

Nurturing Socio-Emotional skills in the context of schools



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Introduction

Socio emotional learning (SEL) is a rapidly expanding domain. It is stressed a lot around the world due to the urgent need of developing informed, compassionate, empathetic, and responsible citizens. The approach towards to nurturing a child to become informed, compassionate, empathetic, and responsible can be viewed within a school space. Schools play a major role in nurturing these skills within an individual. But what are these skills? What do we understand by SEL? There are various questions that the present paper would attempt to address.

Besides the knowledge of different disciplines, several other the skills like ability to identify and manage emotions, develop and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions are also equally central for an overall development of an individual. But the challenge of integrating these into school curriculum is realised by everyone. Nurturing emotional resilience is more challenging than teaching addition or multiplication. Although these skills had been valuable for long, but they have become significantly prominent today. The monumental shift from industrial age to information and knowledge age has been life altering. It is inevitable that more such transformations are yet to come, and we need to nurture our students with more such skills that will help them deal with the complex demands and challenges of the ever-changing society.

With the students flipping through the last pages of their answer sheet to see the marks rather than the qualitative feedback from the teacher or the parents sharing their child's scores to their

relatives rather than sharing about their growth has diluted the culture of appreciating qualitative growth in a child. There has been a focus only on the cognitive domain not only by parents and schools but also by the various entrance exams for higher education. Child-centred education somewhat went astray when the focus of school education shifted to learning outcomes, objectives, standards, and exam results. With the advent of 21st century and the extreme polarisation in views leading to violence, aggression, discrimination and intolerance across the world, the education system also realised that accomplishment of learning outcomes is not enough if the feelings, wants and needs of the students are not taken into account.

To make students socially and emotionally literate is a critical human competence which makes a student happy and content. Schools have a role to play in nurturing students to be socially and emotionally literate and fulfilled human-beings. It also improves the physical as well as psychological health of the student. Being emotionally and socially literate reduces the tendency to succumb to risky behaviours like drug abuse or substance abuse etc. Social and emotional skills also improve behaviour of students. Students learn to manage their emotions and consequently their behaviours. This reduces the rates of violence, aggressions and crimes in the society as well as improves their learning. Being socially and emotionally literate also helps them solve problems and think more effectively and take responsible decisions. The increasingly fragmented and individualised society requires every individual to be self-sufficient, flexible and competent enough to work in collaborative situations. Now we cannot assume that social and emotional development is the sole responsibility of the families or the communities. It is a significant goal of the schools too.

Various new reforms and policies across the country have highlighted the need to foster values in the context of school culture and climate. One such relevant document is NCFTE (2010) which clearly states that teachers are expected to adhere to all the constitutional values in order to enable future citizens to be sensitive, respectful and fair. The National Curriculum

Framework (NCF), 2005 also states- “We need a curriculum whose creativity, innovativeness and development of the whole being, the hall mark of a good education makes uniform tests that assesses memorised facts and textbook-based learning obsolete”. New Education Policy (NEP, 2020) envisions that student should learn certain life skills along with other academic skills. The policy clearly states that ethical, moral reasoning and socio-emotional skills should be incorporated throughout the school curriculum. It adds on to state that scientific temper and socio-emotional values are equally important as constitutional values.

Programs such as ‘Life Skills’, ‘Meena campaign’, and ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ (ESD) have touched upon focused aspects such as gender equality, emotional skills, social skills etc. Even curricular approaches such as the one introduced recently by Delhi government on ‘Happiness Curriculum’ engages with aspects of value education, mental exercises, and meditation within the current curriculum. While these have significant domain influence and are intervention oriented, building a larger contextual and multi-dimensional perspective on values is essential. Now, it is being recognized that schools also need to concern themselves with the students’ and the teachers’ socio-emotional skills besides the academic aspect of school system as we know how central it is for effective learning and overall growth and development.

In light of the mentioned policy documents, and acts, there is a need to understand the roots of these skills, values and attitudes in children and more importantly how can they be developed and assessed. It is necessary to view the development of socio-emotional skills through a whole school approach.

Why do we need a whole school approach for nurturing socio-emotional skills?

We know that learning does not only happen in formal setting inside the classroom. Learning happens beyond the classroom settings too for e.g., in the playgrounds, during midday meals,

during morning assemblies, in the corridors, in the library etc. The domain of socio-emotional skills cannot be force fit inside a school curriculum.

