



The role of teachers' socio-emotional competencies in shaping early childhood education environments

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Abstract

Background: Teachers' socio-emotional competencies (SEC) are becoming more widely acknowledged as central to the effectiveness of early childhood education (ECE) programs. Effective SEC in teachers support the creation of warm, stimulating, and emotionally supportive learning environments that facilitate children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. SEC, though highly valued, is relatively under-prioritized, especially in developing nations such as India. This article examines teachers' socio-emotional competencies' role in influencing early childhood settings, comparing global and Indian contexts. It summarizes difficulties in teachers' development of SEC, underscores the necessity for teacher support systems as an urgent requirement, and presents recommendations for incorporating socio-emotional learning (SEL) into teacher training. Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a conceptual framework, the paper emphasizes that a child's microsystem with the teacher as a key individual significantly impacts developmental outcomes. The results contend that investing in teachers' socio-emotional abilities is not additive but critical to the development of resilient, empathetic, and emotionally intelligent future generations.

Keywords: Socio-emotional competencies (SEC), early childhood education (ECE), teacher training, socio-emotional learning (SEL), emotional supportive environments, child development

Introduction

In a volatile and complex world, socio-emotional skills and emotional intelligence are essential competencies that determine individual success and societal resilience. Early childhood is a critical phase for socio-emotional development, and teachers are both facilitators and role models in this process. Teachers' socio-emotional competencies (SEC) have emerged as a central theme in educational research worldwide (Schonert-Reichl, 2017) [22]. In early childhood education (ECE) environments, where young learners experience formative emotional and cognitive growth, the teacher's emotional availability, empathy, and regulation skills create the bedrock for a thriving classroom atmosphere.

Yet, most education systems, especially in developing nations such as India, still focus more on mastering academic content than socio-emotional development (Kaul *et al.*, 2017; NCERT, 2022) [13]. In light of the background of accelerated changes in society, such as urbanization, technological changes, and increased socio-economic disparities, it is crucial to identify SEC as a core component of teacher effectiveness.

This paper aims at critically assess the role of teachers' socio-emotional abilities in constructing early childhood educational settings, based on international and Indian research. It advocates for a paradigm shift in teacher education revolving around socio-emotional learning (SEL) to attain well-rounded development outcomes for children.

Socio-emotional skills include the skills to recognize, understand, manage, and express emotions well, develop empathy, have healthy relationships, and make responsible choices (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning [CASEL], 2013) [4]. SEC is not just a personal asset but also a professional requirement for teachers. As Jennings and Greenberg (2009) [11], state, emotionally intelligent teachers are more likely to be able to handle classroom dynamics, resolve conflict, and offer emotional scaffolding that enhances students' resilience. The teacher's SEC determines the way learning environments are organized, behavior is controlled, and emotionally charged situations are handled. In addition, SEC allows instructors to demonstrate effective emotional regulation methods, problem-solving, and sympathetic reactions tools that are critical for young children who tend to use imitation and observation as more dominant learning pathways (Denham *et al.*, 2012) [6].

Studies clearly indicate that instructors' SEC plays a direct influence on classroom atmosphere (Zinsser *et al.*, 2016) [25]. Positive emotional climates in classrooms are characterized by warm teacher-student interactions, responsiveness to children's emotional needs, and the promotion of cooperative behaviors among peers. In contrast, teachers with poor SEC often create environments marked by inconsistency, heightened stress, and punitive discipline styles (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) [11]. Emotional dysregulation in teachers can inadvertently lead to reduced instructional quality, strained relationships, and diminished student engagement (Yoder, 2014) [24].

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasises how the immediate environment or microsystem profoundly shapes a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) [3]. The teachers, within the microsystem, influence the emotional context of children's learning, highlighting the far-reaching significance of teachers' SEC.

Socio-Emotional Competencies: Definition and Relevance

Socio-emotional competencies involve specific skills of recognizing, understanding, managing, and communicating emotions in various contexts of effectiveness, building empathy, maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, and making sound decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2013) ^[4]. SEC is not only a personal but also a professional necessity for teachers.

As Jennings and Greenberg (2009) ^[11], explain, emotionally intelligent teachers are more likely to be able to handle classroom dynamics, conflict, and emotional scaffolding that helps students build resilience. Teacher SEC determines the organization of learning environments, the regulation of behavior, and the management of emotionally intense situations.

In addition, SEC allows teachers to demonstrate emotional control strategies, coping skills, and empathetic feedback — essential skill sets for students who tend to use imitation and observation as foremost methods of acquiring knowledge (Denham *et al.*, 2012) ^[6].

