# Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in the 21st Century: A Systematic Review of Global and Indian Research (2020–2025)

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**Abstract: This systematic review synthesizes global and Indian research on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) published between 2020 and 2025, with an emphasis on post-pandemic shifts, policy developments, and cultural adaptation. Drawing from 70 qualitative studies and 40 quantitative evaluations, the paper investigates SEL's impact on academic performance, emotional resilience, classroom behavior, and school climate. Findings affirm the effectiveness of well-implemented SEL programs, especially those led by trained teachers and embedded in supportive school environments. However, significant limitations persist, including reliance on Western-centric frameworks, psychometric challenges in SEL assessment, and gaps in cultural alignment—particularly within the Indian context. The review critiques mainstream models for their inadequate reflection of non-Western worldviews and advocates for Bhartiya-centric SEL frameworks grounded in Indian philosophical traditions such as Vedanta, Yoga, and the Bhagavad Gita. It proposes culturally responsive teacher training, development of indigenous assessment tools, and integration of SEL with the holistic educational vision outlined in India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. By bridging global insights with localized relevance, the study aims to reframe SEL as a transformative, values-driven practice attuned to the socio-emotional realities of diverse learners.**

**Keywords: Social-emotional-learning, Cultural-adaptation, Bhartiya-philosophy, Indian-education, Teacher-training.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is increasingly recognized as a critical component of holistic education, complementing academic instruction with the development of key emotional, ethical, and interpersonal competencies. Defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL refers to "the process through which individuals acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020).

1.1 Evolution of SEL Globally

Since its formal articulation in the 1990s by CASEL, SEL has evolved into a global educational paradigm, increasingly supported by empirical evidence across developmental, cultural, and economic contexts. CASEL's five core competency framework—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—has been widely adopted and adapted by educational systems around the world (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD have reinforced SEL's global relevance. UNESCO's *Futures of Education* report (2021) positions emotional well-being and social cohesion as central to building resilient and just societies. Similarly, the OECD's *Study on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES)* (2021, 2023) emphasizes that emotional regulation, empathy, and cooperation are key 21st-century competencies predictive of long-term success in life and work (OECD, 2021). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses further confirm SEL's efficacy in improving academic performance, behavior, and emotional well-being across cultural contexts (Taylor et al., 2017; Cipriano et al., 2023).

## 1.2 SEL in the Post-2020 Context

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the urgency to implement SEL globally. Extended school closures, psychological isolation, increased anxiety, and inequities in access to learning have intensified the emotional and cognitive needs of students (Jagers et al., 2021; Oberle et al., 2022). Education systems were compelled to move beyond content delivery and attend to student mental health, resilience, and socio-emotional connection. As a result, SEL programs were reconfigured to include online formats, trauma-informed models, and mindfulness-based approaches (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Kim et al., 2021).

In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a watershed in reimagining education as holistic and value-based. It explicitly states that education must aim at "the development of cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical capacities in students" (MoE, 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, it emphasizes the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), ethics, and emotional development into curricula—echoing many SEL principles, albeit through a culturally rooted lens.

## 1.3 Rationale and Objectives of the Review

While substantial global literature affirms the positive impact of SEL, most frameworks and measurement tools have emerged from Western, secular, and individualist paradigms. This raises concerns about cultural mismatch, particularly in collectivist societies like India, where traditional philosophies such as Vedānta, Yoga, Jainism, and Buddhism offer deep-rooted frameworks for emotional regulation, self-awareness, and ethical living (Misra & Gergen, 2021; Macwan & Barot, 2024).

Thus, the current review aims to:

1. Synthesize global research on SEL interventions and their outcomes (2020–2025), focusing on academic, behavioral, and emotional dimensions.

2. Identify gaps in cultural alignment, particularly how mainstream SEL frameworks are adapted (or not) to Indian contexts.

3. Propose future directions for the development of indigenous and context-sensitive SEL models

rooted in Bhartiya Darshan (Indian philosophical thought) and aligned with NEP 2020.

