

Research Paper

## Understanding Social Emotional Learning (SEL) – A Key Aspect to Holistic Development in Children

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### ABSTRACT

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively. The research aims to understand the issues faced by primary students in the area of social-emotional development. A qualitative methodology was used and results were obtained by taking face-to-face interviews and group discussions with 20 students, 5 parents, and 7 teachers. The data were collected by purposive sampling method and it was analyzed by using thematic analysis through which the themes and sub-themes could be identified. The results indicated that there is a need to develop interventions in the areas of Emotional development - improving the understanding, expressions, and management of emotions for their self and others; Social development - improving their relationship building skill, helping behavior, socializing, confronting behavior, dealing with disagreements, disciplinary practices and using 3 magical words; and the awareness of their self. The result also indicated the impact of lockdown on social-emotional development signifying the urgency of the need for the development of an intervention.

**Keywords:** *Social Emotional Learning (SEL), intervention, self-awareness, the impact of lockdown, primary students*

According to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Social-emotional Learning (SEL) is commonly defined as “the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively”. Many countries implemented SEL in their schools for the overall development of the children. It has been observed that India has also started realizing the importance of SEL in the life of children. Many researchers, educators, and other stakeholders have emphasized that along with academic skills, non-academic skills or social emotional skills are essential for holistic development (Bhat & Pillai, 2022). Researchers have also shown through their findings that if SEL is integrated into our daily routine practices with a structured and sequenced

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Received: April 26, 2026; Revision Received: September 22, 2026; Accepted: September 28, 2026

approach, it will be more effective. These skills are not that we are born with, it is to be taught to the children (Sharma, 2021).

The early years of life are very important for healthy development as an adult. It plays a role as a foundation for the entire life of a person. This is the age when a child is more vulnerable and ready to grasp anything in the environment for their growth and development (Cooper et al., 2009). Research on early childhood featured the impact of negative experiences at an early age on the social-emotional, behavioral and cognitive development of the child as an adult (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Education attainment in adolescence or even in later life is thoroughly dependent or can be traced back to their school-level entry (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Teaching Social Emotional skills at an early age is important as the family or other environmental risk factors make the child vulnerable to social, emotional, and behavioral problems (Cooper et al., 2009).

World Economic Forum (WEF) suggested that 70% of the employability requisites are not fulfilled by the educational system. 75% of young adults are unemployed. The reason for it simply is the gap between learning and the requirement of the workplace. Students are running behind the marks rather than the development of their skills which is further making them good in theoretical understanding but lagging in their practical application. They are running in this hyper-competitive world neglecting social and emotional skill development. The social emotional skills are one of the desired and required prerequisites when hiring in any workplace (Zaveri, 2021).

During COVID-19, when all education went online and it was declared nationwide lockdown, many students struggled with their skill development. For the teachers, covering the academics to the student was itself a challenge in online mode and hence they lagged in social emotional development. COVID-19 has also seen an increase number of mental health issues, like anxiety, depression oppositional and conduct behavior, panic, etc. This highlighted the importance of SEL even more (Bhat & Pillai, 2022).

Indian educationists also realized that SEL should be incorporated into the curriculum of the school; hence National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) has also emphasized SEL for the holistic development of all children. They aim at the education system to develop a good human being capable of rational thoughts, appropriate behavior, and holding social-emotional skills. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) also cover a chapter on SEL highlighting its importance along with academic competency. Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2019, which was released in 2020 pointed out the need of integrating social emotional skills into the curriculum (Loomba & Chawla, 2020).

