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Redefining learning through social-emotional learning: A review

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Abstract--The present review aims to explore the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in the education system by highlighting the competencies and skills that are required to augment emotional intelligence and social interaction and, appraising the role of teachers, learning contexts, and family. It draws attention to the core characteristics and the ingredients for the success of SEL programs and, yardsticks for comparison and selection of various frameworks. It discusses the potential limitations in the program implementation and, offers some general considerations relevant to various stakeholders to improve the program effectiveness in educational settings. Under a narrative general review approach, empirical articles, task force reports, and conceptual papers were explored to develop insights into how infusing SEL into the education system help students to learn competencies and skills they need to develop to manage their behaviours and emotions, build connections, and foster

resilience. The review reveals that at its core, SEL instills the caliber to understand and deal with one's own emotions and interactions with others and assists to be successful in the learning setting, in relationships, and as members of society. However, there is a need for the development or selection of a powerful SEL model, the development of "evaluation frameworks" for effective execution of SEL programs.

Keywords---social-emotional learning, students, SEL, learning, education system, social-emotional development.

Introduction

Gone are the days when school conversations were just about students' academic performance, unlike today when personal development is also given equal importance. Every school today is striving to amplify the overall school environment and culture by developing programs on holistic development which highlights the emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL). Being an empirically tested approach, educationists consider SEL as an integral part of the effective teaching-learning process because SEL practice in the learning setting, irrespective of the levels and types of the education delivery systems, assures quality learning experiences, interactions, relationships, etc (CASEL, 2003; Philibert, 2016). Active learning approaches followed in SEL programs make learners skilled enough to transfer learning across contexts and settings, thereby helping to develop desirable attitudes, behaviours, and beneficial thinking processes. The current paper intends to provide an overview of SEL with an emphasis on the major component skills, the role of family and school, and, multiple aspects of the implementation of SEL programs in educational settings. The paper discusses the potential limitations in program implementation and the importance of program evaluation. Further, it offers some general considerations applicable to various stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of SEL programs.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2003) defines SEL as "the process by which children, adolescents, and adults acquire and apply the necessary knowledge and skills to understand and manage emotions, set goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions". Further, the definition of SEL during recent times incorporates an equality approach, hinting strong connections irrespective of "race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, learning needs, and age" (Srinivasan, 2019). In addition to being beneficial to improving academics, presentation, citizenship, and behaviour of learners (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), SEL programs insinuate an economic value highlighting its critical importance (Belfield, Bowden, Klapp, Levin, Shand & Zander, 2015).

Skills in social-emotional learning

The empirical dimensions of SEL reveal it as a non-linear dynamic system influenced by experiences as early as the prenatal period (Farah, 2017). SEL

experiences offer the 'plastic' brain a wide array of quality experiences to develop appropriate response patterns and strategies required for everyday living. CASEL (CASEL, 2003; Oliver, 2020) initiated SEL programs focus on developing five core interconnected sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioural competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). Self-awareness is concerned with the comprehension of one's emotions, intent, and morals, and, helps to ascertain virtues and shortcomings, possess a positive outlook towards everything, and also have faith in oneself. Adequate competencies and attitudes that facilitate the capacity to take care of one's own emotions and behaviours reflect self-management. This encompasses the potential to impede gratification, control impulses, cope with stress and overcome impediments to accomplish educational as well as individualistic goals.

Social awareness encompasses the ability to apprehend, empathize and be more considerate and compassionate towards others irrespective of their socio-economic status or cultural background. It is also about understanding the social etiquette for establishing good relationships with everyone in society and creating a sense of belonging within oneself. Skills such as communicating with clarity, listening mindfully, cooperating, resolving discord constructively, combating societal pressure, and reaching out to people in time of need are considered relationship skills. It aids individuals to conserve healthy connections and acting in line with social customs. Responsible decision-making is the capability to take into account ethical principles, prioritize the physical and mental well-being of oneself and others, and make a rational evaluation of every action. It is about making constructive choices about personal behaviour and interactions with people hailing from diverse backgrounds. However, later research has also emphasized emotional skills and the underlying cognitive processes (Brackett *et al.*, 2009; Durlak *et al.*, 2011).

Family, School, and SEL

The family lays the foundation for social-emotional learning for a child through the fulfillment of the child's needs and the creation of a positive and safe environment. The family culture is responsible for a person's attitudes, beliefs, and values that one holds about oneself and the people around ("The Effects of Family Culture," 2019). Family and community partnerships always help to bridge the gap between school and the outside world ("Families Can Help Develop SEL," 2018). In the contemporary world, schooling is becoming more complex day by day and schools can be considered miniature models of society because educators, students, administrators, and parents, as various social constituents, possess dissimilar roles, goals, and characteristics. These differences make relations even more complicated. The socio-cultural context within schools is convoluted due to its multifacetedness. While schools with a safe and positive environment have a positive impact on the students' academics, behaviour, and mental health (Flook, 2019; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013), and productivity (Bankole Adeyemi, 2019).

