Bridging Academic Rigor and Emotional Development: Teachers' Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning in Indian Higher-Secondary Education

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the perceptions of higher-secondary school teachers in India regarding the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into classrooms amid the demands of academic rigor. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research utilized semi-structured interviews to explore how teachers conceptualize SEL, recognize its benefits, and address implementation challenges. Key findings indicate that while teachers acknowledge the importance of SEL, students exhibit resistance to SEL classes, primarily due to a lack of motivation and limited exposure to formal SEL frameworks such as CASEL. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers from various educational boards and analyzed using thematic analysis.

This study underscores the conceptualization of SEL by higher-secondary teachers and calls for a shift in educational paradigms to balance academic demands with socio-emotional development. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers to create inclusive strategies that support holistic student growth. By contextualizing SEL within the socio-cultural and academic framework of Indian higher-secondary education, this research contributes to the expanding discourse on student mental health and the preparedness of teachers to address SEL in their classrooms.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning, teacher perceptions, academic rigor, CASEL, student well-being, mental health.

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of holistic education, equipping students with critical competencies for emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and responsible decision-making. Teachers are increasingly recognized as primary agents of SEL; however, it is also equally important for educators to consider themselves as change agents in order to implement SEL programs effectively (Morgan, 2019). Research suggests that social and emotional competencies provide students with the resources for better academic performance, improved test scores, and positive social behaviors (Martinez, 2016; Modecki et al., 2017). Educational institutions assume a crucial role in nurturing the well-being of children, contributing not solely to their cognitive advancement but also to the

cultivation of social and emotional development (Weissberg et al., 2004).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) fosters essential competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, as outlined by the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2023). SEL has demonstrated far-reaching benefits, enhancing academic outcomes, emotional well-being, and interpersonal skills (Durlak et al., 2011). However, In India, the tendency to prioritize overly ambitious curriculum coverage and rapid pacing has led to stagnant student learning outcomes (Pritchett & Beatty, 2015). Additionally, teachers are often encouraged to expedite the completion of prescribed syllabi within limited timeframes (Pritchett & Beatty, 2015).

This study is motivated by the urgent need to understand and address these challenges. Exploring teachers' perceptions and practices aims to illuminate pathways for effectively integrating SEL into higher-secondary classrooms, balancing academic and socio-emotional priorities. Insights from this research will contribute to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, aligning with global initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals 2030; this suggests a critical need for schools in India to step out of a myopic focus on student academic achievements and outcomes (Asah & Singh, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) to examine the multifaceted factors influencing teachers' perceptions and practices of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). EST conceptualizes development as shaped by interactions within and across interconnected environmental systems, providing a comprehensive lens to analyze the complexities of SEL integration in higher-secondary education.

Teachers interact directly with students at the microsystem level, addressing their socio-emotional needs while navigating academic demands. Teachers' day-to-day classroom experiences, such as managing student behavior and fostering engagement, are pivotal in shaping their perceptions of SEL. These interactions directly influence how SEL is implemented, emphasizing the importance of understanding teachers' lived experiences. The mesosystem encompasses relationships between teachers, school administration, parents, and peers. These connections can either facilitate or hinder SEL prioritization. For example, if school leadership prioritizes academic outcomes over SEL, teachers may struggle to balance syllabus completion with efforts to address students' social-emotional needs. Additionally, the salary paid to teachers may also affect the prioritization of SEL. At the exosystem level, external influences such as school policies, teacher training programs, and national education guidelines significantly shape the context for SEL. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a critical backdrop, emphasizing the integration of SEL as part of holistic education (MHRD, 2020). The NEP envisions developing students as "good human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy," aligning closely with the core objectives of SEL (Shroff, 2023).

The macrosystem reflects the broader societal and cultural context. In India, societal expectations, particularly the strong emphasis on academic achievement, often pressure teachers to prioritize syllabus completion over holistic education (Prichett & Beatty, 2015). This cultural dynamic creates significant barriers to embedding SEL into secondary education, underscoring the need for institutional and systemic support.

Finally, the chronosystem considers temporal changes, such as evolving educational policies and shifting societal attitudes. The recent push for holistic education, as outlined in the NEP 2020, signals a promising shift toward greater institutional backing for SEL. These changes may gradually mitigate existing barriers,

fostering an educational environment that balances academic and socio-emotional priorities.

