# Empathy through education

## Social and educational learning is not 'fluff'; it is an important goal in education

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India's National Education Policy (2020) mentions social and emotional learning (SEL) as an important facet of education. SEL is the process of learning to recognise and manage emotions and navigate social situations effectively. While the policy notes numeracy and literacy as its central aims, SEL should be an equally important goal as it supports skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity.

### What is SEL?

SEL is foundational for human development, building healthy relationships, having self and social awareness, solving problems, making responsible decisions, and academic learning. Key elements of SEL include cultivating empathy and theory of mind. 'Empathy' is the ability to understand another person's emotions and be aware of why they might be feeling those emotions from their perspective. 'Theory of mind' is the ability to understand others' intentions, knowledge and beliefs and recognise that those might be different from your own. Research finds that students with greater social skills and emotional regulation are more likely to have success.

While some people may perceive discussions surrounding SEL as "fluff", it is, in fact, rooted in physiology. Neurobiologically, various brain regions such as the prefrontal and frontal cortices, amygdala, and superior temporal sulcus are involved in the cognitive mechanisms of SEL. Interestingly, scientists have proposed that the physiological and psychological factors of SEL are inherently linked. Brain systems that are responsible for basic human behaviour, such as getting hungry, may be reused for complex mechanisms involved in SEL. This can explain why the way we feel physically directly impacts our social-emotional evaluation of the world. Despite its importance to life, SEL is often added as a chapter in a larger curriculum rather than being integrated in it. To overcome this challenge, it is vital to consider that the learning process is a social and emotional experience.

The pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for SEL as school closures reduced opportunities for students to deepen social relationships and learn collaboratively in shared physical spaces. Conversely, remote learning "gave parents the opportunity to discover their childrens' social and emotional lives," notes Jim Eagen, the head of Synapse school in California, where SEL is a key strategic pillar of the school. Even with parental involvement, the challenge of an inadequate support system for SEL remains. So, how do we move forward?

### A way forward

Perhaps we can contextually adapt best practices from existing models. Synapse school seamlessly incorporates SEL into curricula through self-science classes, and places SEL centrally within the school culture.

How can we sustainably incorporate SEL into education across communities, cultures, and social strata? In reality, individuals from underprivileged backgrounds have faced immense learning losses over the last one and a half years. A starting point would be to consider insights from the Indian SEL framework: one, application of SEL practices should be based on students' socioeconomic backgrounds; two, SEL strategies of caretakers and educators must align with one another; three, long-term success requires SEL to be based on scientific evidence.

While policies provide guidelines, a big challenge in moving forward is unlearning old habits. The lockdowns provided an unintended reset which afforded an opportunity for positive change. As a sustainable development goal outlines, policymakers now have to ensure that future changes prioritise "inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Importantly, the onus lies on all of us to make individual contributions that will drive systemic change.

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