella and Merrell 1997; Csoti 2001). However, like all other skills (e.g., athletic skills, craft skills), these initiatives for SS development also require regular practice; participating in social activities and receiving constructive feedback are important for the continuous improvement of social interactions and the permanence of their positive contributions (Greene 2016).

The development of SS helps individuals to engage in healthy social interactions, achieve personal goals, and align their behaviours with societal expectations, thereby fostering a strong sense of belonging and self-efficacy within the context of the individual-society relationship (Nowak and Krawczyk 2014). Furthermore, SS are an integral part of mental health, as deficiencies in these skills can lead to psychological disorders such as social anxiety and depression (Bautista-Ronces 2020; Little et al. 2017). Moreover, the development of SS also has tremendous contributions on a societal scale: it provides a solid foundation for the proper functioning of communities and institutions, and facilitates cooperation, an understanding of conflict resolution, and the adoption of social norms for social cohesion and stability (Greenwood et al. 2002; Turner et al. 2018).

### 2.2.2 | The Teaching and Support of SS

SS development begins in early childhood and is influenced by various factors, including family dynamics, educational environments and broader social contexts (e.g., peer relationships). Enjoyable learning environments and activities are particularly effective in developing SS in children as they provide opportunities to learn fundamental social concepts (e.g., respect, tolerance, cooperation) and to practice interpersonal interactions. It is accepted that participatory learning practices such as drama, role-playing and choir work strengthen interest and motivation in primary school-aged children, significantly

encourage the acquisition of SS, and lead to more lasting learning of core social concepts (Ezechinyere et al. 2021; Fermoso et al. 2019).

For primary school-aged children, SS encompass behaviours such as effective communication, empathy, and cooperation (Csoti 2001; Greenwood et al. 2002). These skills help children to form positive social interactions and develop healthy self-esteem, while also creating a solid foundation for their personal development and future academic and social success (Asyari and Astuti 2022; Besi and Sakellariou 2019; Ozerova et al. 2023). Therefore, SS development in primary school is of great importance. Research in the relevant literature reveals that the development of SS improves students' academic, emotional and behavioural performance (Fermoso et al. 2019; Tratnik 2022) and fosters responsibility and self-management while promoting cooperation among students (Salimi and Fauziah 2023; Zehrina et al. 2018).

#### 2.2.3 | The Measurement of SS

In primary school, the measurement of SS can be accomplished through surveys in which students assess their own developmental levels, observation forms where skill acquisition is evaluated by an external rater (parents, teachers, peers), or combinations thereof (Breil et al. 2022; Caballo et al. 2014; Matson 2017). For example, the *Social Skills Inventory* developed by Riggio (1986) was used to assess both verbal and non-verbal social skills among primary school students and revealed that students scored highest in the areas of emotional sensitivity and social awareness. The *Social Skills Improvement System—Teacher Rating Scale* (*SSIS-TRS*), which defines four dimensions of SS (cooperation, empathy/relationship building, engagement/interaction and self-control) and three dimensions of problem behaviours (aggression/defiance, disruptiveness and withdrawal/social retreat), is another important teacher-rated instrument used in this field (Elliott et al. 2008).

Studies have also been conducted in this field in Turkey; for example the *Social Adjustment and Skills Scale* for children aged 6–12 developed by Sezgin and Akman (2014) is a 59-item, parent-rated scale. The *Social Skills Scale* for children aged 7 and over, adapted by Gençdoğan (2008), is used as a 21-item self-report scale. The *Social Skills Scale* (*SBÖ*), a 20-item, single-dimension scale developed by Kocayörük-Yaya (2000), is another of these studies. Additionally, there is the 16-item, self-report *Scale for Determining Social Participation Skills for Children* (*SKBÖ*), developed by Samancı et al. (2018), which was also used in the present research.