As per the World Happiness Report, 2017, India ranked 122 out of 155 countries in the happiness quotient. Considering this scenario, the Delhi government announced the 'Happiness Curriculum' in Delhi government schools (Kundu, 2018). Many institutes or NGOs started bringing awareness around it and approaching schools for it. This research is also on the same ground, bringing awareness around the current social and emotional development of the children age range of 7 to 10 years in Pune city schools. It will also understand the perspective of parents and teachers around the same. The findings of this research will guide further the development of the intervention around SEL based on the needs of the current social-emotional development.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Difficulties in Social Emotional Learning is identified to be the source of learning disabilities in children specifically difficulties in recognizing emotions in self and others, regulating and managing strong emotions, and recognizing strengths and areas of needs are majorly contributing factor leading to learning disabilities. The researchers have come up with interventions that will help them in connecting social skills with academics and show improvement learning of the children (Elias, 2004). Developing successful youth is a give-and-take responsibility both for the youth and the adult. The youth is open to the opportunities provided by the adult and the adult provides nourishing and growth-enhancing opportunities to the youth. Based on this the research was conducted and the findings of the research indicated that specific instructions from the teachers and specific interpersonal and organizational dimensions of the school perceived by the children are associated with academics and social emotional functioning over time (Roeser et al., 2000). A survey study was conducted to understand the perception of the teachers regarding social emotional learning in the school. The result of the survey indicated that teachers believe SEL is important for the development of the students and hence schools should actively work on equipping institutions with social emotional training, Help from professionals should be taken to provide training regarding SEL and also to deal with the barriers in the same (Buchanan et al., 2009)

To understand social emotional development it is required to connect it with a developmental approach. This will support in planning interventions and implementing developmentally sensitive strategies. These strategies will also intervene in the development of psychopathology and lead to holistic development (Malti & Noam, 2016). Children and adolescents who have gone through violence are predisposed to develop mental health problems, this further impact the development of their social and emotional skills, and this further lead to poor performance in school. The school setting should be framed in such a manner that it protects the children from negative school outcomes leading due to social emotional issues such as meeting the mental health needs of the students, providing training to the teachers, focusing on policies on mental health for the children and developing new programs catering the need for social emotional development (Aviles et al., 2006). Pre, post, and follow-up research was conducted on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-grade students. A 12-week program along with 1 booster session was implemented on the students. Teachers also continuously used all the SEL skills outside the curriculum. They also reminded students to use these skills in their day-to-day life. The result indicated positive gain in the post-test and follow-up measures (Harlacher & Merrell, 2010)

Social emotional development provides a framework for children to understand and comprehend the social world around them and process the emotional information in their surroundings. Often in higher studies, the focus is on content delivery ignoring the holistic development of the students. If higher education focuses on social emotional development, it will help students to prepare for an ever-changing world (Seal, et al., 2011). Intervention based on social emotional development was implemented in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The impact of the intervention supported reducing behavior problems and hyperactivity in the children (Mendelsohn et al., 2018). A research study investigated social emotional learning skills curriculum for grade 1 students. The result indicated an increase in the level of social emotional competency, well-being, and academics. It also leads to a reduction in behavioral issues (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012)

Social emotional learning programs have been widely used in many schools. The research was conducted to understand teachers' perceptions of these programs. The challenges of such programs were discussed through the qualitative study. The finding of the study revealed that teachers believed that it is their responsibility to provide students with social emotional learning. Even without prior experience with SEL, they were asked to incorporate social emotional learning into their curriculum. Teachers had an understanding of the importance of SEL for the students, hence committed to providing these competencies, but faced challenges in making this a reality (Humphries et al., 2018). A research study was conducted to evaluate the social emotional learning programs “Strong Kids and “Strong Teens” to increase healthy social emotional behaviors and decrease emotional distress and negative affect. The result indicated that social emotional learning programs should be used as prevention for promoting mental health in schools (Merrell et al., 2008). The research was conducted to implement social emotional learning programs for students with culturally and linguistically diverse segments. The result indicated that these segments of students benefitted in improving their self-awareness and relationship skills (Castro Olivo et al., 2022).

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Research question:***

1. What are the social-emotional needs of children in schools?
2. What are the social-emotional issues experienced by children in schools?

#### ***Participants:***

For the present study, a purposeful sample was selected. Different types of schools were approached for the data collection, such as SSC, CBSE, ICSE, and Zilla Parishad School. Data was also collected by directly approaching the child and their parents at home. The group discussion/interview was taken of the children belonging to 7 to 10 years of age; the interview was taken of their parents and the teachers teaching these children, mostly belonging to 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The face-to-face interviews and group discussions were taken with 20 students, 5 parents, and 7 teachers.