The recognition of schools being central in nurturing socio-emotional learning in students’ needs to be at a structural level and at individual level. Some believe that socio emotional skills are woven within subject lessons and can be taught while transacting the curriculum. It is believed that no separate programme is required since all the required skills can be learnt directly through daily experiences, regular conversations, and relationships. But it is essential to provide the supporting environment for such teachings to be impactful even withing the existing school curriculum. Without a socially and emotionally supportive environment, the school curriculum is empty and can have no significant impact on the development of the child.

Table 1 lists three approaches widely used across schools- traditional ‘special needs’ approach for emotional and behavioral problems, teaching social and emotional competence through taught curriculum and whole school approach to promote social and emotional well-being (Weare, 2003).

Table 1

Approaches to socio-emotional nurturance in schools

Aspects of school life	Traditional ‘special needs’ approach for children in need of social and emotional support	Social & emotional competences through taught curriculum	Whole-school approach

Focus of concern	Focus on individuals with problems and ‘special needs’ procedures and responses. For e.g., identification, referral to outside agencies, support for students in school.	Focus on teaching and learning for all students	Focus on totality of the school as an organization in its community, including all aspects of school life e.g., ethos, relationships, communication. Management, physical environment, learning strategies, curriculum, parents and surrounding community etc.
What constitutes quality	Emphasis on getting the procedures and responses right for children with ‘special needs’	Emphasis on getting the taught curriculum right for all students	Emphasis on ensuring a embedded, coherent congruent and coordinated approach across all parts of school.
Goal	Goal is to overcome negative problems and difficulties in a majority of students, those with ‘special needs.	Goal is to promote the learning of competences for all students and overcome problems and difficulties for students	Goal is to promote positive emotional literacy and well-being, including the learning of emotional competences and prevent problems and difficulties for all school

			members e.g., staff, students, parents etc.
Timing of the response	Short term response to events, often crisis management	Long term developmental approach which starts early for all children, includes competence and prevention of problems	Long term developmental approach which starts early, for all children and which includes teacher and parental development, the development of emotional literacy and well-being, the learning of competence and prevention of problems.
Theory of cause of problem	Focus on difficult behaviour	Focus on emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and skills that underlie behaviour	Focus on social and emotional contexts that shape behaviour as well as emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and skills that underlie it.
Role of parents and community	Parents and community asked to 'support' the school		Parents and wider community actively involved. E.g., in school decision making etc.
Relations with	Outside agencies used for referral of children with problems and difficulties		Outside agencies involved with whole-school work, in

outside agencies	Outside agencies can be roped in as experts for lectures or interactions with students. they can be thematic topics that are age appropriate etc	school, as well being used for referral, for training teachers or active parent orientation programs.
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Note. From “Some Key Principles for Developing Emotional Literacy in Schools”, by Katherine Weare, 2003, *Developing the Emotionally Literate School*, p.54
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Resonating with Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being, the focus of schools has also shifted towards a more positive approach from focussing only on troubled children, children with disabilities or emotional problems. The positive perspective allows the schools to visualise the entire school community as one unit. There is a strong consensus on visualising socio emotional development as high priority and cannot be seen in silos tucked within school subjects.

Creating a supportive culture

The word culture means to have shared beliefs, values, attitudes, practices and dispositions. It is not something which can be established once and it can flourish on its own. It requires cultivation. Just like crops in the fields, culture also requires significant effort. The ground needs to be laid down carefully, new ideas to be sown, watered, taken care of. Culture is a process and not an outcome for which every single member of the community should put in equal effort for its cultivation. To create a culture which reflects the vision of our policies of developing a sensitive, respectful, and fair citizen, a school needs to have certain shared values and norms which we are trying to achieve. This does not mean that we all should follow the

same process or should think identically on political, religious, or social issues. The underlying belief is that everyone should agree on the fundamentals of what we are aiming to achieve and should share the core principles of what is right & wrong, what is fair & unfair and what is tolerable & what is not.

To ensure that the entire environment around the child has a common consensus on values and attitudes one needs to ask these questions:

1. Has the school initiated this discussion?
2. Do the parents have the same views as you on the purposes of the classroom activities?
3. Do you think your efforts will just get good marks or will it also have a long-term influence on the child?
4. Do your lesson plans incorporate these ideas intentionally?