Statement of Problem

Despite the growing recognition of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a critical component of holistic education, its implementation in Indian higher-secondary education remains fragmented and inconsistent because of the gap between theory and practice (Muravevskaia et al., 2024). 20.9% of India's population accounts for adolescents, the country is home to 253 million adolescents (10-19 years) (Ramdass et al., 2017). Adolescence is a pivotal developmental stage marked by significant emotional, behavioral, and health problems, which can have negative consequences for them later in life (Yeager, 2017). Research reveals that about 50% of mental health disorders in adults develop at the age of 14 (Bandela et al., 2019). However, the current academic landscape in India is characterized by an overwhelming emphasis on academic performance, with teachers and students alike experiencing immense pressure to meet rigorous academic standards. This singular focus often sidelines the socio-emotional development necessary for students' overall well-being. This gap is particularly pronounced in higher-secondary education, where academic rigor peaks and adolescents face heightened emotional and social challenges. However, Parents, teachers, and community members across the nation also widely agree that schools should provide more than just academic skills (Jacob et al., 2023).

While global frameworks like CASEL provide structured approaches to SEL, their application in Indian classrooms remains sparse due to cultural, systemic, and contextual differences. Neglecting SEL in Indian classrooms has far-reaching implications, including increased student stress, diminished engagement, and compromised mental health which can be improved with SEL (Zins et al., 2007). As key stakeholders, teachers face numerous challenges, including lack of training, academic pressures, and minimal institutional support. Coherently, they are pressured to focus on syllabus completion within a limited timeframe (Prichett & Beatty, 2015). These barriers hinder the integration of SEL into classrooms, limiting its potential to enhance student engagement and emotional well-being, especially at the higher-secondary level. Despite the proven benefits of SEL, its implementation in Indian higher secondary education remains fragmented and inconsistent. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating a balanced education approach that prioritizes academics and socio-emotional development.

Research Objectives

1. To understand how teachers, conceptualize and practice SEL in higher-secondary education in India
2. To examine teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of integrating SEL amid academic rigor

Research Questions

1. What frameworks do teachers use to conceptualize and practice SEL in higher-secondary classrooms?
2. How do teachers perceive the benefits on the overall well-being of students and the challenges of SEL integration at the higher-secondary school level?

Review of Literature

Schools are the cornerstone for developing children's social and emotional competencies (SEC) and fostering self-awareness (Manivannan et al., 2022). According to Elias et al. (1997), a school's success in ttheir educational mission lies in promoting their social, emotional, and academic learning.

SEL is defined as the process through which individuals develop essential skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which has emerged as a crucial component of education (CASEL, 2023). These competencies enable students to equip themselves with skills necessary for academic success, such as self-management, motivation,

engagement, and participation (Jones et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011).

The concept of SEL gained prominence following Goleman's (1995) pioneering work on emotional intelligence, dividing it into four components: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management, highlighting that non-cognitive abilities are equally, if not more, critical for success than traditional cognitive skills. This perspective has been supported by subsequent research, emphasizing that SEL is indispensable for fostering holistic student development (Zins et al., 2007).

ASER (2019), The Annual Status of Education Report: Early Years, released in January 2020, underscores the importance of integrating SEL into school curricula. It was the first large-scale study conducted in India to examine the developmental indicators, which include social and emotional abilities, among children aged 4-8 years in rural areas. Conducted across 26 districts in 24 states and in 14 languages, the study highlights significant cultural and linguistic diversity while revealing the limited SEL skills children acquire and the associated consequences. These findings emphasize the need for targeted SEL interventions in early education (Shroff, 2023).

Adolescence, characterized by significant physical, emotional, and cognitive transitions, is a critical period for implementing SEL. This phase is marked by heightened vulnerability to stressors, necessitating interventions that promote emotional regulation and resilience (Feldman & Elliott, 1990). SEL initiatives have enhanced adolescents' ability to navigate academic and social challenges while fostering emotional well-being (Kothari & Wesley, 2020). Posamentier, Seibel, and DyTang (2023) conducted a review of school-based practices for preventing youth suicide and explored how Social-Emotional Learning aligns with comprehensive efforts. The review revealed the presence of all SEL competencies to varying degrees. It was also found that all five SEL competencies address and reduce the major risk factors of youth suicide.