## 3 | Method

### 3.1 | Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, multilevel correlational design to examine the relationship between a Level 2 fixed effect (teacher EI) and a student-level outcome (SS). Students were nested within classrooms, with each classroom taught by a single primary school teacher. Because observations within the same classroom cannot be assumed to be statistically independent, a multilevel analytic approach was adopted to appropriately model the hierarchical data structure and to obtain unbiased parameter estimates. In this framework, teachers' EI scores were modelled as a Level 2 (teacher-level) predictor of students' SS scores at Level 1 (student-level). This approach is appropriate for examining relationships across different hierarchical levels and for correctly modelling the non-independence of data within groups (Heck et al. 2013; Privitera 2022). The primary aim was to determine the nature and extent of the relationship between the EI levels of primary school teachers and the SS levels of their students.

### 3.2 | Participants

Participants were drawn from three public primary schools located in the Küçükçekmece district of Istanbul, Turkey. The final sample comprised 12 primary school teachers (6 teaching third grade and 6 teaching fourth grade) and 321 students (167 third-grade and 154 fourth-grade students). An initial total of 327 student responses were collected; however, six student questionnaires were excluded from the analyses because they either lacked demographic information (grade and gender) or contained multiple markings for the same item, resulting in a final analytic sample of 321 students.

The distribution of teachers and students across schools is presented in Table 1. As shown, the sample included six female and six male teachers, and the students were relatively evenly distributed by gender across the three schools.

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton 2015; Privitera 2022) was used, combining convenience and criterion sampling. Four public schools with which the researcher already collaborated as part of the university's teaching internship programme were initially contacted to facilitate access and coordination. From these, three schools that met the study criteria agreed to participate. This reflects the convenience sampling component, as participants were selected based on ease of access.

The criterion sampling component was defined as follows:

a. Teachers had to be currently employed as primary school classroom teachers in one of the participating schools, and
b. They had to have worked with the same group of students for at least three consecutive years.

Furthermore, only third- and fourth-grade classrooms were included, as the student SS scale used in the study was specifically developed for these grade levels.

**TABLE 1** | Sample distribution.

| | Teacher (*n*) | | Student (*n*) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **School** | **F** | **M** | **F** | **M** | **Student (%)** |
| School A | 4 | — | 53 | 49 | 31.8 |
| School B | 2 | 2 | 48 | 59 | 33.3 |
| School C | — | 4 | 51 | 61 | 34.9 |
| Total | 6 | 6 | 154 | 173 | 100.0 |

### 3.3 | Measures

Teachers' EI levels were assessed using the Rotterdam Emotional Intelligence Scale (REIS), a self-report instrument originally developed by Pekaar et al. (2018) and adapted into Turkish by Tanrıöğen and Türker (2019). The REIS consists of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale and measures four sub-dimensions: Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA), Other-Emotional Appraisal (OEA), Self-Emotion Regulation (SER) and Other-Emotion Regulation (OER). These four sub-dimensions are conceptually consistent with core EI competencies emphasised in mixed models (e.g., Bar-On 2010; Goleman 1998), and can be interpreted as broadly corresponding to self-awareness (SEA), social awareness/empathy (OEA), self-management (SER), and interpersonal competence/relationship management (OER). In the Turkish adaptation study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these sub-dimensions were reported as 0.91, 0.91, 0.89, and 0.93, respectively, with an alpha of 0.94 for the total scale. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed the original four-factor structure and indicated that the scale explained 68% of the total variance. In the present study, the internal consistency reliability of the total scale was calculated as 0.86, confirming the reliability of using the total EI score for the analysis.

In the present study, the total REIS score was used as the primary indicator of teachers' EI. This decision was based on the strong intercorrelations among the four sub-dimensions and the aim to represent EI as a holistic construct. Using the total score also helped reduce potential multicollinearity problems in the multilevel model while still capturing the broader spectrum of emotional competencies measured by the REIS. The decision to use a total score was supported by positive intercorrelations among SEA, OEA, SER and OER in our sample (ranging from $r = 0.334$ to $r = 0.768$; see Table S1), suggesting that these dimensions tap into a common underlying emotional competence construct while avoiding multicollinearity issues that would arise from entering four highly correlated sub-dimensions simultaneously into the multilevel model.

