Rebuilding Classrooms through SEL: Evidence-Based Strategies for Post-Pandemic India

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented disruptions in education, with excessive EdTech use causing prolonged screen time, behavioural issues, and reduced attention spans among students. This article explores **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** as an essential strategy for post-pandemic classroom recovery, examining its core competencies i.e. self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-makingand their role in enhancing student well-being and academic performance. Through a qualitative literature review and practitioner insights from secondary teachers of Delhi, the study identifies practical, evidence-based classroom strategies (SAFE instruction, restorative practices, and community routines) and addresses India-specific implementation gaps under NEP 2020. The findings emphasise teacher capacity-building and systemic support for sustainable SEL integration.

Keywords: *Social emotional learning, education post covid, student well-being, classroom pedagogy, teacher capacity.*

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted educational systems worldwide, reshaping how students learn, interact, and cope with challenges. Post-pandemic classrooms reveal heightened behavioural difficulties, declining engagement, and emotional dysregulation among students (Jones, S. M., McGarrah, M. W., & Kahn, J. (2021).; *OECD, 2021*). Remote learning and social isolation increased the anxiety and reduced connectedness (*CASEL, 2023*; *UNESCO, 2022*), creating an urgent need for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in recovery efforts.

SEL equips students to understand emotions, achieve goals, build relationships, and make responsible decisions .Research confirms SEL competencies predict academic success and lifelong well-being more effectively than cognitive skills alone (*Durlak et al., 2020*; *Cipriano et al., 2023*). In India, NEP 2020 mandates holistic pedagogies integrating socio-emotional learning, yet implementation gaps persist due to inadequate teacher training (*Ahmad et al., 2026*; *Muravevskaia et al., 2024*).

This article synthesises global and Indian research to provide practical, teacher-led SEL strategies for post-COVID classrooms.

2. WHAT IS SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Social Emotional Learning or SEL as we refer to it is a process through which individuals acquire and apply knowledge, attitudes, and the skills necessary to understand and manage emotions , establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

2.1 Casel's 5 core competencies

According to the CASEL SEL Framework, the five core competencies are as follows:

1. **Self awareness:** The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behaviour across contexts.

2. **Self Management:** The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.

3. **Responsible Decision Making:** The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behaviour and social interactions across diverse situations.

4. **Relationship skills:** The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.

5. **Social Awareness:** The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts.

Figure 1. *The CASEL wheel, Source CASEL Wheel*

Source: *https://i.casel.org/spai/q_lossy+to_auto+ret_img/casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/casel-wheel.png*

These competencies are not isolated, they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, shaping how students think, feel, and behave in various contexts. They are imperative to developing Emotional Intelligence, a skill much sought after in today's world.

As *Signorelli et al. (2021)* note: "Cognitive skills connected with Emotional Intelligence... need to be educated and strengthened—*in some cases, these skills need to be developed from scratch*."

In the post-COVID educational settings, SEL has emerged as a leading pedagogy to address issues such as prolonged social isolation and digital learning, limited peer interaction, uncertainty and emotional instability as a consequence (OECD, 2021). Research indicates that engagement of students in SEL-focused interventions; post COVID exhibited improved emotional regulation, higher empathy levels, and better academic performance in students. (Oberle et al., 2022, Cipriano et al., 2023).

Thus we can say that SEL offers a comprehensive framework that not only prepares students to succeed academically but also to thrive socially and emotionally in an increasingly interconnected world.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article has adopted a qualitative and analytical review approach to examine the SEL and its implementation in post-covid classrooms. The methodology consists of the following stages:

1. Literature Review: With the use of databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar and Research Gate, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers and meta-analysis published between 2014 and 2025 were reviewed. With an emphasis on post-pandemic research the social-emotionaland behavioural challenges faced by both the teachers as well as students was highlighted(Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L. H., Ha, C., Kirk, M., Wood, M., Sehgal, K., & Zieher, A. K. (2023), Durlak et al., 2020; OECD,2021)

2. Selection Criteria: Studies focusing on SEL implementation frameworks, teacher professional development, and school-based interventions to promote SEL were prioritised. Both International and Indian educational contexts were included to ensure cultural diversity and relevance in today's education landscape.

3. Data Analysis: In order to identify recurring patterns across studies, a thematic content analysis was conducted. The parameters considered were: (a) emotional well being and mental health, (b) classroom strategies fostering SEL, and (c) the role of institutions as SEL implementation enablers and barriers.

4. Validation through practitioner insights: Informal interviews and reflective narratives from 5 secondary school teachers from the Delhi region were used to triangulate the findings from the literature. These narratives provided valuable perspectives on challenges faced by the teachers while integrating SEL in the post-COVID classrooms.