The human brain undergoes significant maturation until age 25, leading to notable distinctions between adolescent and adult cognitive functioning (Stanford Children's Health, 2020). While adults predominantly engage the rational prefrontal cortex for decision-making, adolescents rely more on the emotional amygdala, making it challenging for them to consider long-term consequences or engage in ethical reasoning (Stanford Children's Health, 2020). This developmental stage underscores the importance of targeted interventions like social-emotional learning (SEL) to support adolescents' mental health and decision-making capabilities.

Research consistently demonstrates the efficacy of SEL frameworks in enhancing adolescent mental health. For instance, a systematic review and meta-analysis by Takizawa et al. (2023) highlighted the positive impact of school-based SEL programs in improving mental health outcomes among adolescents. The benefits of SEL extend beyond immediate academic outcomes, contributing to long-term personal and professional success. By equipping students with essential life skills, SEL programs facilitate smoother transitions into adulthood (Yeager, 2017). A landmark meta-analysis of 213 studies involving over 27,000 students found that SEL interventions improve classroom behavior by enhancing emotional expression and stress management. These interventions increase self-awareness, helping students recognize, label, and understand their emotions (Shroff, 2023). Despite these benefits and the demonstrated efficacy of SEL across age groups, SEL initiatives are far more prevalent in elementary schools than secondary education, where they remain limited (Keltner, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). This oversight is concerning given the significant pressures faced by Indian adolescents, including academic competition and societal expectations, substance use, and technology addiction (Agarwal &Sinha, 2016). Secondary education holds immense potential for fostering adolescents' social and emotional competencies, equipping them with essential skills that extend into adulthood and support their overall

development.

The integration of SEL into higher-secondary education faces several systemic challenges. Schools in India often prioritize academic achievements, sidelining holistic developmental approaches. Teachers report significant time constraints and pressure to complete syllabi as primary barriers to incorporating SEL into their teaching practices (Buchanan et al., 2009; Prichett & Beatty 2015). Studies have highlighted that teachers view SEL as crucial for addressing students' emotional and social needs, yet they struggle to balance its integration with academic demands (Manivannan et al., 2022). Exploring these perceptions is critical to identifying barriers and opportunities for effective SEL implementation.

Teachers also benefit from SEL, as social-emotional competence directly influences classroom climate and student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Educators with strong SEL skills are better equipped to manage classroom dynamics, provide emotional support, and foster a positive learning environment.

The absence of formal teacher training programs significantly hampers SEL's consistent and effective integration into classrooms. Teachers often lack the knowledge and resources to apply SEL frameworks, resulting in ad-hoc and inconsistent practices (Durlak et al., 2011). Institutional support is essential for fostering a culture that prioritizes SEL. This includes providing professional development opportunities, aligning school policies with SEL goals, and incorporating SEL into academic curricula.

Aligning with findings by Elias (1997), holistic educational approaches that balance academic and socio-emotional development are essential for nurturing well-rounded individuals.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research emphasizing the importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) during adolescence, there is a significant lack of focus on teachers' perceptions of SEL in higher-secondary education in India. This gap is critical given the unique developmental challenges and societal pressures faced by Indian adolescents, which demand targeted SEL interventions. While frameworks like CASEL and ISELF provide foundational guidance, their practical application in Indian secondary classrooms remains underexplored. Teachers, as key facilitators, face challenges in integrating SEL with academic rigor, yet their perspectives at this level remain insufficiently understood. This research addresses the need to examine how teachers perceive and implement SEL in higher-secondary education, aiming to inform policies that balance academic and socio-emotional development.

2. METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were teachers from higher-secondary schools in India, representing diverse educational boards, including ICSE, CBSE, and State Board schools. A purposive sampling method was employed to select teachers, ensuring diversity in teaching experience, subject areas, school types and relevance to the study. Social media posts, networking, and LinkedIn messages were used to recruit relevant participants aligned with the study's objectives. While a total of 10 teachers were initially interviewed, data from 6 participants were included in the final analysis as data saturation was reached. This ensured that the study captured sufficient depth and breadth of perspectives while avoiding redundancy in the findings.