Students' SS were measured with the Scale for Determining Social Participation Skills for Children (SKBÖ) developed by Samancı et al. (2018). The SKBÖ is a 16-item, single-factor, self-report scale designed for third- and fourth-grade primary school students. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale. In the original development study, the scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.76 and explained 34% of the total variance in SS.

The SKBÖ captures four key components of social participation: communication skills, social problem-solving skills, social awareness skills, and academic social skills. Its psychometric properties and age-appropriateness for Turkish primary school students were the main reasons for its selection in this study.

### 3.4 | Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected during the fall semester of the 2024–2025 academic year, after obtaining the necessary formal permissions from the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of National Education and the administrations of the participating schools. All teachers and parents of the students were informed about the aims, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and from parents on behalf of their children. Students were additionally informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

Teachers completed the REIS individually in a quiet setting at school, during scheduled sessions agreed upon with the school administrations. The student SS scale (SKBÖ) was administered by classroom teachers during a regular class hour (40 min) in their own classrooms. Before administration, teachers explained how to complete the scale and reminded students that there were no right or wrong answers, encouraging honest responses. Adequate time was provided to ensure that all students could complete the questionnaire comfortably. Teachers completed the REIS during one data collection session, and the SKBÖ was administered to students in a separate session within the same month.

No identifying information (e.g., names, student ID numbers) was collected. Class and school codes were used to link students to their respective teachers while preserving anonymity in the dataset.

### 3.5 | Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using Jamovi (version 2.6.26), including the GAMLj3 module for multilevel modelling. Prior to the main analyses, the dataset was screened for entry errors, and descriptive statistics were computed for the key variables (see Table 1). The distributions of teacher EI (REIS) and student SS (SKBÖ) scores were examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which indicated deviations from normality for both variables ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, non-parametric tests were used for preliminary group comparisons.

To explore whether student SS scores differed by student gender, grade level or teacher gender, Mann–Whitney $U$ tests (Cohen et al. 2007; Privitera 2022) were conducted (see Tables 4 and 5). No statistically significant differences were found across these demographic groups ($p > 0.05$), which allowed the main analyses to focus on the relationship between teacher EI and student SS without including these demographic variables as covariates.

Next, the overall relationship between teachers' total EI scores and the average SS scores of their students was examined using Spearman's rank-order correlation, given the non-normal distribution and small number of clusters at the teacher level ($n = 12$). This analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant positive association between teacher EI and student SS ($\rho = 0.778$, $p = 0.003$; see Table 6).

For the main analysis, a Linear Mixed Model (LMM) (Heck et al. 2013) was specified to account for the nested structure of the data (students within classrooms). Student SS scores served as the dependent variable, and teachers' total EI scores as the Level 2 fixed effect (teacher EI). A random intercept was included for teachers (classrooms) to allow average SS levels to vary across classes. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was 0.010, indicating that 1.0% of the variance in student SS

scores was attributable to differences between teachers, which still justifies the use of a multilevel approach to correctly model the clustering of students within classrooms (see Table 7). Model parameters were estimated using restricted maximum likelihood (REML), and the level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ for all analyses.

## 4 | Findings

### 4.1 | Preliminary Analyses

Before addressing the main research question, preliminary analyses were conducted to (a) describe the distributional characteristics of the key variables and (b) examine whether students' SS differed across selected demographic factors, which would warrant their inclusion as covariates in the multilevel model.