5. Ethical Considerations: The study respected the confidentiality and anonymity of the teachers who were consulted and adhered to the ethical norms of academic writing and citation.

4. ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN IMPLEMENTING SEL

Schools play an important role in developing, implementing, and sustaining Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). While families and communities support a child's early emotional; growth, schools offer structured and consistent opportunities to build SEL skills. After COVID-19, schools have taken on an even greater responsibility to help students regain confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging.

4.1 Schools as Ecosystems for Emotional Growth

According to CASEL (2023), for SEL to be effective, a whole school approach is required. This essentially means integrating SEL skills into lesson plans, daily classroom activities and the overall school culture. Schools function as SEL ecosystems where emotional skills are developed through curriculum design, positive teacher-student relationships, and school policies that promote empathy, inclusion, and collaboration (OECD, 2021)

Post-pandemic studies highlight that schools focusing on SEL show better student engagement leading to better learning outcomes. It also shows better resilience in students. Grant, S., & Brackett, M. (2024) reported that schools with well-structured SEL programs saw an increase of 22 % in student self-confidence and classroom participation. Similarly, according to OECD's

2021 global survey, students in emotionally supportive schools experienced stronger peer relationships and reduced school-related anxiety.

4.2 Institutional Frameworks for SEL

According to a 2023 study published in the Journal of Sustainable Responsible Value (PII: S2773233924000044) advancing SEL frameworks by integrating sustainable education principles into school settings, promotes competencies like self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. It demonstrates how these frameworks reduce emotional distress, foster prosocial behaviours, and boost academic engagement across PreK-12 levels, aligning with evidence from meta-analyses showing medium-to-large effect sizes. This work supports practical school adoption through classroom-based strategies, such as explicit instruction and formative assessment, making it a robust reference for equitable SEL implementation. (Greenberg, M., 2023)

One framework which can be adapted is the CASEL School wide SEL Process.