Creating time and spaces to talk and reflect: two thirds of the time spent in ‘traditional’ classrooms is mostly talk and two-thirds of that talk is predominantly done by the teacher (Flanders, 1970). The students usually do not get enough time to share their thoughts or opinion. Even if they do, it is mostly academic related discussions. Designated time and space for teachers and students to talk to each other within the school time is critical. It might seem challenging to find time for such discussions, but it is predominantly a matter of clever scheduling of regular. Such discussions within school can easily take the shape of a formal conversation where the teacher is mostly talking and giving advice. One has to take care that such conversations should not be around any academic disciplines or take the shape of a preaching.

Non-verbal communication also sends various messages to children. Such messages are a significant part of communication and learning. It is not only what you say to your children is

important but also how you say it. Some non-verbal behaviours one can explore are eye contact, facial expressions like a smile that would communicate warmth to children, gestures like a head nod communicates that you are listening actively, an animated style of teaching also captures the attention of children, proximity is also a form of communication which the teacher should look out for- certain cultural norms dictate the distance to be maintained for an interaction. Another important non-verbal communication is the ability to laugh on self and encourage students also to laugh on self. Humour allows to create a friendly environment which releases stress and also aids teaching learning process.

Celebrating the arts: There is no value or socio- emotional skill that cannot be fostered through art. Art is a powerful medium in developing constitutional values. In schools the teacher usually focusses on the end result of the process where the process of painting is not taken into consideration but the end product of the painting or a sketch of how beautiful or life like it looks like is focussed upon. Drawing class has a place in the timetables of our schools and that class is dedicated to how well one can be draw an apple or a flower. The idea here is to teach to draw well and not to let children explore drawing as an expression. Similarly for other art forms like dance, music, theatre is all about how well the end product looks like – be it a dance performance or a play in the annual programme but we must ensure that the process and the journey is the core of the this learning opportunity. Children who perform well in these art forms are encouraged but the ones who doesn't perform well as per the common standards of the teacher are asked to focus on something else. Teachers need to appreciate and acknowledge art as an integral part of education. Art need not be taught like other academic subjects, rather it can be incorporated into the subjects in form of music, dance, theatre, literary arts, visual arts etc. Art experiences help students develop self-management, self-expression, interpersonal and relationship skills consequently building a positive identity. Some of the strategies that can be applied to incorporate arts into classroom are:

1. Expressing thoughts, feelings and ideas through art: Some students might have difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings through writing. Students, especially those learning a second language like English or students with special needs can use arts to communicate and explain themselves. Students learn better through visuals which can form the basis to further connect it to meaningful concepts. For example, teachers can focus on what kind of colours children prefer using when angry or when happy. What kind of objects they draw when in the state of a specific emotion. It can strike a conversation on how emotions has an impact on our choices or preferences.
2. Role-playing: Allowing role-play of characters in a story or event help students to develop confidence and they tend to understand in a more meaningful manner. When learning becomes fun, engagement increases. Through role-play students develop various socio-emotional skills like self-control, self-confidence, empathy, positive communication and cooperation. Role-play is an effective tool to develop social awareness as it provides the opportunity to step into someone else's shoes.
3. Using visual art, music or dance as a prompt: Use a form of art piece, a video of a dance or some music associated with an event or a situation to initiate discussion on a theme. The art can provoke interesting thoughts from different perspectives. Music help students to focus and develop active listening skills necessary to build relationships. Dance allows the students to relate their body with their emotions. Recognizing their emotions helps develop self-awareness. For e.g., teacher can bring their attention to the way students move when they are angry or when they are proud.

Promoting collaborative and co-operative learning: Co-operative and collaborative learning involves a group of students working together to accomplish a goal such as a building a project, creating a product etc. Students learn better when exposed to different viewpoints from people with different backgrounds. While it is important to achieve a particular learning outcome, it

is also important to learn to work effectively in groups even if there is a disagreement on views. In a co-operative and collaborative environment, a student is required to listen to various viewpoints, articulate and defend their ideas. Doing such an activity a student begins to develop their own framework of building knowledge rather than merely relying on a text or an expert. When tackling difficult concepts or ideas, collaborative work can provide support. Working with peers reduces the anxiety and stress of performance.