**TABLE 2** | Descriptive statistics for the main variables.

| Variable | *n* | $\bar{X}$ | SD | Min. | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SKBO | 321 | 52.82 | 5.80 | 36 | 64 |
| REIS | 12 | 112.19 | 16.34 | 84 | 136 |
| SEA | 12 | 22.02 | 3.06 | 15 | 25 |
| SER | 12 | 36.65 | 5.69 | 27 | 45 |
| OEA | 12 | 27.63 | 4.43 | 21 | 34 |
| OER | 12 | 25.89 | 5.77 | 14 | 35 |

**TABLE 3** | Normality test results for the main variables (Shapiro–Wilk).

| Variable | *W* | *p* | Result ($p < 0.05$) |
|---|---|---|---|
| SKBO | 0.983 | 0.0009 | Not normally distributed |
| REIS | 0.866 | < 0.0001 | Not normally distributed |
| SEA | 0.838 | < 0.0001 | Not normally distributed |
| SER | 0.930 | < 0.0001 | Not normally distributed |
| OEA | 0.872 | < 0.0001 | Not normally distributed |
| OER | 0.925 | < 0.0001 | Not normally distributed |

Descriptive statistics for teacher EI and student SS are reported in Table 2. Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated that both variables deviated from normality ($p < 0.001$; Table 3); therefore, non-parametric tests were used for the preliminary group comparisons. Mann–Whitney *U* tests showed no statistically significant differences in students' SS by student gender ($U = 11412.500$, $p = 0.084$), grade level ($U = 12398.500$, $p = 0.565$), or teacher gender ($U = 13.000$, $p = 0.485$) (see Tables 4 and 5). Accordingly, these demographic variables were not included as covariates in the multilevel model. Finally, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine the association between teachers' total EI and the classroom-average SS scores. Results indicated a substantial, statistically significant positive association ($\rho = 0.778$, $p = 0.003$; Table 6), suggesting that classrooms with higher teacher EI tended to display higher average student SS. This pattern provided initial support for proceeding with the multilevel analysis.

### 4.2 | Main Analysis

The primary research question asked: 'To what extent is teachers' overall EI associated with their students' SS in a multilevel context?' To address this question, a linear mixed-effects model was estimated to account for the nested structure of the data (students within classrooms). Students' SS scores served as the Level 1 outcome and teachers' total EI scores as a Level 2 fixed effect. A random intercept for teachers was included to allow baseline SS levels to vary across classrooms. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was 0.010, indicating that approximately 1% of the variance in student SS scores was attributable to between-classroom differences.

Although modest, this level of clustering supports the use of a mixed-effects model to avoid potentially biased standard errors that may result from ignoring group-level variance. Results indicated a statistically significant positive association between teachers' total EI and students' SS ($B = 0.079$, SE = 0.022, $p = 0.006$, 95% CI [0.036, 0.123]; Table 7). The model's marginal $R^2$ suggested that teacher-level EI accounted for approximately 5% of the between-classroom variance in students' SS. This pattern suggests that higher teacher EI tends to co-occur with higher average student SS in this sample; however, given the cross-sectional design and the limited number of Level 2 units, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and not used to support causal claims.

## 5 | Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which primary school teachers' emotional intelligence (EI) is significantly

**TABLE 4** | Mann–Whitney *U* test results for differences in SS Scores by gender and grade level.

| | Groups | *n* | Mean rank | *U* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SKBO | Male | 169 | 152.530 | 11,412.500 | 0.084 |
| | Female | 152 | 170.418 | | |
| | 3rd grade | 163 | 158.064 | 12,398.500 | 0.565 |
| | 4th grade | 158 | 164.028 | | |

associated with the social skills (SS) of their students within a multilevel framework. The findings revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between teachers' overall EI and students' SS, demonstrating that classrooms led by emotionally competent teachers tend to support higher levels of social functioning among primary school children.

The significant relationship observed in this study aligns with a growing body of research establishing emotional competence as a core component of effective teaching. Previous studies have shown that teachers with higher EI are more capable of forming warm, responsive, and stable classroom relationships (Limbo 2023; Long et al. 2024), maintaining positive emotional climates (Evans et al. 2009; Meirovich 2012), and regulating their own emotional reactions in challenging instructional moments (Bahman and Maffini 2008; Goleman 1998). The present findings reinforce these conclusions by providing empirical evidence from the Turkish primary school context, where teacher–student relationships are particularly central to classroom functioning.