Recent research by the World Economic Forum (Zahidi, 2020) revealed that 65 percent of children starting with elementary school today will be taking up

occupations that have not come into existence. Currently, skills like creativity, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking are the topmost skills desired by employers. Using SEL at schools to ingrain skills of demand and similar ones like adaptability, problem-solving and collaboration is vital for children to become lifelong learners with the ability to retrain themselves with adequate skills to join the workforce of the future.

The Role of Teachers in facilitating SEL

Teachers act as a driving force behind the successful implementation of SEL programs. However, teachers can often experience high stress, as they are expected to complete a plethora of tasks every day, and they are also bearers of professional, social, and individual responsibility (Adams, 2001). Work-related stress arises when the job's requirements and the worker's capabilities do not match, resulting in deterioration of physical and mental health. Teacher's stress is transmissible—students suffer collateral damage when teachers are stressed (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, Chen, 2018; Suresh & Srinivasan, 2018). It is an arduous task for teachers to help students if they do not possess the necessary SEL skills. Teachers who have strong social-emotional competence can build a good rapport with the students, engage in more skillful activities and manage the classroom effectively whereas a lack of SEL skills may lead to negative results, resulting in teachers' burnout and decreased effectiveness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Proponents of SEL suggest that a student-centered approach help in relinquishing the hierarchical structure and sharing control, thereby creating a manageable classroom environment. Individual differences in learners make teachers adopt diverse strategies to make learning more effective for them (Willis, 2007). Providing students with opportunities and moral support will help to aggrandize student commitment to the educational process (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; *Four major benefits of social/Emotional learning*, 2019).

Implementation of SEL in learning settings

Educational institutions need to aim at promoting SEL in multiple contexts to enhance its influence in conjunction with academics that can support the advancement of student development (Oliver & Berger, 2020; Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Kahn, 2018). SEL implementation can create better student outcomes by not only enhancing student satisfaction, but also greater success, a sense of belongingness, and an increase in overall performance (Newman, 2020; Jones *et al.*, 2018). Further, SEL interventions can curb bullying behaviours, reduce behavioural problems in schools, and augment self-development (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, & Pachan, 2008).

SEL strategies are commonly offered in the form of guidelines, procedures, or structures concerning student services (Meyers, Gil, Cross, Keister, Domitrovich, & Weissberg, 2015). Hence, the construction of a concrete plan is essential to conceptualize the complete implementation process of SEL, highlighting the factors that enhance implementation, such as providing details about the rubrics for evaluation of practices and outcomes, partnerships with family/community, and, the proceeding professional development. Although significant attention has been paid to SEL programs in the school context, organized and structured

approaches are lacking in higher education institutions (Conley, 2015). Incorporating the theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) with SEL will be much more relevant in classrooms having youth as learners.

Core Characteristics of SEL Programs in learning settings

Effective SEL programs comprise five characteristics, which are known by the acronym 'SAFER', that can enrich the designing and execution process of its curriculum, (Oliver & Berger, 2020). 'Sequenced'(S) indicates the planning of SEL activities in a connected and coordinated manner. 'Active' (A) highlights the significance of student engagement through activities. 'Focused' (F) stands for a plan which clearly states the required resources, and the expected SEL outcomes. SEL programs must be made 'Explicit' (E) by identifying the gaps or challenges to target specific SEL skills. 'Reflection' (R), which relates to self-evaluation and thinking about how SEL helps in life, is the fifth characteristic that has been incorporated from the work of Blyth, Olson, and Walker (2017). Conceiving and implementing SEL programs meeting these core characteristics ensures the attainment of SEL goals in learning settings. Prioritizing SEL models and frameworks based on their theoretical background, scientific nature of the program, culturally sensitive nature, contribution to academic success, involvement of families and communities, an opportunity for the development of personnel involved, and provisions for program evaluation and modification is also important (Singh & Duraiappah, 2020).

The Three Component Framework for the Success of SEL

There are numerous execution frameworks for SEL that have been designed (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Yeager & Walton, 2011; Gehlbach & Chuter, 2020) and similar student outcomes are recognized by each framework, such as improved social-emotional competence and higher academic performance. The three distinct and interrelated components shared by most of these frameworks are the learning setting, the SEL of learners, and the SEL of educators.