#### ***Data collection and analysis:***

Data collection for the present study was done by using group discussions and in-depth interviews. All the group discussions or interviews were collected face to face by visiting the schools or visiting their home. Prior permission was taken from each school or the parents if the visit was at home. The convenient time and date were asked for them assuring their availability and comfort. The consent form was filled out by the parents to allow the use of data provided by them and by their children. They were assured that the data will be used only for research purposes and nowhere the name of the child, the parents, or the teachers and the school will be mentioned, assuring them full confidentiality. Each group discussion/interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes. The responses of the participants were transcribed verbatim with the prior consent of the participants and then the participants were asked to read the transcription for ensuring the validity of their responses.

Thematic analysis was used for data analysis to understand the emerging themes and sub-themes of the data collected.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Need analysis of Social Emotional Learning amongst children:*

Table no. 1 showing the analysis identified core themes and sub-themes focusing on the Social and Emotional issues amongst the children

| Themes                        | Sub-themes                | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Narratives                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Emotional Development         | 1. Emotions of self       | Students understand but struggle to express and manage their emotions whilst they face difficulties in understanding and responding to others' emotions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <i>"I can recognize my emotions but find it difficult to express the emotions to others." (C1)</i>                                                          |
|                               | 2. Emotions of others     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>"I believe she yet doesn't understand the emotion anger and does not understand when she experiences anger and how to manage it." (P5)</i>               |
| Social Development            | 1. Helping behavior       | Students are hesitant to share or ask for help. They are very selective in building relationship. Confronting is another difficult task, as they believe doing that will lead to losing the relationship. Rarely uses the 3 magical words i.e. 'sorry', 'thank you' and 'please'. Disagreements are common and may go to extreme impacting mental health of the child. Observed as impatient, mischievous, and casual about rules. | <i>"I hesitate in asking help to others, instead of helping others, it is better I do the task by myself only." (C6)</i>                                    |
|                               | 2. Building relationships |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>"Now-a-days, I can see her always with their mobiles, as her education was also through mobiles, but this has made her to be a bit isolated." (P4)</i>   |
|                               | 3. Being sociable         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                             |
|                               | 4. Three magical words    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <i>"I see students these days are mischievous and use abusive words in their communication. They may say or use these abusive words very casually. (T4)</i> |
|                               | 5. Discipline             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                             |
|                               | 6. Disagreement           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                             |
| Preoccupation with self-image | 7. Confronting behavior   | Highly focused on appearance; sometimes over-confident while sometimes under-confident.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <i>"These days I have observed students have a lot of ego issues and overconfidence issues." (T2)</i>                                                       |
|                               |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                             |
| Impact of Lockdown            |                           | Lower interest in studies and socializing; more gadget use; adjustment challenges.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <i>"I have observed especially after the lock down, that the students' self-esteem has become very low." (T1)</i>                                           |

### *Discussion of the theme:*

#### **Emotional development**

Emotional development is learning that helps children recognize, understands, and feel emotions. As per the **students**, they understand their emotional state but find it difficult to

express the same to others. They believe it is always good to express positive emotions and bad to express negative emotions. This may also further hamper the effective management of their emotional state. They find difficulties in understanding others' emotional states and hence lesser awareness of how to approach someone who is going through a difficult emotional state. As per the **parents**, their child has an understanding of their emotional state but lacks effective management. Their child understands the emotional state of their family members but faces difficulties in understanding others' emotions. As per the **teachers**, the students go through the different emotional state but lacks understanding of them leading to the use of the different channel for the expression of felt emotions. They can understand if their friends or teachers are sad or angry easily as compared to other emotions, but will lack in taking effective steps to deal with those emotional states of others.

This reflects the need to develop an intervention for the students to develop an understanding of their emotional state; understanding of others' emotions; effective management techniques; and to enhance approaching skills to others when they are in different emotional states.

### Social development

Social development occurs throughout life and deals with how the child interacts with their social environment. As per the **students**, they hesitate in providing and asking for help from others. They find it difficult to build a relationship as it takes a lot of effort. Confronting is another difficult task, as they believe doing that will lead to losing the relationship. When they are with others in the group, disagreements are common and may go to the extreme impacting the mental health of the child. As per the **parents**, their child does find difficulties in building relationships with an unknown. The usage of technologies or gadgets has made the child aloof and away from groups of people reducing their social skills. Disagreements among the children are common observations of the parents. They believe, the child has not developed a sense of right and wrong and indulges in the fight without understanding the righteous behavior towards it. As per the **teachers**, students do hesitate in helping others and ask for help from others. They are very selective in socializing. They will socialize only with people with whom they feel comfortable, excluding others. Teachers have also observed that the students are not willingly using 3 magical words i.e. 'sorry', 'thank you', and 'please'. A reminder every time is needed for using these magical words. They have also observed using 'sorry' is mostly avoided as they are not willing to accept their mistakes. Students nowadays have a very casual attitude toward anything in life. They are also very mischievous and use abusive words very casually. They become impatient at times failing to follow established rules and regulations. Like parents, teachers also believe that students have not developed a sense of right and wrong, hence they are part of the conflicts without understanding the right and required behavior in the conflict situation.