Teacher EI appears to be linked to students' SS through several interrelated pathways. First, emotionally intelligent teachers typically model adaptive emotional responses—such as empathy, patience and self-regulation—behaviours that students tend to internalise through observational learning (Curci et al. 2014). This mechanism echoes Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura 1977) and is consistent with prior findings that emotionally competent teachers foster more cooperative and prosocial interaction patterns among students (Buyanova 2022; Ghanizadeh and Moafian 2010; Juniar et al. 2023; Kanbur and Kirikkaleli 2023). Second, teachers with stronger EI are more adept at managing conflict situations constructively and maintaining orderly classroom routines, thereby reducing interpersonal tensions that may inhibit SS development (Vila et al. 2021). Third, EI enhances teachers' ability to detect subtle socio-emotional cues in their students, enabling them to support students who struggle with peer relationships or emotional regulation (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Together, these mechanisms help explain why teacher EI emerged as a significant factor associated with student SS in the current study.

A recurring theme in the international literature is that teacher EI contributes indirectly to student outcomes by shaping the emotional climate of the classroom (Collie 2017; Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Classrooms in which teachers display high EI tend to be characterised by predictable routines, reduced behavioural disruptions, and stronger teacher–student rapport. Such environments offer greater opportunities for students to practice cooperative interaction, problem solving and effective communication—core components of SS (Caldarella and Merrell 1997; Csoti 2001; Dallasheh and Zubeidat 2022; Rahman et al. 2024).

While the ICC in the current study was low (1.0%), indicating that most variance in SS resides at the student level—a common finding in educational research—the multilevel analysis nevertheless identified teacher EI as a statistically significant classroom-level predictor. This suggests that, even with limited between-classroom variability, teacher EI is associated with consistent between-classroom differences in students' social functioning. This suggests that the association between teacher EI and SS does not operate solely through individual student factors but also through the broader socio-emotional context the teacher helps construct. In the Turkish educational context, where primary school teachers typically maintain long-term, close relationships with their students across multiple years of schooling, the role of classroom emotional climate may be particularly pronounced.

Although teacher EI accounted for approximately 5% of the variance in student SS, this proportion should be interpreted as practically meaningful. To contextualise the magnitude of the association, the fixed-effect estimate ($B = 0.079$) implies that a one standard-deviation increase in teacher EI (SD = 16.34) corresponds to approximately 1.29 points higher student SS, which is about 0.22 SD of the SS distribution (SD = 5.80). This small-to-moderate magnitude is broadly consistent with international evidence suggesting that teacher socio-emotional/relational

**TABLE 5** | Mann–Whitney *U* test results for differences in SS scores by teachers' gender.

| | Groups | *n* | Mean rank | *U* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SKBO | Male teacher | 6 | 5.667 | 13.000 | 0.485 |
| | Female teacher | 6 | 7.333 | | |

**TABLE 6** | Spearman correlation test for the relationship between teachers' EI scores and students' SS scores.

| | *n* | Spearman's $\rho$ | *p* | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SKBO–REIS | 12 | 0.778 | 0.003 | 0.313, 0.963 |

**TABLE 7** | Linear mixed-effects model results for the association between student SS and teacher total EI.

| Predictor | *B* | SE | 95% CI | *t* | df | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fixed effects | | | | | | |
| Intercept | 52.819 | 0.357 | 52.117, 53.521 | 147.960 | 9.856 | < 0.001 |
| Total EI score (teacher) | 0.079 | 0.022 | 0.036, 0.123 | 3.606 | 8.874 | 0.006 |
| Random effects | Variance | SD | ICC | | | |
| Teacher intercept (Level 2) | 0.332 | 0.576 | 0.010 | | | |
| Residual (Level 1) | 31.753 | 5.635 | | | | |

characteristics typically show modest associations with student outcomes. For example, a meta-analysis of affective teacher-student relationship quality reported average correlations of approximately $r = 0.34–0.39$ with school engagement and achievement, and $r = 0.22$ with reduced dropout (Roorda et al. 2011). Effect sizes, however, vary by outcome and analytic approach; in a large Chinese sample, teacher EI predicted student academic achievement with $B = 0.572$ ($R^2 = 0.224$) in an SEM framework (Wang 2022).