- The learning setting: SEL skill advancement and interventions ought to happen in a protected, mindful, strong, participatory environment where the learning will be effective. The learning setting incorporates factors such as classroom structure and rules, school hierarchical environment, communication style, obligation to academic accomplishment for all students, and parental and local area inclusion.
- SEL of learners: SEL consists of processes by which learners attain and constructively make use of their knowledge to empathize, achieve positive goals, build healthy relationships, make sound decisions, and cope with their emotions.
- SEL of educators: Educators' social-emotional competence and wellbeing influence their relationship with the students. It is an arduous task for teachers to help students if they do not possess the necessary SEL skills. According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), "the quality of teacher-student relationships, student and classroom management, and effective social and emotional learning program implementation all mediate classroom and student outcomes." Classrooms with profound connections between the

educator and the students advance in learning when compared to those with harsh environments.

Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) model depicts how teachers' social and emotional competencies and well-being affect the class environment, their relationship with the students, and also their potential to execute effective SEL practices and programs. Primarily, the model views the teacher as an important contributor to developing teacher-student relationships. Teachers who have strong social-emotional competence can build a good rapport with the students, engage in more skillful activities and manage the classroom effectively. First of all, a teacher can recognize the emotions of students, and understand what motivates the student's behaviour. Secondly, teachers who have adequate skills are likely to manage the classroom effectively; promote enthusiasm among students, resolve conflicts effectively, and make the overall learning process enjoyable. Thirdly, teachers with necessary SEL skills become creators of healthy classrooms. When the teachers lack SEL skills, the feedback loop will elicit negative results, resulting in teachers' burnout and decreased effectiveness in both teachers and students. The model also emphasizes the various factors such as support from colleagues, school environment, educational policies, demands, etc., that help to nurture teachers' SEL. Friendships, marital relations, and other personal stress also have an impact on teachers' well-being and influence the classroom environment positively or negatively depending on the teacher's social-emotional abilities.

SEL implementation and the selection of frameworks

Even though several studies have been conducted, there is a dearth of evidence to corroborate SEL across cultures. While all the SEL programs try to ensure consistency with the components, there are considerable differences in the focus of the programs (Woolf, 2022). Consensus is required on the terminologies so that uniformity can be maintained in various interventions, approaches, and evaluation strategies. Although there are many frameworks for SEL the selection of setting specific, suitable framework is important for its effective implementation. Being a blueprint or a tool that helps to set the foundation for the implementation of any SEL program, a framework helps to identify core SEL competencies focused in the program, the interrelationships among various competencies, the context, and various other aspects of the SEL programs. SEL frameworks can be selected for implementation based on the criteria such as clarity of the design, competencies covered (interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive competencies), appropriateness for the group, suitability to the culture, and empirical support for the design. The Assessment Work Group's (Blyth, Borowski, Farrington, Kyllonen & Weissberg, 2019) ten criteria cover criteria for conceptual clarity (Specificity, Balance, Developmental, Culturally sensitive, and Empirically sound) and implementation support (Intended for practice, Resources for practitioners, Resources for use with and by children and youth, Resources for measurement and data use, Empirically tested). The degree to which a framework is theoretically flawless defines its effectiveness. Although there is no single framework that meets these criteria fully, these prerequisites help the authority in a need-based manner to describe and decide about the components in a

framework, compare and evaluate different frameworks and, gather information on popular frameworks.

Equity ensuring SEL programs have the features like “equal access, awareness of implicit bias, and responsiveness and sensitivity to culture” (Dusenbury, Yoder, Dermody, & Weissberg, 2019). According to Robert Jagers and colleagues (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018), a transformative SEL framework is “a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems”. It can focus on addressing various equity-related issues.

The Pratham’s Annual Status of Education Report in 2019 sheds light on poor academic outcomes among children aged between 4 and 8 years across different states of India, suggesting the need for a predominant focus on cognitive skills during the early years, as it can make a huge difference in the overall development of the child. There were efforts to incorporate SEL skills in the context of learning for Indian children to ensure their overall development through education (The Teacher Foundation, 2022). The **Indian Social and Emotional Learning Framework (ISELF)**, an age-banded framework suitable for the Indian setting, has been developed by the Teacher Foundation based on findings from their extensive research. In countries like India, which is densely populated with a cultural mosaic, an eclectic mix of SEL programs has to be designed.

Discussion

Although research based on data from over 60 countries indicates that “the productivity lost for not spending on SEL interventions is about 29% of the Gross National Income” (Singh & Duraiappah, 2020) several factors have been identified as hindering the effective execution of SEL programs in learning settings. Hence, limitations in the program implementation must be addressed with due emphasis on these factors.