The participants' teaching experience ranged from six months to 21 years, providing a broad spectrum of professional backgrounds. The sample included teachers from various subject areas, commerce, economics, psychology, and SEL teachers. The participants' ages ranged from 24 to 46 years, offering a

range of perspectives based on diverse personal and professional experiences.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The semi-structured format allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding SEL amid academic rigor. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to explore the teachers' understanding of SEL and its integration into the curriculum. To ensure the interview guide's reliability and validity (Appendix), it was reviewed and validated by three experts in the field of educational psychology, all of whom have extensive experience in conducting research while holding PHDs. Suggestions from them were incorporated to develop the interview guide. Each interview lasted approximately 20 – 25 minutes.

Purposive sampling was specifically chosen to ensure that participants could provide relevant and insightful data regarding their experiences with SEL. This method included a diverse range of teachers—those with expertise in SEL, subject-specific teachers, and those with limited or no formal training in SEL. This diversity was essential to capture a comprehensive view of varying perspectives within the teaching community, particularly within the context of higher-secondary education (grades 11 and 12).

Inclusion Criteria

- Teachers currently teaching at the higher-secondary level (grades 11 and 12) in India.
- Subject teachers (teaching core academic subjects such as Economics, Commerce, Humanities, etc.).
- Teachers specifically responsible for teaching SEL in the classroom.
- Teachers with varying levels of prior knowledge or formal training in SEL.

Exclusion Criteria

- Teachers not currently teaching at the higher-secondary level.
- Teachers working exclusively in administrative roles without direct classroom teaching responsibilities.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and key themes and patterns were identified through an iterative process. An inductive coding framework was developed based on emerging themes, and these codes were applied to relevant data segments. Thematic Analysis facilitated the systematic identification of common challenges and potential solutions, enabling an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of SEL amid academic rigor in secondary education. An emergent, reflective, and continuous dialogue with the supervisor was used to understand the participants' responses. Iterative rounds with the supervisor allowed for refinement and consensus building.

By utilizing this approach, the study aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of the diverse perspectives and challenges faced by teachers in integrating SEL within the academic framework of higher-secondary education.

3. Results

This section presents the findings on teachers' perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and the challenges they face in implementing SEL in higher-secondary classrooms. The analysis yielded several key themes, each revealing the varied understandings, practices, and obstacles encountered by participants. Below, the themes and subthemes are explored in detail, incorporating various teacher perspectives.

3.1 Social Emotional Learning

3.1.1 Knowledge of SEL

Most participants demonstrated some awareness of SEL concepts, but their understanding was largely abstract and derived from personal experience or workplace practices. For instance, one participant described SEL as "developing interpersonal skills and emotional regulation" (P1), while another admitted, "I suppose it's about society and emotions" (P2). The other two participants, P4 and P5, had each heard about SEL by virtue of being SEL teachers.

Participant 3 remarked that while teaching social science in the CBSE curriculum, they had a subject called 'life skills' alluding that this was also connected to SEL.

One of the participants had no idea about SEL and couldn't fully understand the concept either. Instead, she would begin talking about issues such as lack of concentration in class and how she would try to help the students struggling with that by bringing them to the front suggesting a limited understanding of the concept (P6).

Teachers' understanding varied widely, they were mostly shaped by their limited exposure through sporadic workshops or informal learning.

3.1.2 Familiarity with Frameworks

The study revealed a general lack of familiarity among participants with formal Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks, like CASEL.

Participant 1 exhibited a limited understanding of SEL, stating, "See, basically what I've read about it and what I know is it helps in developing, you know, like self-awareness, self-control, and maybe, you know interpersonal skills." This response suggests a basic, albeit surface-level, awareness of SEL's objectives without reference to established frameworks.

Other participants explicitly indicated a lack of exposure to formal SEL frameworks. Participant 2 admitted, "I have not heard, to be very honest," emphasizing a complete unfamiliarity with the concept. Similarly, Participant 3 acknowledged the absence of SEL content in their prior academic training, stating, "I don't think when I did my, you know, UG and Masters, we didn't cover this concept of social-emotional learning. I've heard about it but nothing in specific like a framework or anything."

Participants 4 and 5, who had more direct exposure to SEL through their professional roles, displayed a slightly deeper understanding of SEL's principles but still lacked familiarity with formalized frameworks. For instance, Participant 5 queried, "Could you explain to me what exactly you mean by frameworks?" Upon clarification of the CASEL framework, the participant acknowledged that their school followed a different approach, stating, "Frameworks as in what we follow in school is a bit different from the competencies developed."