This reflects the need to develop an intervention for the students to develop the understanding of how to build a relationship with an unknown person; build their helping nature, so that they help others in need and ask help from others when they need it; learn the skill to socialize and be inclusive to all around; learn to confront their feelings whenever required; learn the importance as well follow disciplinary rules and regulations; and also the meaning and usage of 3 magical words.

### Preoccupation with Self-image

Preoccupation with self-image describes the understanding and engagement of actions concerning the self. As per the **students**, they believe there is a need to improvise in their

behavior and thoughts, to be likable amongst friends or elderly people. As per the **parents**, they didn't find any issues with their children concerning self-image. According to them the child is good and has a good self-image as well. As per the **teachers**, the students are found to be overconfident in their approach toward self. Students believe they know everything and when evaluated they are in the average range. Teachers also reported that the students are preoccupied with thoughts and actions toward making their appearance beautiful so that to attract others' attention towards them.

This reflects the need to develop an intervention for the students to develop self-awareness amongst the students.

### Impact of Lockdown

Due to the widespread Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the lockdown was announced in the country. Due to the lockdown in the country, the schools were functioning online and the activity of the students was reduced as they were at home throughout the lockdown period. This has led to some social and emotional impacts on the students. As per the **students**, they missed Offline School as the study was boring in the online mode. There was no physical activity and no friends around them while studying creating a lack of motivation for study among the students. Online schooling restricted the socializing amongst the students and hence reduced the use of 3 magical words, helping behavior, building a relationship, emotional understanding and expressing and other areas of the child. As per the **parents**, their children wanted to play as they do with their friends, but due to working from home, they were not available for their children to play with them. Due to no physical interaction between the children, the online mode was chosen, but the frequency was too less, thus impacting their social skills. Being at home, children were watching news channels or reading or hearing COVID-19 news around. This has resulted in the development of negative attitudes among the students like trauma among the children whose family members were infected with the disease or who faced loss due to the disease. Social distancing, not sharing the food, and negative emotions or experiences impacted their social and emotional skills. As per the **teachers**, students started using gadgets for their academic purposes giving easy access to social media, games, and other online platforms. This has grabbed students' attention to the social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. increasing their addiction towards usage of them. Students are choosing online games over games including physical activity. In the classroom teachers have observed students showing hyperactivity in their behavior, lower attention span, and lower confidence level i.e., will they be able to perform better in school as 2 years of studies were not done elaborately at home during online schooling.

This reflects the huge gap in the social and emotional learning of the students before the lockdown and after the lockdown and hence the need to develop intervention on social emotional learning based on the above themes for the students considering the present scenario is the need for the holistic development of the students.

### CONCLUSION

The present study on Social emotional development amongst primary school children aimed to understand the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents on the practices and development of social emotional skills among primary school children. Social emotional learning is one of the essential learning for holistic development and this learning is very well grasped at the age of school learning. Hence it is important to understand the level of development students have around social and emotional learning to design intervention that

enhances these skills to the utmost level. The findings of this study indicated that there is a need to develop interventions in the areas of Emotional development - improving the understanding, expressions, and management of emotions for their self and others; Social development - improving their relationship building skill, helping behavior, socializing, confronting behavior, dealing with disagreements, disciplinary practices and using 3 magical words; and the awareness of their self. The result also indicated the impact of lockdown on social emotional development signifying the urgency in the need for the development of the intervention.

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### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Bhandari, G. & Singh, B. (2026). Understanding Social Emotional Learning (SEL) – A Key Aspect to Holistic Development in Children. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(3), 2441-2449. DIP:18.01.222.20261403, DOI:10.25215/1403.222