

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is increasingly promoted as a crucial part of school curriculum.



The five core skills students need to have are self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making

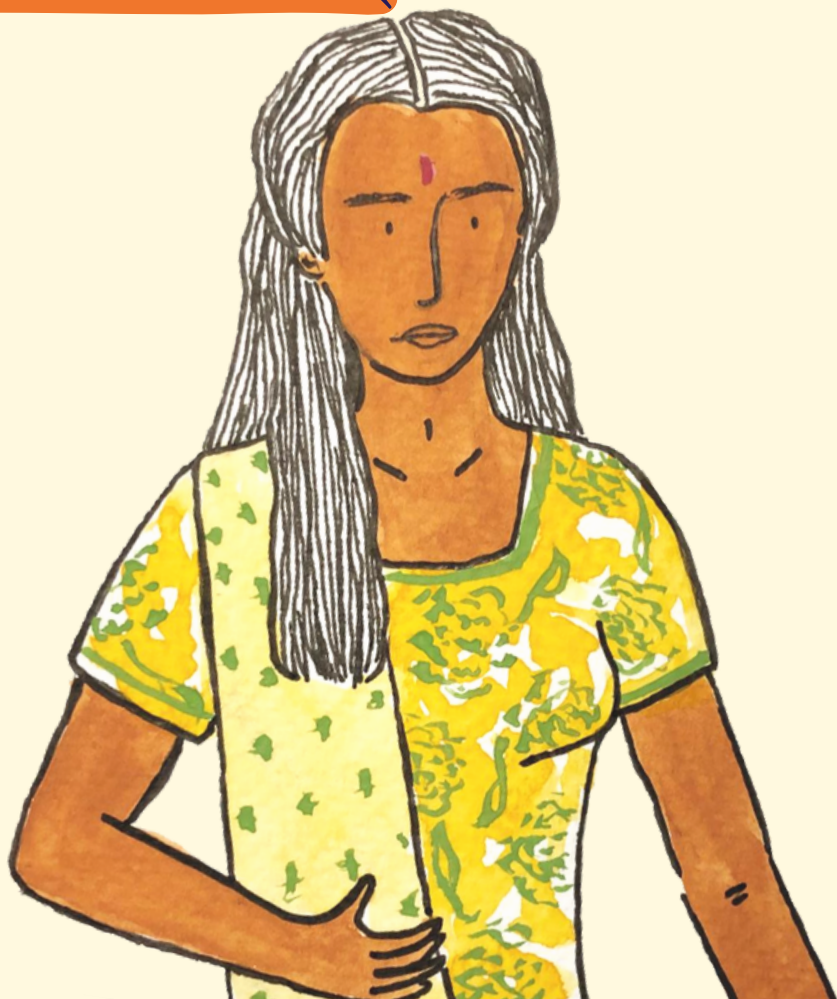
But the implementation of SEL programs reveal a few problems we must think through...

What is taught vs what is practised

Learning
Empathy

...it's important to
consider other
people's emotions,
to feel what
others feel

Why is she
teaching this
course?! It's not like
we've forgotten how
horribly she used to
beat us in junior
school



Individual responsibility over community support

One of the easiest and best ways to regulate stress is through...

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I feel so bad that Payal has to hear this when she speaks about her anxiety... she needs urgent help to leave her abusive home, not just breathing exercises...



Using ambiguous concepts universally

These methods are backed by research, which shows that SEL helps build self-awareness in students...

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What do the researchers exactly mean by 'self-awareness'? Is it the same as how we're using it? And will the children also understand it as the same? These words feel complex and vague... but who am I to question Harvard research...



Standardising emotions and behaviours

You know, this approach of regulating and managing emotions in set ways... feels like I'm training them how to feel... it's a bit uncomfortable

Yeah, and sometimes I'm not sure about the goals of this training. Should so-called negative emotions always be regulated? Like anger... students feel that in reaction to injustice also and acting on it is useful...



SEL aims to provide students the 'skills' to regulate their emotions, build healthy relationships, and take responsible social action.

However, there are some problems in how SEL is designed and implemented: 1. The values taught in SEL (empathy, gratitude) can feel hollow when they go against school/classroom practices 2. SEL often focuses on training the individual to manage their emotions without necessarily considering structural reasons that cause them and looking at social/community interventions accordingly 3. SEL can be taught as a set of top-down, universal values/skills, standardising 'good' emotions/behaviours, without helping students work through emotions in their personal contexts 4. Teachers may struggle to teach SEL, due to many of its concepts being ambiguous. This is amplified by inadequate training and lack of access to mental health professionals.

It is important, then, to hold both policy-level as well as institutional conversations on how SEL can be meaningfully adapted to local contexts, and support teachers and students in understanding and expressing complex emotions.