3.1.3 Importance of SEL at the higher-secondary level

Participants unanimously acknowledged the importance of SEL for grades 11 and 12 students, citing its role in enhancing emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and preparedness for life outside school. However, they highlighted that the current academic focus on exams and career readiness often overshadowed SEL priorities. "We have to incorporate it," one teacher noted, "but academics is very pressurizing" (P1).

Participant 3 underscored the need to focus on emotional and social skills alongside content mastery, emphasizing that education should not be limited to academics alone.

Participant 4 pointed to the lack of emotional literacy among older students, noting through her experiences that many struggle to identify and articulate emotions such as anger or irritation. She stressed

that in her experience as an SEL teacher, SEL helps students understand and manage their emotions, enhancing their overall well-being. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 5, who reported positive feedback from students on strategies learned during SEL classes, particularly in managing emotions like anger.

While all participants agreed on the importance of SEL for higher-secondary students, several advocated for introducing SEL at earlier grade levels to maximize its impact. Participant 2 expressed concerns about initiating SEL too late, suggesting that middle school (grades 6-7) would be a more appropriate starting point to effectively shape students' skills and interests. Participant 3 supported this view, advocating for a seamless continuum of SEL from primary through senior secondary education.

3.2 Challenges and Benefits of Implementing SEL
3.2.1 Balancing Academic Demands
The tension between academic rigor and SEL integration was a recurring theme. Teachers described the pressure to complete syllabi as a significant barrier. "There are deadlines, exams, and so many other things," one participant remarked (P1). Another pointed out that convincing parents of SEL's value was particularly challenging, given the focus on academic outcomes (P2). One of them pointed out that "we cannot conduct exams for SEL", suggesting that SEL was not a measurable outcome and, therefore, teachers find it difficult to implement without training.

3.2.2 Institutional and Cultural Barriers
Participants expressed concerns about the lack of institutional support, insufficient training, and cultural emphasis on academic achievement over holistic development. For example, one teacher noted, "The management wants it, but they don't provide the time or resources" (P1). Another commented, "In India, students and parents prioritize academics; SEL is often seen as secondary" (P3). According to another teacher, there needs to be a 'conscious effort of all the sectors, who are the stakeholders' in education to implement SEL, which is lacking.

3.2.3 Student Resistance
Some teachers reported resistance from students, particularly in higher grades, where SEL activities were perceived as distractions from academic preparation. One participant shared, "Students often see SEL sessions as 'free periods' and don't take them seriously" (P4). Another participant shared that students at this stage want to question everything, 'bunk classes' and 'break rules' therefore, they treat SEL classes with little importance. They feel a lack of motivation to attend these classes. (P5)

3.2.4 SEL Training and Professional Development
Most participants emphasized the need for formal training to enhance their ability to implement SEL effectively. One teacher remarked, "We are aware of SEL, but formal training would help us learn more and implement it better" (P1). Another suggested that teachers must be upgraded in all respects (P2). One of them pointed out that "we cannot conduct exams for SEL", suggesting that SEL was not a measurable outcome and therefore, they struggle to track if students have gained the knowledge that the teacher intended to impart in terms of SEL (P3). One participant argued that passion and personal growth were as critical as formal training for effective SEL facilitation (P4). The teachers who remarked that they underwent some sort of SEL training alluded to mere two-day workshops and training given by people 'who did not know what SEL was'. This reveals the current scenario of training in SEL among teachers.

3.2.5 Benefits of SEL
Despite the challenges, teachers recognized the positive impact of SEL on student engagement and

emotional well-being. Examples included improved teamwork, empathy, and self-awareness among students. "Students now understand strategies to manage emotions, like anger management," one teacher observed (P5). Another highlighted how SEL fosters inclusivity: "It helps students respect diverse backgrounds and learn empathy" (P3).

4. Discussion

This study sought to explore the perceptions of higher-secondary school teachers in India regarding Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) amid academic rigor, framed within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST). The findings reveal a complex interplay between teachers' recognition of SEL's importance and the systemic, cultural, and individual barriers that hinder its effective integration. By examining teachers' conceptualizations, practices, and challenges, the study addresses critical gaps in understanding how SEL is applied in Indian classrooms.