This review is both timely and necessary to ensure that SEL initiatives in India are not only effective but also culturally resonant, spiritually grounded, and locally relevant.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability in the synthesis of evidence on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). The review protocol was designed to capture a wide range of studies from diverse global and Indian contexts, particularly those published after 2020—a period marked by rapid transformations in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of policy reforms such as India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

## 2.1 Search Strategy and Databases

To capture both global and India-specific literature on SEL, a comprehensive search was conducted across the following databases:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)
- Google Scholar
- SSRN (Social Science Research Network)
- Shodhganga (INFLIBNET) – for doctoral dissertations and India-based academic work

Searches were conducted using Boolean combinations of keywords such as:

"SEL" OR "social emotional learning" OR "emotion regulation" OR "CASEL" OR "well-being" OR "school-based intervention" OR "education" AND "India" OR "Bhagavad Gita" OR "Happiness Curriculum" OR "Bhartiya Darshan" OR "Indian knowledge systems"

Searches were restricted to articles published between January 2020 and May 2025 and were conducted during April–May 2025. Additional searches were also done using snowball sampling from the references

of key review articles and government reports (e.g., NEP 2020, UNESCO Futures of Education).

2.2 Inclusion Criteria
Studies were selected for inclusion based on the following criteria:

- Peer-reviewed status: Only articles published in peer-reviewed journals or indexed conference proceedings were included.
- Language: Studies were limited to those published in English.
- Timeframe: Articles published from January 2020 to May 2025 were considered, capturing both pre- and post-pandemic educational shifts.
- Focus area: The primary focus had to be on Social and Emotional Learning interventions, either directly or as a core component of a broader educational or psychological program.
- Educational context: Studies needed to focus on school-based settings (pre-primary to higher secondary levels).

- Outcomes assessed: Eligible studies included at least one of the following outcome domains:
  o Student emotional well-being
  o Academic performance
  o Social behavior
  o Classroom climate

o Teacher readiness for SEL implementation

2.3 Exclusion Criteria
- Articles focused solely on tertiary or university education without a school component.
- Editorials, commentaries, and theoretical opinion pieces without empirical data.
- Studies that addressed emotional well-being without a structured SEL framework or intervention.
- Non-English publications and grey literature not subjected to peer review.

2.4 Screening and Selection Process

An initial pool of 815 studies was identified through database searches and cross-references. After removing 95 duplicates, 720 records were screened by title and abstract. A total of 120 full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility. Of these, 50 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria (e.g., lack of SEL framework, non-school-based context). Finally, 70 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis, and 40 studies—those with robust statistical outcomes—were included in the quantitative meta-synthesis. The entire process was documented in a PRISMA flowchart (see Table 1).

Table 1 :PRISMA Flowchart Table – SEL Systematic Review (2020–2025)

| Stage | Number of Records |
|---|---|
| Records identified through database searching (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, etc.) | 780 |
| Additional records identified through other sources (Google Scholar, SSRN, Shodhganga) | 35 |
| Total records identified | 815 |
| Records after duplicates removed | 720 |
| Records screened (title and abstract) | 720 |
| Records excluded (irrelevant topics, non-school-based, etc.) | 600 |
| Full-text articles assessed for eligibility | 120 |
| Full-text articles excluded (no SEL framework, opinion pieces, etc.) | 50 |
| Studies included in qualitative synthesis | 70 |
| Studies included in quantitative synthesis (meta-analysis) | 40 |

2.5 Data Extraction and Coding
For each study, the following data were extracted:

- Author(s) and Year of Publication
- Country/Region
- Educational Setting (Grade, Type of School)
- Type of SEL Intervention (Program Name, Duration)
- Theoretical Framework (CASEL, trauma-informed, culturally responsive, etc.)
- Assessment Tools Used (e.g., SDQ, DSELS, teacher ratings)
- Outcomes Reported (well-being, academics, behavior, etc.)

- Methodological Design (RCT, quasi-experimental, qualitative, etc.)

Studies were coded thematically under categories such as intervention design, teacher factors, student outcomes, and cultural relevance. Inter-rater reliability checks were performed on 20% of the studies to ensure consistency in coding.

### III. THEMATIC SYNTHESIS OF GLOBAL RESEARCH

In light of the diverse and expanding landscape of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) research since 2020, a thematic synthesis was conducted to organize the global literature into coherent, analytically meaningful categories. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the varied dimensions in which SEL is being conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated across educational contexts. Rather than merely cataloging findings, this synthesis interprets trends through five emergent themes identified during the coding and review process. These themes not only reflect the dominant areas of empirical focus but also capture the evolving challenges and innovations in the SEL field.