Teachers' SEC and Classroom Climate

Studies repeatedly demonstrate that teachers' socio-emotional competencies (SEC) have direct effects on classroom climate. Healthy emotional climates in classrooms are defined by warm teacher-child relationships, sensitivity to children's emotional needs, and encouraging cooperative behaviors among peers. Conversely, teachers with lower SEC frequently build classrooms with characteristics of inconsistency, increased stress, and punitive disciplinary styles. Teacher emotional dysregulation can unintentionally result in lower instructional quality, strained teacher-student relationships, and lower levels of student motivation.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes that the immediate setting or microsystem has a major impact on a child's development. Teachers within the microsystem define the emotional context in which children learn, underscoring the far-reaching implications of educators' SEC.

Global Perspectives

Across the world, SEL is being increasingly seen as a foundation of quality education. Research in the U.S., Canada, and Europe indicates that when teachers are provided SEL-targeted professional development, they experience reduced stress, improved classroom management, and enhanced student performance. For example, in the U.S., the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been a leader in advocating for SEL in schools. Their research shows that SEL programs can result in significant improvements in students' social behavior, attitudes, and academic achievement.

In Canada, the same types of initiatives have resulted in SEL benefiting not only students but also teachers' mental health. Teachers who undergo SEL training feel more able to manage classroom issues and establish positive relationships with their students. This leads to a more supportive and efficient learning environment.

In Europe, Finland and the Netherlands have incorporated SEL into the national education policy. These nations place

a high value on emotional intelligence and social competency as essential aspects of their educational strategy. Studies from these nations indicate that SEL helps establish a healthy school environment, minimizes bullying, and enhances students' mental health.

Longitudinal research, such as the Chicago School Readiness Project, revealed that teachers' emotional support skills improved children's academic and behavioral outcomes significantly over time. This project revealed that when teachers are trained to give emotional support, children are likely to adopt the skills required for academic achievement and positive social behavior.

Overall, the international view of SEL emphasizes its importance in developing not just academic success but also the general well-being of students and teachers. By focusing on SEL, education systems globally can build more inclusive, caring, and efficient learning environments.

Indian Perspectives

In India, the discussion regarding teachers' socio-emotional competencies (SEC) is new but emerging. Research such as that by Kaul *et al.* (2017) ^[13], in Delhi pre-schools points out that teachers' capacity to establish secure attachment with children strongly predicts socio-emotional and cognitive development. Research by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2022) ^[18], emphasizes that Indian teachers receive little systematic training in socio-emotional learning (SEL), which negatively impacts their emotional responsiveness in classrooms. A study by Malik and Kapoor (2020) ^[15], discovered that early childhood educators in urban India had moderate to low emotional self-awareness, which, the authors emphasized, created an urgent need for SEC training modules to be integrated into teacher education programs. The Indian Early Childhood Education Impact Study (Kaul *et al.*, 2017) ^[13], also identified that emotionally supportive teacher-child relationships were correlated with increased learning levels in mathematics and language for young children.

Apart from these results, the Indian context presents special challenges and opportunities for promoting teachers' SEC. Chronic stress, heavy workloads, huge class sizes, and bureaucratic pressures tend to leave teachers drained of emotions. Teacher education programs tend to emphasize cognitive skills overwhelmingly and pay scant attention to SEL. Hierarchical, rigid school cultures might discourage open expression of emotions or support-seeking behaviors among teachers. Social stigma, especially in collectivist cultures such as India, also discourages teachers' emotional development. Systemic problems, including low teacher-student ratios, poorly equipped classrooms, and little in-service training of teachers, continue to exist.

Yet, encouraging developments are underway. Initiatives such as the Apna Ghar Apni Shala in Maharashtra incorporate SEL practices into early education by educating teachers in emotional literacy and mindfulness. Organizations such as Pratham and NGOs such as UNICEF India are actively piloting programs to train educators in socio-emotional teaching methods.

Developing teachers' SEC takes deliberate, systemic action. Integration of SEL modules into teacher education courses can prepare aspiring teachers to be SEC proficient. Ongoing professional development, such as in-service training and mentoring programs, can emphasize emotional self-

awareness, coping, and relational management. Mindfulness interventions have been found to effectively enhance teachers' emotional regulation and stress management. Creating peer support groups in which teachers can share problems and strategies for emotional well-being may also be helpful. Teacher mental health should be given top priority by school leaders, administrative work should be minimized, and the school culture must be supportive. Policymakers should define and communicate clear standards and frameworks of socio-emotional competencies to teacher education programs.

To achieve the complete potential of early childhood education, policymakers need to require SEC training, provide funding for teacher support services, mental health services, and SEL materials, and have systems in place to measure the effectiveness of SEC programs at enhancing teacher and student outcomes. Combining forces within health, education, and child development agencies can offer comprehensive assistance to educators.

With India's demographic facts youth population and rising urbanization constructing strong, emotionally intelligent teachers is central to the country's developmental path.

