

Socio-emotional learning in India

- *By Mansi Dhata and Swati Kumari*

The intent of education is not limited to sharing information with children, but rather, to develop critical skills that enable character growth, and provide them with the resources to solve problems and deal with their life constructively. “Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions”¹. SEL is a term that can be understood through many different perspectives and lenses, however, in any case, its importance for adolescents cannot be denied. A glimpse of this multitude of definitions can be found within the “Explore SEL”² dashboard, which has documented more than 40 frameworks used across the globe to measure and promote SEL skills. The myriad frameworks and conflicting descriptions of similar terminology and skills can make navigating the world of social-emotional learning extremely time-consuming and complicated. The most widely used frameworks include the **CASEL Framework**³ (that identifies 5 core competencies for the child including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making), **OECD Framework**⁴ for the Study on Social and Emotional Skills, the skills in this framework are arranged hierarchically, with six broad skill categories and the framework includes “compound” skills that represent combinations of two or more individual skills.

Social and emotional competencies do not just raise academic achievement and educational attainment, but have also demonstrated strong correlations with personal satisfaction and growth, citizenship, and reduced risky behaviours like violence and drug use. Researchers have conducted a wide breadth of studies on the impact of childhood adversity, which they define as not only traumatic experiences but also chronic stressors that have a significant negative effect on the child. The unrelenting stress caused by extreme poverty, neglect, or abuse can weaken the architecture

¹ [What is SEL?](#)

² [Explore SEL](#) is a product of the Taxonomy Project, which is an ongoing project designed to create a scientifically-grounded system for organizing, describing, and connecting frameworks and skills across the non-academic domain.

³ [CASEL Framework](#)

⁴ [OECD](#) Social and Emotional Skills Well-being, connectedness and success

of the developing brain, with long-term consequences for learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health.^{5,6} According to the **Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University**, the impact of adversity in early childhood has a significant negative impact on executive function and self-regulation which limits their ability to access the tools given to them in school systems. A meaningful investment in non-cognitive approaches which allows all children (particularly those coming from adversity) to build foundational skills to access learning is the need of the hour.⁷ Recently, the need for SEL has only been exacerbated by the pandemic, “COVID-19 pandemic in India and lockdown has impacted 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary education, besides 28 million children who were undergoing pre-school education in Anganwadi centres”⁸. Even though the government of India has taken initiatives to continue education for children through multiple e-platforms, “approximately only a quarter of households (24 per cent⁹) in India have access to the internet and there is a large rural-urban and gender divide”. The pandemic has a multi-faceted impact on children, with rising concerns of child protection, ‘CHILDLINE’, a service of the Ministry of Women and Child Development had received 460,000 calls in 21 days from March 20 to April 10, a 50 per cent increase from their regular call volumes¹⁰. This doesn’t stop here, the secondary impact of COVID-19 may also result in reduced access to healthcare and nutrition.

At present, socio-emotional learning has gained significant momentum in India. Launched this year, the New Education Policy¹¹ talks about socio-emotional learning for the holistic development of the child, which is a step in the right direction. Similarly, the Health and Wellness Curriculum for School Going Adolescents¹² (launched in February 2020, under the Ayushman Bharat scheme) has been developed on the premise that addressing wellbeing holistically is critical for the well-rounded growth of an adolescent to a healthy adult.

⁵ [The impact of childhood adversity on later anxiety](#)

⁶ [Toxic stress derails healthy development](#)

⁷ [The Impact of Early Adversity on Children’s Development](#)

⁸ [UNICEF: Life Upended](#)

⁹ [UNICEF: Life Upended](#)

¹⁰ Ministry of Women and Child Development

¹¹ [New Education Policy](#)

¹² [Health and Wellness Curriculum for school going adolescents](#)

This momentum around social-emotional learning is not just being driven at the national level, but also actively prioritised by the state education departments. States like Delhi and Uttarakhand have introduced a “Happiness Curriculum”, aimed at improving the mental well-being of pupils through developing their levels of mindfulness, critical thinking, problem-solving, and relationship building. Jharkhand is currently running a curriculum called UDAAN that aims to influence and empower adolescent boys and girls with age-appropriate knowledge on life skills, reproductive health and prepare them for a healthy transition to adulthood. In addition to implementing new age curriculums, some states are also implementing programmes to actively promote and build SEL in a subset of schools, for example, schools within the Tribal Welfare Department/Social Welfare Department. The Telangana Social/Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society jointly headed by Dr RS Praveen Kumar, is implementing a myriad of programmes within the residential schools that aim to contribute to the holistic development of the child.

While states are introducing the programmes and curriculums, shortage of staff within the departments limit their ability to effectively implement the programmes on ground. Therefore, many of the state government and their programmes are supported by organisations that believe in the importance of SEL and its role in the development of a healthy adolescent into a healthy adult. There are many such organisations in India working towards socio-emotional learning, and each has a different approach to address the needs of the child and the system. Most understand that in order to develop socio-emotional learning competencies in the child, the social context of the child cannot be ignored, therefore the engagement with the community and the parents becomes a critical aspect of the interventions. Organisations like Dream a Dream, Quest Alliance, Kaivalya Education Foundation work across stakeholders and enable learning not just for the teachers but for the system whereas organisations like NalandaWay, Learning Curve Life Skills Foundation, Art of Play engage deeply with the stakeholders within the school, namely the teachers and principals to ensure mindset shift and adoption of socio-emotional learning for the stakeholder closest to the child.

Even though there are a lot of efforts being put into driving momentum around policy changes and mindset shift of the system and various stakeholders, through our engagement in the space, we identified that the socio-emotional learning space in India is still **riddled with many challenges:**

- There is a lack of consistent understanding of SEL in the Indian context. Frameworks for SEL are largely drawn from global context and lack the necessary levers to contextualise SEL to diverse environments within India.
- There is a shortage of reliable and relevant instruments for assessing SEL, making it difficult to generate conclusive evidence on-the-ground.
- Furthermore, while there are investments being made in the systemic implementation of SEL across select states, the current work on SEL is executed in silos, with not enough mechanisms to bring the various players together and to channelise targeted funding to SEL.

Firstly, there is a need to build India specific evidence for SEL that takes into account the context and needs of the children in India, this evidence could help drive advocacy with the government, the organisations and the donors that are looking to expand into SEL. Secondly, a consultative approach needs to be undertaken to convert the NEP vision to reality. Thirdly, the organisations working towards SEL in the country may need to come together to implement and learn from each other. In the next part of this series we will delve deeper into the SEL ecosystem in India with the aim to understand existing initiatives and different interventions at both state and local level that are helping institutionalise the understanding and importance of social-emotional learning in the country.

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We'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback on this topic. Do write to us: impact@sattva.co.in