Some strategies that can be applied to nurture co-operative and collaborative learning in classroom are:

1. Identifying the strengths of students: The first and foremost step should be to believe that each student has strengths. The strengths might come in different forms like sports, arts, oration skills, humour, leadership etc. It is important to understand that a strength is not something that a student is best at, rather something the student has developed and is inclined to be best at. Identifying strengths can aid the teacher to assign specific tasks or activities to the students where they can perform well and consequently build their self-confidence. Observation, informal chats or various other activities can help the teacher in identifying the strengths
2. Developing critical thinking skills: Consider the learning process of group work as a part of assessment. Refrain from criticising a particular student or a particular group rather assess the process. It shows the students that co-operative and collaborative learning is valued for meaningful conversations and building ideas. Allow the groups to engage in self-criticisms to assess themselves and their work. This will lead the students to build trust with the teacher and peers for more open communication.
3. Encouraging collaboration with other classes: When students are familiar with co-operative and collaborative learning, the next step can be to organize inter-class collaborative activities. Students of varying age groups can work on one project or one

problem. This will not only enhance their learning but also foster their ability to accept, negotiate and make decisions.

Subject Integration

Teachers will have to find teachable moments to integrate socio-emotional skills within class lessons. Most of the chapters provide enough opportunity to have a discussion around several societal and cultural issues and concerns. It also provides opportunity to encourage creativity, critical thinking and collaborative learning. Certain illustrations in our textbooks can also be used to initiate discussions or activities to nurture several socio-emotional skills such as empathy, sensitivity, recognition of emotions etc.

The chapter on shapes and space in NCERT textbook- Math Magic for grade 1 has a story on how the camel gets inside the tent of its owner. Besides developing vocabulary and an understanding of spaces, this story can also be used to discuss empathy towards animals. The teacher can have questions such as ‘what must be the camel feeling? What must be the man feeling? What would you have done if you were in his place? Have you ever done this for anybody?’ Etc. Such questions will lead the child to think from the camel’s perspective and feel its pain in this context. Similarly, there can be various illustrations to talk about appreciating and accepting diversity in our mathematics textbooks.

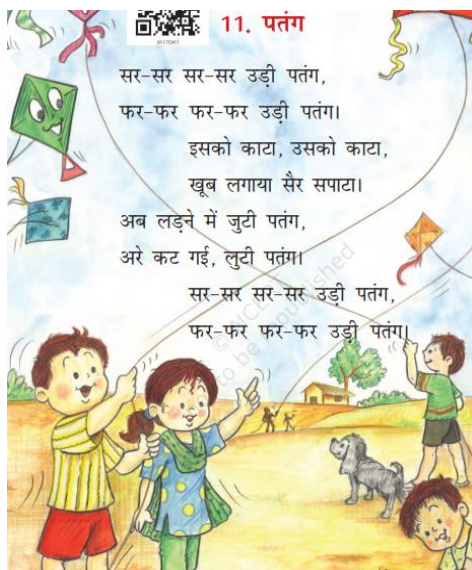
In NCERT science textbook for grade 6 the chapter on Food: where does it come from? can be used to discuss about the various cuisines people eat, the diversity in food, the cultures of people and their dependence on nature. The chapter can also open up a dialogue on inequality in our country around food. There are many people in our country who do not get sufficient food to eat and why do you think that is.



Fig. 3.11 Charkha

The children can exercise their critical thinking skills to find out a reason behind this. When we ask children, what can be done to resolve this issue, we, as educators, are nurturing their problem-solving skills. The chapter on Fibre to fabric for grade 6 also gives us ample teachable opportunities to talk about the hard work and dignity of labour. Children can be shown videos or pictures of people weaving, making clothes, knitting and all the labour involved in making a cloth from a plant or animal. Such discussions inculcate respect and dignity for people at every stratum of the society. There are also various horrifying procedures to extract wool, fur, silk or leather from animals that conflicts with animal rights.

Language, out of all the subjects, provides an infinite space to inculcate a lot of socio-emotional skills through its curriculum. One way of inculcating such skills is through poetry recitation. The children when enacts the poem, it evokes a lot of feeling and emotions in the child. For



e.g., in NCERT English textbook -marigold for grade 2 the poem “Granny Granny, please comb my hair” has a lot of scope for discussion around identifying emotions, maintaining positive relationships, co-operation and compassion. The teacher can talk about the emotions being expressed through the poem- love, care, joy and many more. The children can be encouraged to identify such emotions by relating it to their own lives. The poem ‘Patang’ in NCERT Hindi textbook for Grade 1 has an

illustration that shows the boys flying kite while the girl is just watching. This illustration can initiate conversation around gender equality and the stereotypes associated with gender. The focus is not to explain what gender is or what is gender stereotype for the 6-year-olds but to make them think about the discrimination we usually see around us in our societies and

families. Stories also provide us scope to have discussion around several such socio-emotional skills.