Taken together, the present effect size should be interpreted as meaningful but not large, particularly given the low between-classroom variance (ICC = 0.010), which constrains the maximum explanatory leverage of Level 2 predictors. Yet even modest teacher contributions can yield substantial developmental benefits when applied consistently across an entire classroom or school system. At the same time, with only 12 clusters and an ICC of 0.01, the model captures a very small share of total variance at the classroom level; thus, the classroom-level association should be interpreted cautiously and primarily as hypothesis-generating.

Furthermore, the effect size aligns with evidence on teacher-student relationship quality and its contribution to children's social development. Research shows that emotionally available teachers function as protective factors for students who face difficulties in self-regulation or social participation (Poulou 2017). In this sense, the current study adds to the literature by showing that teacher EI is not merely a personality characteristic but a pedagogically consequential competency that shapes classroom-level social processes.

The absence of gender- or grade-based differences in students' SS aligns with earlier research indicating that primary school social skills tend to show relatively stable patterns across demographic groups when classroom conditions and teacher practices are consistent (Malkić Aličković 2017; Ozerova et al. 2023). This stability may reflect the structured and teacher-centred nature of Turkish primary classrooms, which can homogenise students' opportunities for social participation regardless of individual differences. The finding also supports the decision not to include demographic covariates in the multilevel model, strengthening the interpretability of the teacher EI effect.

It is important to acknowledge that the relationship between teacher EI and student SS may be reciprocal. Classrooms with socially competent and cooperative students may be easier to manage, thereby reducing teacher stress and enabling teachers to activate and express their emotional competencies more effectively. Prior research has documented this bidirectionality, suggesting that teacher EI and students' social functioning may mutually reinforce one another over time (Hen and Goroshit 2016; Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Jones et al. 2013).

An additional interpretive caution concerns shared perceptual processes. Teachers' EI was assessed via self-report, which can be influenced by social desirability and self-perception. It is also plausible that teachers who perceive themselves as more emotionally competent foster classroom climates (e.g., supportive, emotionally safe interactions) that lead students to report higher SS, thereby strengthening associations between teacher-reported EI and student self-reported SS without necessarily reflecting purely objective behavioural differences. Future studies should therefore triangulate EI and SS using multi-informant and/or observational indicators (e.g., peer nominations, teacher ratings of student behaviour, classroom observations, or performance-based EI measures).

Similarly, unmeasured contextual factors—such as school climate, socioeconomic composition of neighbourhoods or administrative support—may shape both teacher EI expression and student social behaviours. While these alternative explanations cannot be ruled out completely, the multilevel model used in this study partially mitigates such concerns by accounting for classroom clustering and focusing on between-teacher variance. Future longitudinal or intervention-based research would be well positioned to disentangle these more complex pathways.

By demonstrating the significant relationship between teacher EI and student SS within a multilevel framework, this study contributes novel empirical evidence to a relatively underdeveloped line of research in Turkey. While international literature has extensively documented the role of EI in shaping teaching effectiveness, motivation, interpersonal behaviour, classroom climate and student engagement, the Turkish research landscape has largely focused on teacher EI in relation to intrapersonal or teacher-centred variables, rather than student-level socio-emotional outcomes.

Existing studies in Turkey demonstrate that teacher EI is associated with more effective classroom management practices (Akan 2020; Toytok 2013), more constructive approaches to handling undesired student behaviours (Özmen 2009, 2012), stronger teacher–student interactions and improved relational quality (Erdil 2018), and higher levels of reflective thinking (Güvenç 2012). Other research has linked higher EI to reduced burnout (Akar and Üstüner 2017; Turan 2015), greater job satisfaction (Öztürk and Deniz 2008), more adaptive emotional labour behaviours (Durdu and Şahin 2018), and stronger organisational commitment (Özyavuz 2021) and forgiveness (Tekin 2021). Evidence also suggests that teacher EI tends to increase with professional seniority and age (Özmen 2012; Toytok 2013), and may vary by branch or marital status (Turan 2015; Özmen 2012), indicating that emotional competencies develop through both personal and professional experiences.