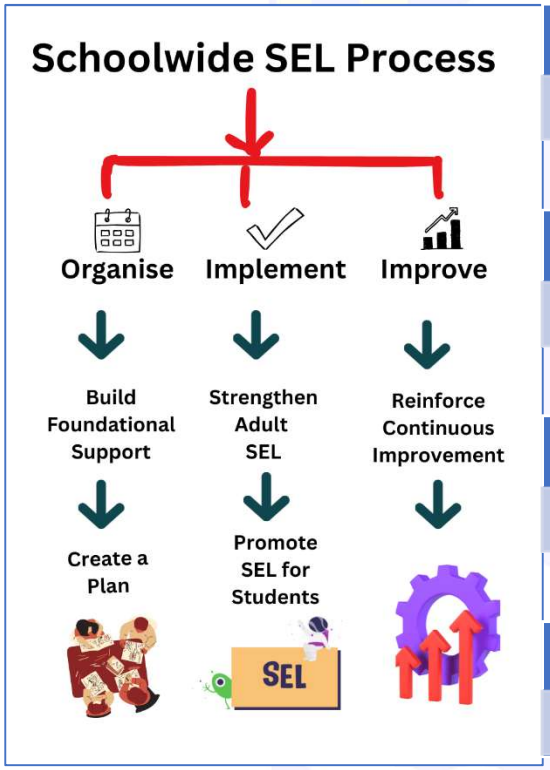

Figure 2: *The SEL framework*

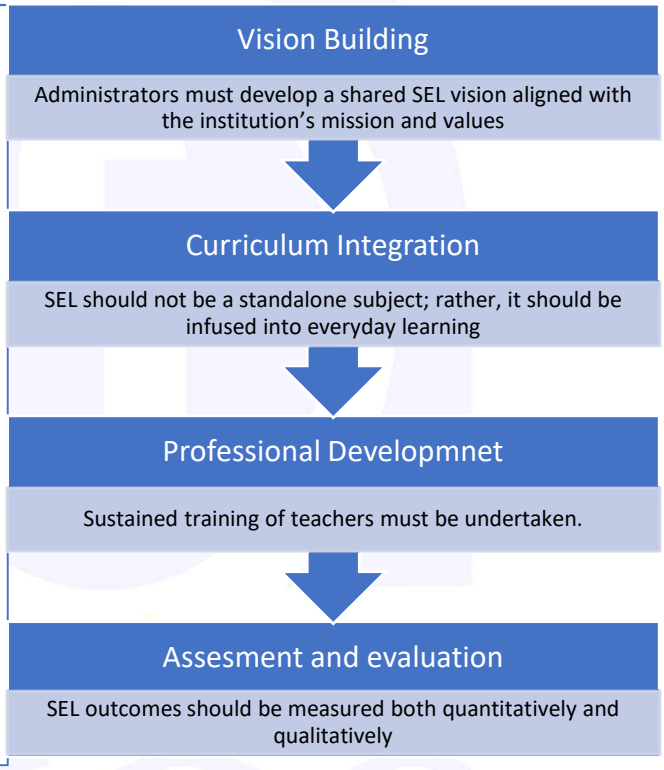

Figure 3: *The four fold SEL plan for whole school integration*

(Adapted from CASEL, https://schoolguide.casel.org/)

4.3 The Indian Context

Delhi's government-led "Happiness Curriculum" is a clear example of how SEL has been contextualized in India through a structured, system-wide school framework rather than as an optional add-on. The Brookings Centre for Universal Education case study reports that the curriculum consists of compulsory 45-minute daily lessons implemented across more than 1,000 government-run schools in Delhi, aiming to develop mindfulness, critical thinking, reflection, and

social-emotional skills for students from nursery to grade 8. The program is organized into three units—(1) Exploring Happiness through Learning and Awareness, (2) Experiencing Happiness in Relationships through Feelings, and (3) Happiness through Active Participation.

For SEL scholarship and policy discussions, this Delhi case illustrates an Indian approach that ties social-emotional skill-building to daily instructional time, reflective classroom practices, and large-scale public-sector implementation, making it a relevant reference point for framing "the Indian context" of SEL in school frameworks.(Khanna, D., & Peterson, A.,2023).

However, significant challenges hinder SEL implementation in Indian schools, including the absence of systematic frameworks, insufficient teacher training as facilitators, and a lack of culturally adapted monitoring tools (JK Policy Institute, 2024; UNESCO MGIEP, 2023; NHSIS (2024). Studies highlight teacher resistance due to prioritizing academics, limited stakeholder awareness, and resource constraints in regional contexts like Kashmir (JK Policy Institute, 2024; NHSIS 2024). The post-pandemic recovery phase presents a timely opportunity to address these gaps by aligning SEL efforts with NEP 2020's emphasis on socio-emotional competencies (Sharma 2023; International Journal of Indian Psychology 2023).

5. ROLE OF TEACHERS' SEL IMPLEMENTATION: PRE AND POST-COVID PERSPECTIVES

Teachers remain central to SEL success, modellingbehaviours and creating supportive environments both pre- and post-COVID. Foundational research established their roles, while pandemic adaptations addressed trauma, consistently improving student resilience across contexts. (Kaspar, K. L., & Massey, S. L. 2023; Sandilos, L. E. et all 2023).

5.1 Teachers as Emotional Leaders

Teachers need to model emotional regulation and empathy to build classroom trust, in order to reduce behavioural issues through daily classroom activities. In the post-pandemic period, this role expanded to addressing heightened student anxiety and promoting emotional recovery. Evidence suggests that educators who effectively self-regulate experience up to a 25% reduction in classroom disruptions, underscoring the enduring influence of emotional leadership in creating safe and supportive learning environments (Kaspar, K. L., & Massey, S. L. 2023; Sandilos, L. E. et all 2023).

5.2 Building Teachers' SEL Competence

Teachers need to build their own SEL skills before teaching them in the classroom. Structured training opportunities via professional development workshops provide a framework to build teachers' SEL competence. Programs focusing on self-management and social awareness equip educators to deliver SEL confidently, addressing common gaps in preparation. Studies emphasize ongoing support through workshops to sustain competence and efficacy. (Sandilos, L. E. et all, 2023).

According to a Master's project submitted to Grand Valley state university (Olivia R, 2025) after 2022, special training that helped teachers handle students' COVID trauma made SEL programs 30% more effective and improved student results, even though teachers were exhausted. Regular coaching helped teachers keep these skills strong before and after COVID.

5.3 Teachers as Designers of SEL-Enriched Learning

SEL integration into the curriculum is done by teachers via activities like collaborative projects and reflective discussions, adapting lessons to cultural contexts. They cultivate inclusive classroom environments through clear expectations and intentional empathy-building activities, integrating social-emotional competencies seamlessly across subject areas rather than treating them as add-ons. Evidence indicates this approach improves academic and social outcomes when systematically planned. (UNESCO MGEP, CSA Education). Given below is the 4 P frameworks proposed by UNESCO MGIEP for teacher to design andadopt SEL enriched pedagogies.