Social science and EVS have the chapters directly linked to socio-emotional skills but the main focus of these chapters is not to just share the information of what happened in the past or how the sun rises in the east but also to provide insight into the nature of the subject and to help children imbibe the different attitudes and skills associated with that subject.

The chapter ‘From tasting to digesting’ in the EVS textbook “Looking Around” for grade V has an illustration which shows different emotions as a consequence of several bodily urges and pains. It also shows a dog who says that it cries too when hungry. This illustration can be used to initiate discussion around the various emotions we feel and emote in different situations. The child can be asked to associate name emotions and also recognize the emotions in different situations through games, activities or just discussion. The children can also be challenged to think of solutions to manage these emotions. The socio-emotional skill to regulate emotions is a very critical and needs to be nurtured in children from a very early age.

All the lessons in our textbooks provide such opportunities but we, as teachers, need to just identify them and consciously put in effort to nurture them in the classroom.

Beyond the classroom

All the activities outside the classroom like sports, morning assemblies, mid-day meals, nature walks, library work etc are all spaces to inculcate socio-emotional skills (Central Board of Secondary Education, 2012). These activities contribute significantly towards the holistic development of the child. Various strategies that can be applied by the school to further nurture these skills through such activities are:

Teachers and students can collaboratively form several committees or clubs or societies for different activities like ecological activities, literary work, musical or dance engagements or just simply a chit-chat club where children and adults can come together to simply talk about anything on their mind without any prior agenda. The students should have a say in deciding what kind of activities they would like to engage with.

Another critical aspect in building a socially and emotionally competency student is community building. The school must promote a culture of unity and solidarity amongst students. Students across age groups should come together to accomplish tasks for their school like- cleaning and decorating the school premises, cultivating and maintaining a school garden, older students helping younger students in academics, school excursions or short trips to places outside the school campus can build empathy, encourage team-work & decision-making skills in students. A form of buddy system between children from different grades to promote caring attitude towards each other as well as to ensure that bullying doesn't happen also reduces the idea of seniority and fosters sense of brotherhood.

Community connect also means being able to develop a relationship with people outside the school like the community nearby the school campus. Students can act as agents of community development by providing information through various platforms on relevant topics like- sanitation, alcoholism, conservation, empathy towards animals, gender disparity, issues related to health and well-being etc. the students with the teachers can plan recreational activities for the community. For e.g., the community can be invited for their annual programs, cultural events, exhibitions/project displays, art melas, food festivals or sports events.

Any activity that is done should involve students from planning stage to the feedback stage. Each stage allows the space for the development of several socio-emotional skills- problem

solving, effective decision making, working in a team, ability to take and give constructive feedback.

There is a growing body of research accentuating the deep connection between sports, physical fitness, and positive socio-emotional health. Sports also provides ample prospects to develop team spirit, compassion, empathy, and decision-making abilities just to name a few. Sports and physical fitness activities tend to be less structured and less formal as compared to activities inside the classroom giving more opportunities to develop relationships and build socio-emotional skills.

Conclusion

Effective integration of Socio-emotional skills in curriculum and entire school culture can have significant impact on the positive behavioural outcomes of children. Nurturing socio-emotional skills happens at a multi-level ecosystem of contexts and relationships.

The article provides only an indicative list of strategies that can be applied by educators to initiate the nurturance of socio-emotional skills in school. There is no doubt that gaining competence in socio-emotional skills is the need of the hour and every school should put in effort to incorporate this in their school activities be it within the classroom or beyond the classroom.

Looking at these skills in isolation will lead them to look at these skills away from their own lives which is why it is of utmost importance to integrate them into school culture practices. It is necessary for the teachers to identify the scope in each lesson to foster socio-emotional skills. Once identified they can be communicated to the students in fun, interactive and engaging manner.

Being aware of their own emotions, being able to manage them and knowing their own thoughts, feeling and emotions is only the stepping-stone for them to develop into effective members of the society.

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