The study's key finding reveals teachers' perception regarding students when implementing SEL; student resistance to SEL classes offers a rich insight into the broader issue surrounding SEL implementation in higher secondary education. Teachers reported that students often perceived these sessions as "free periods" or distractions from academic preparation, reflecting a lack of intrinsic motivation. Teachers also reported that for this reason, SEL must be implemented from a younger grade. This resistance aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self – Determination Theory, which emphasizes that adolescents' engagement is driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Therefore, this reveals a critical understanding of adolescents' interests while designing SEL classes that they feel motivated to attend, given its proven benefits, such as helping children manage, recognize, and label, and their emotions. (Shroff, 2023). One of the teachers even mentioned how she practices this by trying to educate her students about labeling emotions, for example, by differentiating between fear and anxiety. To make SEL meaningful, programs must align with students' developmental needs and interests, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance. Most teachers demonstrated limited awareness of formal SEL frameworks like CASEL, relying instead on informal, ad-hoc methods. This finding underscores the need for structured teacher training programs that incorporate theoretical foundations and practical applications of SEL. However, this is only possible if teachers are willing to take these training sessions atop their existing duties.

Recent studies within the Indian educational context have highlighted the significant impact of inadequate compensation and excessive workloads on teachers' well-being, which, in turn, adversely affects their classroom management and instructional quality. A comprehensive review by Shukla and Trivedi (2008) reported that approximately 44% of teachers in India suffer from burnout, characterized by heightened emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Factors contributing to this burnout include excessive workload, lack of autonomy, unrealistic expectations, poor working conditions, and low pay and benefits. In a more recent study, Chaudhry and Chhajer (2023) examined the psychological well-being of school teachers in India, focusing on the roles of energy management, thriving, and stress. The findings suggest that effective energy management positively impacts psychological well-being, while high stress levels, often stemming from heavy workloads and insufficient support, negatively affect teachers' mental health. Applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to the teaching profession provides a valuable framework for understanding these challenges. Maslow posited that individuals must satisfy basic physiological and safety needs before achieving higher levels of psychological well-being and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). In the context of education, if teachers' fundamental needs—such as adequate compensation (safety) and manageable workloads (physiological well-being)—are unmet, their ability to reach self-

actualization and effectively fulfill their roles is compromised (Shaughnessy et al., 2018)

Therefore, it is imperative to address these foundational needs by ensuring equitable salaries, reasonable workloads, and robust mental health support. Such measures would empower teachers to become effective school leaders and agents of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), ultimately enhancing educational outcomes.

The academic focus on syllabus completion and exam preparation emerged as a dominant systemic barrier. Teachers reported time constraints and institutional pressure to prioritize academic outcomes over holistic development. Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem highlights the importance of interactions between teachers, administrators, and parents in shaping educational priorities. For example, if school leadership and parents emphasize academic success at the expense of socio-emotional growth, teachers may struggle to allocate time and resources for SEL.

The study uncovers a dual narrative. Teachers recognize SEL's potential to enhance emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, contributing to holistic student development (Yeager, 2017). However, systemic challenges such as academic pressures, lack of institutional support, and student resistance hinder effective integration. These barriers underscore the critical need for targeted interventions to align SEL's benefits with the realities of higher-secondary education in India.

Despite these barriers, the findings also emphasize teachers' organic efforts to implement SEL principles. Some participants described fostering interpersonal skills and emotional awareness through informal methods, demonstrating their commitment to holistic student development. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, where teachers' day-to-day interactions with students play a pivotal role in shaping their socio-emotional growth. However, the lack of familiarity with formal frameworks such as CASEL indicates a missed opportunity to leverage structured, evidence-based approaches.

The findings point to a critical need for systemic interventions. Institutional policies must bridge the gap between academic priorities and socio-emotional development, creating an educational environment that values both and by designing SEL curriculums that address the developmental needs of adolescents while understanding what motivates them. The resistance from students signals the importance of reimagining SEL delivery to resonate with adolescents' perspectives. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on SEL's integration in culturally diverse contexts, highlighting the urgency of addressing both systemic and individual-level barriers.

Limitations

This study's findings must be interpreted within the context of its limitations. The small sample size, while providing in-depth qualitative insights, limits the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the diversity among participants—regarding educational boards, teaching experience, and subject areas—may not fully capture the breadth of perspectives across Indian higher-secondary education.