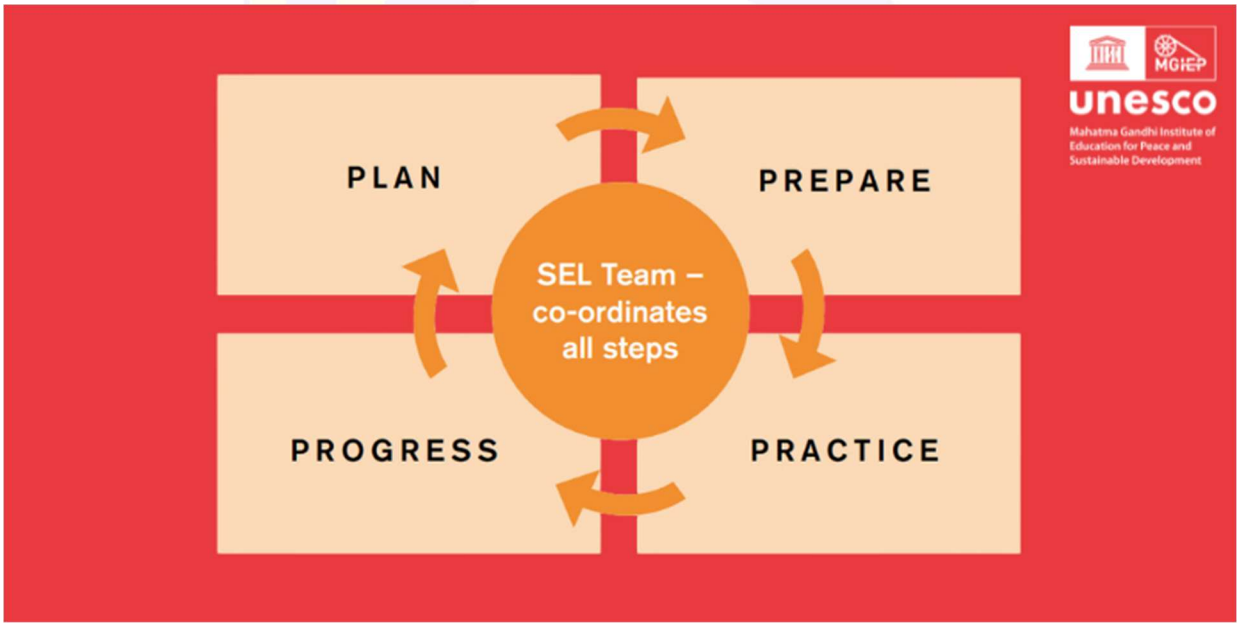

Figure 6: *The UNESCO MGIEP SEL framework for teachers*

(Link: https://d1c337161ud3pr.cloudfront.net/thumbnails/24592e78-5d41-413f-b7af-21c759275e67_Renula_blog_image.png)

5.4 Teachers' Emotional Well-being

Teacher well-being directly influences SEL delivery; supported educators maintain positive interactions even under stress. Interventions preserving emotional health prevent burnout and sustain classroom organization, with SEL programs buffering low well-being effects. Prioritizing mindfulness and resources for teachers amplifies program impact.

Pandemic burnout surges necessitated mindfulness interventions, reducing stress by 22% and preserving effectiveness through 2025. (Sandilos, L. E., Neugebauer, S. R., DiPerna, J. C., Hart, S. C., & Lei, P. 2023).

6. EVIDENCE -BASED CLASSROOM SEL STRATEGIES

Effective SEL in the classroom is reflected in teachers' structured approach in their everyday class instructions. It is the evidence-based practices that teachers adopt to foster skill development and a sense of belonging in the students. This helps create a safe and conducive learning environment in the classroom. Recent research syntheses continue to demonstrate that universal, school-based SEL produces meaningful gains in students' social-emotional skills and related outcomes, supporting the inclusion of classroom level SEL strategies as a core implementation layer in research articles (Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L. H., Ha, C., Kirk, M., Wood, M., Sehgal, K., & Zieher, A. K. ,2023).

Evidence base (latest)

Universal SEL programs significantly improve social-emotional skills (g = 0.57), social behaviours (g = 0.24), attitudes (g = 0.23), and academic performance (g = 0.13) according to a comprehensive meta-analysis of studies from 2008-2020 (Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L. H., Ha, C., Kirk, M., Wood, M., Sehgal, K., & Zieher, A. K. ,2023).

Policy syntheses drawing on hundreds of studies conclude that well-implemented SEL improves competencies, prosocial behaviour and relationships, reduces emotional distress and conduct problems, and supports academic engagement (Greenberg et al., 2023). Evidence reviews consistently emphasize that stronger outcomes are associated with SAFE instruction—Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit—a framework embedded in leading SEL guidance and validated across meta-analyses (Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2023; Greenberg et al., 2023).