Although this expanding body of research highlights the importance of EI for teacher functioning and school climate in Turkey, very few studies have empirically examined whether teacher EI translates into measurable differences in student socio-emotional outcomes, particularly within a multilevel analytical framework. The present study therefore fills a critical gap by demonstrating that teacher emotional competencies extend beyond individual teacher characteristics and are reflected in observable differences in students' social skill levels. This finding strengthens the argument that teacher EI is not merely a personal trait but a pedagogically consequential competency with meaningful implications for children's social development.

This contribution is especially relevant in the context of Turkish primary education, where classroom teachers remain

with the same group of students for multiple years and serve as central figures in children's socio-emotional experiences. Such long-term, relationally intensive instructional structures likely amplify the influence of teacher EI on the everyday classroom interactions that shape students' social functioning. Accordingly, the present study provides an important empirical foundation for rethinking teacher professional competencies in Turkey, underscoring the critical role of emotional intelligence in fostering supportive, relationally rich learning environments.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that evidence-informed EI development could be integrated into teacher learning across the continuum. In preservice programmes, EI may be embedded through coursework and practice-based activities that build emotion recognition, regulation and relationship-centred classroom interactions. For in-service professional development, structured training and coaching could support teachers in translating these competencies into daily routines and a more supportive socio-emotional classroom climate. At the school level, implementation may be strengthened by aligning EI-related practices with broader classroom-climate initiatives and by monitoring progress using multi-informant indicators of students' SS and well-being. Importantly, these implications should be interpreted in line with the study's correlational and exploratory evidence. Future research with larger numbers of teachers, multi-informant measurement, and longitudinal or intervention designs is needed to clarify directionality and underlying mechanisms.

## 6 | Conclusion

This study provides multilevel evidence from Turkey that primary school teachers' EI is positively associated with their students' SS. In the linear mixed model, higher teacher EI was linked to higher classroom-average student SS ($B = 0.079$, $p = 0.006$), while between-classroom variance was small (ICC = 0.010); nevertheless, teacher EI accounted for a modest but meaningful share of the variance in students' SS.

### 6.1 | Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, both teacher EI and student SS were measured using self-report instruments, which may have introduced shared method variance and inflated observed associations. Although the multilevel design partially mitigates shared-source bias by separating teacher- and student-level responses, future studies should incorporate observer-rated SS measures, performance-based EI assessments, or mixed-method designs to strengthen construct validity.

Second, the relatively small number of teachers ($n = 12$) limited statistical power at Level 2. With such a limited number of clusters, statistical power for detecting small classroom-level effects is constrained and parameter estimates may be sensitive to sampling variability; therefore, the results should not be generalised beyond similar contexts without replication. Accordingly, the present findings should be interpreted as exploratory and primarily indicative of patterns in this sample. While the results are informative, power to detect small effects at Level 2 was constrained, and generalisations should be made with caution. Future research should include a larger number of clusters across schools and socioeconomic contexts and, where feasible, employ longitudinal designs to capture developmental change in students' SS over time. Additionally, due to the limited number of teachers at Level 2, we could not include multiple teacher-level covariates (e.g., years of experience, classroom size, or school-level indicators) in the multilevel model; future studies should test the robustness of the association while accounting for such factors.

Third, contextual variables such as socioeconomic status (SES), school climate, administrative support and peer norms were not included in the current model. Incorporating such variables would enable researchers to examine whether the association between teacher EI and student SS is moderated or mediated by classroom emotional climate or broader organisational conditions.

Finally, although this study provides evidence for an association between teacher EI and student SS, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Future intervention-based studies and longitudinal designs would be advantageous for establishing directionality and identifying mechanisms that may underlie the association between teacher EI and students' socio-emotional development.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Pearson correlations among REIS sub-dimensions (teacher sample, $n = 12$).