Another limitation is the absence of direct student voices, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding SEL implementation.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Enhancing Student Engagement

Addressing student resistance requires reimagining SEL delivery to align with adolescents' developmental needs. Incorporating interactive methods such as gamification, peer-led activities, and real-life scenarios can foster intrinsic motivation. For instance, gamified SEL tools could help students connect with the

content in a manner that feels engaging and relevant.

Strengthening Teacher Training

The findings highlight an urgent need for comprehensive teacher training programs. These should include long-term mentorship and skill-building workshops tailored to the Indian context. Such programs must integrate both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies for implementing SEL. For example, using the CASEL framework as a foundation, training modules contextualized to the Indian scenario could guide teachers in embedding SEL competencies into daily classroom practices. Conversely, attention should be paid in ensuring that teachers' basic needs are met as discussed earlier.

Aligning Institutional Policies

Institutional policies must balance academic and socio-emotional priorities. Embedding SEL into the formal curriculum, rather than treating it as an add-on, can help shift perceptions of its importance. Drawing from the NEP 2020's emphasis on holistic education, schools should allocate dedicated time for SEL activities and provide teachers with the necessary resources and support. Additionally, research needs to be expanded into why the necessary resources and support are still not being provided to the majority of schools in India despite NEP 2020's emphasis on holistic education.

Future Directions

Expanding this research to include perspectives from students, parents, and administrators would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding SEL implementation. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of SEL initiatives on student outcomes could offer valuable insights for refining programs and policies.

By aligning SEL initiatives with the developmental needs and cultural context of Indian adolescents, this study underscores the critical importance of fostering an educational environment that values both academic excellence and socio-emotional well-being. The integration of targeted teacher training, systemic support, and culturally relevant SEL strategies has the potential to transform the educational landscape, promoting holistic student development in Indian higher-secondary schools.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in fostering holistic student development, particularly in higher-secondary education. While teachers acknowledge SEL's value, systemic challenges such as academic pressures, lack of training, and student resistance hinder its effective integration. Addressing these barriers requires a collaborative approach involving targeted teacher training, policy-level interventions, and strategies to enhance student engagement. By aligning SEL initiatives with the developmental needs and interests of adolescents, schools can create a balanced educational environment that prioritizes both academic excellence and socio-emotional well-being.

Appendix

Interview Schedule

Rapport Building Questions:

1. Hi, Ma'am/Sir; how are you feeling today?
2. Thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of my study
3. Are comfortable right now?
4. Alright great, so shall we start?

Questions for the Interview:

1) Have you heard about Social Emotional Learning? (If they say yes, ask them if they know any

frameworks such as CASEL, ISELF etc.)

(If they say no, brief them about what SEL is and then ask them how much of relevance they think it has)

2) Now that you have a brief understanding of SEL, can you share how you in your own way, you maybe incorporating SEL in your daily teaching practices and routines? **Probe:** Do you have any specific examples of your work/lesson plans that you can share?

3) What do you think are the benefits of SEL in terms of student engagement and overall well-being?

4) What challenges do you face when implementing SEL in your classroom, especially considering the academic rigor of higher-secondary education?

a. Do you find it challenging to balance both?

b. **Probe:** How do you address/try to overcome these challenges? (IF THEY ARE INCORPORATING SEL)

c. What do you think are the challenges of implementing SEL in a classroom especially considering the academic rigor of higher-secondary education in India? (IF THEY ARE NOT INCORPORATING SEL)

5) Even if you do not follow a formal framework of SEL, such as CASEL which focuses on five competencies, that are self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making and self-awareness? **Probe:** To make it easier for your understanding are you adding any or all these skills in your pedagogy? Could you share some classroom examples?

6) What are some specific problems related to social and emotional difficulties that you see your students facing in the classroom? How do you as a teacher handle it?

7) Do you think SEL is important to address problems and assist students at this grade? **Probe:** Can you give any examples that informs your thinking?

8) Have you undergone SEL training? If so, how did it influence your understanding and practice of SEL? (IF NOT) Do you think formal training in SEL is required for a teacher to adequately incorporate that to their teaching? Why or why not?

9) How does the overall school environment influence your ability to incorporate SEL practices?

10) Do you collaborate with other teachers or staff to promote SEL within your school? Can you give me an example of how that played out?

11) Do you think external support or professional development are necessary to effectively implement SEL? What kind of support do you think one would require?

12) What recommendations would you make for improving SEL practices in high school settings?

Thank you so much for your time! Your insights will be invaluable to my study.

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