Limitations in the Implementation of SEL

At the broader level, as most of the SEL frameworks remain not culturally very sensitive, ease in selection and implementation across systems is compromised. Insufficient budget allocation and lack of encouragement from the government to promote SEL in institutions make some school authorities adopt a neutral attitude towards the implementation of SEL programs. Offering shortened, less frequent sessions may affect the effectiveness of SEL programs at the institutional level. Issues in prioritizing the SEL program in the curriculum may lead to its marginalization and fragmentation during implementation. Delimiting the application of SEL in certain classrooms may restrict its transfer across contexts. The lack of sufficient emphasis on strategies that teachers can implement to infuse SEL in everyday lessons is a major drawback of poorly conceived programs. Further, the lack or limited training of staff for SEL delivery affects the overall quality of SEL programs.

SEL Program Evaluation

Evaluation of the program which includes both process and outcome is an integral part of SEL program execution. Further, there exists a lack of consensus on the parameters of SEL program evaluation. According to Singh and Duraiappah (2020) evaluations should be focused on the following outcomes: “(i) Communicate SEL as a priority; (ii) Establish a common language for SEL; (iii) Deepen understanding of how SEL competencies manifest in students over time; (iv) Continuously improve SEL instruction and implementation; (vi) Evaluate the effectiveness of SEL programs and approaches, and (vii) Support equitable outcomes in education.” Taylor and Spinrad (2017) propose a three-phased process for measuring learners’ SEL competencies. Part I (Preparation) includes developing the SEL plan, identifying the importance of and planning for evaluation, and deciding about the SEL competencies to be evaluated. Part II (Selection of the assessment) embraces steps such as reviewing the various options for assessment and selecting the tools or measures. Finally, Part III, measurement of SEL competencies covers the measurement or evaluation of predefined competencies and the use of data gathered to estimate the effectiveness of the program.

General considerations to improve SEL

Based on the above review the following general considerations are made for the various stakeholders to improve implementation of SEL programs.

- **For Policy Makers:** (i) Allocate adequate funds for the execution of SEL programs integrating flexibility to accommodate the specific requirements of schools; (ii) Establish standards for SEL programs; (iii) Encourage research that focuses on specific SEL strategies and their impact; (iv) Plan and conduct monitoring programs at regular intervals to ensure standards of SEL programs; (v) Implement evidence-based strategies and SEL frameworks through pilot projects to examine their effectiveness.
- **For School Authorities:** (i) Considering the increase in stress levels, anxiety, learning loss, and other repercussions of the pandemic on the education system, re-evaluate the current implementation of the curriculum to understand the drawbacks and restructure accordingly to ensure that institutions can meet and implement goals as intended; (ii) Appreciate the efforts of teachers and other employees for better performance, and take measures to increase their job satisfaction; (iii) Offer training programs on SEL for educators to ensure effective execution of SEL programs for learners; (iv) Encourage partnership with family/community to bolster the social-emotional competencies and improve the academic performance of learners.
- **For Educators:** Some general recommendations that educators can follow are as follows: (i) Understand and accept the differences in capacities of learners in learning to sequence and customize the learning experiences within flexible limits; (ii) Consider all learners equally to develop a sense of belonging in their minds, and build a healthy relationship with the teacher; (iii) Infuse SEL skills into all courses of the curriculum and solicit feedback from learners from time to time; (iv) Set SEL goals for every learning

experience to nurture a growth mindset in learners; (v) Support and appreciate even small achievements of learners to boost their confidence and help to build a healthy relationship with them; (vi) Include discussion on gender, racial and cultural differences, marginalized populations, etc. to widen their horizons, and make them more empathetic towards people hailing from different strata of the society; (vii) Train learners to take mindfulness breaks when they are feeling stressed or emotionally overwhelmed; (viii) Promote random acts of kindness to enhance the quality of the classroom environment and develop empathy in learners.

Conclusion

It is unquestionably proven that teaching-learning strategies based on SEL make learners enjoy learning and influence augmenting their performance. Strategies adopted in SEL programs equip learners irrespective of their level of education to overcome hindrances and learn to utilize their highest abilities throughout life. Youngsters and adults are helped to learn the necessary competencies and skills they need to develop to foster resilience successfully control their emotions, behaviour, and build a connection with others. However, the multitude of SEL frameworks makes the selection of it a tedious job and it is imperative to have more SEL frameworks that are culturally inclusive. Thus, opting for evidence-informed practice in specific cultural contexts is critically important for programs implementing SEL.

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