6.1 Five core SEL strategies

While policies provide the foundation for SEL, classrooms remain where competencies are cultivated through intentional, contextually responsive practices integrated into daily teaching (Greenberg et al., 2023). Post-COVID, students exhibited fragmented attention, heightened anxiety, and reduced peer interaction, making classroom SEL strategies essential for reconnection and motivation (Allen et al, 2024; Cipriano et al., 2023).

6.1.1. Teach SEL skills explicitly (SAFE aligned lessons

Classroom SEL is strongest when teachers define target skills (e.g., labelling emotions, taking perspective, and resolving conflict), teach them in a sequence, and provide structured practice with feedback (CASEL's SAFE framing). This approach, framed as "explicit instruction + guided rehearsal + feedback loops," is supported by meta-analytic reviews linking such structured, skill-focused methods to stronger social, emotional, and academic outcomes. For example, a weekly mini-lesson on "I-messages" followed by role-plays and teacher feedback operationalizes the Active and Explicit components, boosting skill mastery in post-pandemic recovery. (Greenberg, M., 2023).

6.1.2. Use routine "community practices"

Routine "community practices" such as structured check-ins and morning meetings foster emotional expression and enhance classroom climate when integrated consistently into daily instruction rather than as isolated events. These predictable routines provide students with dedicated opportunities to share feelings, practice active listening, and establish shared daily goals, thereby strengthening belonging and peer relationships. For example, a 10-minute opening circle—incorporating greetings, emotion check-ins, and a brief cooperative task serves as an effective universal strategy for building community. (Durlak et al., 2011; Corcoran, R. P., Cheung, A., Kim, E., & Cheung, S. Y., 2020)

6.1.3. Integrate SEL with academics

A growing research base supports integrating SEL into academic instruction through class discussions and collaborative problem-solving. CASEL's School Guide proposes a "frame–coach–reflect" routine to make SEL skills visible during academic tasks: teachers frame the target skill upfront, coach students during application, and facilitate brief reflections afterward. Example: During a group science investigation, the teacher frames "turn-taking," coaches in-the-moment, and ends with a 2-minute reflection on conflict management (CASEL School Guide 2024).

6.1.4. Use restorative practices to prevent and respond to conflict

Restorative practices build community, repair harm, and reduce exclusionary discipline by addressing conflict root causes rather than relying on punishment. A large-scale study across 485 California middle schools (2+ million students) found higher restorative practices exposure linked to improved academic outcomes, reduced suspension rates and duration, and enhanced school safety indicators. In classrooms, this manifests as restorative conversations, affective statements, and repair circles—structured relational supports that prioritize relationship repair over punitive measures (Fronius et al., 2019).

6.1.5. Embed formative monitoring

Because implementation quality drives outcomes, classroom SEL sections in research articles often specify simple monitoring tools (e.g., weekly fidelity checklists; quick student self-report reflections; observation rubrics for discussion norms) to support consistent delivery. This is consistent with broader guidance that SEL gains are strongest when practices are implemented with structure and continuity rather than fragmented sessions. Example: teachers complete a 5-item weekly checklist capturing whether the lesson was sequenced, active, focused, and explicit, aligned with SAFE criteria. (Durlak et al., 2011;Grant, S., & Brackett, M. 2024).

7. CONCLUSION

Cumulative evidence establishes social-emotional learning (SEL) as a transformative, evidence-based approach yielding benefits across social, emotional, behavioural, and academic domains (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2024). Recent meta-analyses of universal school-based programs report moderate-to-large effects on social-emotional skills (g = 0.57), behaviours (g =

0.24), attitudes (g = 0.23), and academics (g = 0.13), with effects persisting into follow-up periods (Cipriano et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2023).

These outcomes hold across PreK-12 levels, diverse socioeconomic contexts, and implementation modalities, including post-COVID recovery efforts addressing trauma-related distress. Structured classroom strategies; explicit SAFE instruction (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit), restorative practices, and integrated routines drive these effects, with implementation fidelity moderating impact sizes by up to 30% (Durlak et al., 2011). Teacher competence and well-being amplify student resilience when supported through training and monitoring (Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T., 2009). In the Indian context, aligning these practices with NEP 2020's holistic development mandate offers scalable solutions to address systemic gaps.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, culturally adapted tools, and cost-effectiveness analyses. Well-implemented SEL equips students for academic success while fostering lifelong competencies essential for personal and societal flourishing.

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