Challenges in Building SEC Among Teachers

Teachers everywhere are confronted with a set of challenges in developing and utilizing socio-emotional competencies (SEC):

Chronic Stress: Excessive workloads, big class sizes, and administrative responsibilities usually leave teachers drained emotionally. This chronic stress has the potential to cause burnout, lowering the capacity of teachers to efficiently deal with classroom dynamics and offer emotional support to pupils. Montgomery and Rupp (2005) ^[17]. point out that chronic stress is a key determinant of teacher turnover and lowered job satisfaction.

Shortage of Professional Development: Most teacher training programs emphasize cognitive abilities at the expense of socio-emotional learning (SEL). Schonert-Reichl (2017) ^[22]. states that a lack of proper training in SEL could lead to teachers' inability to build emotional intelligence to create a healthy class environment. This shortfall in professional development renders teacher's incapable of dealing with the emotional and social issues present in the classroom.

Institutional Culture: There can be stringent, top-to-bottom school cultures that are unfriendly towards expressiveness of emotion or help-seeking behavior for the teachers. Bing-You *et al.* (2018) ^[2]. explain that there can be a school environment promoted by institutional culture where the teacher is not assisted and lacks expressiveness of emotions, so their capacity for establishing and employing SEC is delayed due to its detrimental effects.

Social Stigma: Especially in collectivist societies like India, seeking emotional support or acknowledging emotional turmoil might be stigmatized, which in turn becomes a barrier to teachers' emotional development. Chopra (2016) ^[5]. points out that social stigma regarding mental health and emotional wellness may deter teachers from asking for the

assistance they require. Such stigma can result in unresolved emotional problems, which affect teachers' performance in the classroom.

In India, some systemic issues include low teacher-student ratios, poorly resourced classrooms, and little in-service teacher training. UNICEF India (2021) ^[23]. indicates that these systemic issues make it more challenging for teachers to implement and utilize SEC. Low teacher-student ratios result in less time available for teachers to address the emotional needs of individual students, and poorly resourced classrooms can restrict access to materials and support that are essential for successful SEL. Minimal in-service training further exacerbates these challenges, depriving teachers of the continuing professional development they require to further develop their SEC.

Indian Context: Studies, Challenges, and Opportunities

A sizeable body of Indian research emphasizes the significant gaps and opportunities in relation to teachers' socio-emotional competencies (SEC):

Training Deficits: A Bengaluru study by Prasad and Ghosh (2019) ^[19]. identified that a mere 20% of early childhood teachers reported to have received any formal training on emotional development or socio-emotional learning (SEL). The absence of training creates a major gap in the capacity of teachers to adequately facilitate the socio-emotional growth of their students.

Mental Health Issues: Studies have shown that Indian teachers suffer from high levels of work-related stress and emotional exhaustion (Rana & Singh, 2020) ^[20]. This can adversely affect their capacity to foster a healthy and supportive classroom environment, again highlighting the importance of in-depth SEC training and support mechanisms.

Policy Gaps: Although the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 focuses on wholesome development, working guidelines for making SEL a part of teacher training is unclear (Government of India, 2020) ^[9]. Actionable and clear guidelines should be provided in order to achieve the integration of SEL into teachers' training processes.

Yet, hopeful initiatives are on the horizon. Programs such as the Apna Ghar Apni Shala in Maharashtra weave SEL practices into early education by educating teachers on emotional literacy and mindfulness (Kaul, 2021) ^[14]. Such programs equip teachers with the strategies and tools required to nurture their own emotional health as well as that of their students.

Additionally, organizations such as Pratham and UNICEF India are positively experimenting with programs to train teachers in socio-emotional teaching methods. These efforts are extremely important in narrowing the gap between policy and practice and making sure that teachers are prepared to promote a healthy and caring classroom environment.

Securing Strategies for Teachers' SEC

Teachers' socio-emotional competencies (SEC) need deliberate, systemic action:

Pre-Service Training: Incorporating socio-emotional learning (SEL) modules into teacher education programs is critical to prepare future educators with SEC skills. Schonert-Reichl (2017) ^[22], reiterates that pre-service training must incorporate extensive SEL elements to prepare teachers adequately to create a positive and emotionally nurturing classroom environment.

Continuous Professional Development: Offering in-service workshops and mentorship programs that focus on emotional self-awareness, resilience, and relationship management is vital. Jennings *et al.* (2017) ^[12], point out that continuous professional development enhances teachers' SEC, allowing them to effectively manage classroom dynamics and meet students' emotional needs.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Studies reveal that mindfulness training can have a significant positive impact on teachers' emotional regulation and stress management. Meiklejohn *et al.* (2012) ^[16], discovered that incorporating mindfulness practices into teacher training can enable teachers to better have emotional control and lower levels of stress, contributing to a more positive classroom environment.

Peer Support Groups: Organizing peer networks in which teachers can exchange experiences and emotional well-being strategies is helpful. Zinsser *et al.* (2016) ^[25], advise that peer support groups offer a setting in which teachers can share their experiences, solicit advice, and create coping strategies, thus strengthening their SEC.

Institutional Support: Teachers' mental health should be given top priority by school leadership, administrative tasks should be minimized, and a positive school culture should be encouraged. Greenberg *et al.* (2016) ^[10], contend that institutional support is crucial in establishing a setting where teachers feel valued and supported, which in turn has a positive effect on their SEC and classroom performance.

Policy Frameworks: Policymakers need to define clear standards and frameworks for socio-emotional competencies in teacher training programs. The Government of India (2020) ^[9], stresses the importance of clearly defined policies that incorporate SEC into teacher training and professional development so that teachers are prepared with the required skills to facilitate students' socio-emotional development.

By adopting these measures, education systems can develop a more supportive and efficient learning environment, ultimately helping teachers and students alike.

Policy Implications

In order to achieve the maximum potential of early childhood education, policymakers need to take a few key steps:

First and foremost, SEC training should be made mandatory. Teacher education standards at both the national and state levels should incorporate socio-emotional competencies (SEC) as a foundational element. This guarantees that every teacher is endowed with the competencies required to create a safe and emotionally intelligent classroom environment. Through the inclusion of SEC in the curriculum, teachers are better able to control classroom dynamics, solve conflicts, and offer emotional scaffolding that enhances students' resilience.

Second, the funding must be allocated. Teacher support programs, mental health interventions, and SEL materials need to be invested in to equip teachers with the support they require. Proper funding provides teachers with opportunities for continuous professional development, SEL training, and mental health counseling, which are essential to enable them to remain healthy and productive in the classroom.

Third, effective monitoring and evaluation of the impact of SEC programs is essential. Implementation of processes to gauge the extent to which these programs enhance teacher and student performance ensures that the initiatives are attaining their desired objectives. Periodic monitoring can detect areas needing improvement and furnish evidence for justifying ongoing investment in SEC training and assistance.

Finally, intersectoral collaboration is necessary to offer comprehensive support to teachers. A combination of efforts from health, education, and child development sectors can establish a whole-of-system support for teachers. Intersectoral collaboration can cover all dimensions of teachers' well-being, ranging from mental health to professional growth, to ensure that they are adequately prepared to facilitate their students' socio-emotional development.

With India's demographic circumstances in mind — a young country with rising urbanization — developing resilient, emotionally intelligent educators is paramount to the developmental path of the nation. Through SEC training priority, investing, assessment, and cross-sector collaboration, policymakers can establish a strong framework that helps teachers and establishes better quality early childhood education.

Conclusion

Teachers' socio-emotional skills are the building blocks for the development of caring, responsive, and effective early childhood educational settings. Such competencies comprise skills like regulating emotions, empathy, teamwork, and conflict management, which allow teachers to develop good classroom climates and build good relationships with children, parents, and peers. In the absence of emotionally intelligent teachers, attempts to develop children holistically will be short-changed and limited, since socio-emotional learning makes teaching personnel model and internalize the very abilities they aim to instill in their pupils.

In India, where systemic issues abound—various combinations of under-resourced schools and student-to-teacher ratios—the focus on socio-emotional competencies (SEC) within teacher education and school practices represents a change-for-good avenue. By enabling teachers to master stress management, work through sophisticated interpersonal relationships, and foster the emotional resilience of their students, the education system can meet short-term classroom imperatives as well as long-term social objectives. For example, emotionally intelligent teachers are best suited to deal with diverse classrooms, such as students with special needs, diversity in linguistic background, or socio-economic differences.

Furthermore, investing in the socio-emotional well-being of teachers is not just an educational issue; it is an investment in emotional health in society. When teachers are attended to in their mental health, they are more likely to stay engaged, lower burnout, and maintain their enthusiasm for instruction—a factor that directly translates to enhanced

student outcomes. This has a ripple effect, bolstering the ability of coming generations to handle adversity, form relationships, and meaningfully contribute to their worlds. This shift requires us to extend beyond intellectual-exclusive models of learning and embrace an educational vision under which emotional intelligence, resilience, and empathy constitute key goals for schooling. Educational policymakers, school professionals, and stakeholders alike are required to come to grips with the reality that the affective atmosphere in the classroom is equally as essential to academic rigors and that both students' and teachers' socio-emotional learning is bound in deep and meaningful ways. By giving these dimensions precedence, India's education system can become a more inclusive, equitable, and effective system, empowering both teachers and students to succeed in an increasingly complex world.

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