3.1 Theme 1: Effectiveness of SEL Programs

A growing body of research over the past five years has demonstrated that well-implemented Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs significantly improve a wide range of student outcomes, including academic achievement, emotional regulation, behavioral adjustment, and overall school climate. This section synthesizes findings from multiple studies and reviews to critically evaluate the effectiveness of SEL interventions in school-based settings.

One of the most comprehensive evaluations comes from CASEL's 2023 global synthesis, which consolidated findings from hundreds of studies and reported that SEL interventions consistently lead to improvements in students' emotional skills, mental health, behavioral regulation, academic performance, and perceptions of safety and belonging (CASEL, 2023). The study emphasized that the most effective outcomes were observed in schools where programs were implemented with high fidelity and integrated into broader school climate reforms.

Pham et al. (2024), in a systematic review of universal SEL programs, similarly found significant gains in emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, and student engagement. However, they also cautioned that many programs suffered from issues such as inconsistent implementation, teacher overload, and participant attrition, which reduced the overall effectiveness of the interventions. The importance of fidelity and school support systems was echoed in the findings of a U.S.-based meta-analysis of 90 SEL studies conducted between 2010 and 2020, which concluded that programs were most impactful when delivered by regular classroom teachers rather than external facilitators (Durlak et al., 2020).

Beyond social-emotional competencies, SEL has been shown to have a meaningful impact on academic outcomes. The PowerMyLearning project (2022–2023), a two-year school-based SEL and academic intervention, demonstrated a 26 percentage point increase in student-reported SEL skills, alongside a 14-point increase in math and a 7-point increase in reading scores. Moreover, the intervention led to a 45-point increase in teachers' confidence in supporting SEL practices, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between teacher efficacy and student outcomes (PowerMyLearning, 2023).

Resilience and emotional adaptability have also emerged as central benefits of SEL. A synthesis of 12 meta-analyses conducted by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) found strong evidence that SEL interventions significantly enhance youth resilience, coping strategies, and emotional self-awareness (NCBI, 2023). Similarly, the School Climate Resource Center (2022) highlighted the reinforcing role of a positive relational culture within schools—one in which belonging, empathy, and mutual respect amplify the gains achieved through SEL programs.

Another important insight is the predictive value of specific SEL competencies. A study conducted by the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) found that among the five CASEL competencies, self-management emerged as the strongest predictor of academic performance, particularly during the critical transition years of middle school (DCPS, 2024). This finding reinforces the idea that emotional discipline

and behavioral regulation are not ancillary to academic success, but foundational to it.

Collaborative learning models and peer-supported SEL structures also show promising results. Programs such as FRIENDS and peer mentoring models have been effective in improving students' social cohesion and reducing anxiety and aggression (Barrett et al., 2021). These findings align with a broader global movement toward relational SEL practices, wherein trust, cooperation, and friendship are recognized as powerful drivers of emotional well-being and academic persistence.

Despite these promising trends, several challenges remain. Many studies point to inconsistencies in how SEL is implemented across schools and regions. In some cases, reliance on externally developed or Western-centric models has led to a lack of contextual relevance, particularly in non-Western educational systems (OECD, 2021). Moreover, while short-term gains are well documented, longitudinal evidence on the sustained effects of SEL is still limited. Funding models, teacher training quality, and leadership support also play critical roles in determining the long-term success of SEL initiatives.

In conclusion, the collective evidence over the past five years establishes Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a vital pedagogical strategy with measurable outcomes in emotional development, academic improvement, behavioral adaptation, and overall school climate. Effective SEL implementation hinges on factors such as teacher facilitation, fidelity of program delivery, integration with positive school culture, and age-appropriate strategies. However, the research also reveals gaps—particularly concerning long-term sustainability, context sensitivity, and cultural alignment—highlighting the importance of adapting SEL frameworks to local worldviews. For countries like India, these findings provide both validation and direction: validation that SEL matters, and direction to shape it through Bhartiya philosophical traditions that honor emotional literacy, ethical discernment, and holistic development. The table below summarizes the major studies that informed this theme.

Table: 2 Summary of Key Studies under Theme 1 – Effectiveness of SEL Programs

| Study / Source | Sample / Setting | Outcomes Observed | Notes / Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|
| CASEL (2023) | Meta-review of global SEL studies | SEL skills, academics, well-being, school climate | Variation in fidelity across contexts |
| Pham et al. (2024) | Universal SEL reviews | Emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, classroom engagement | Noted attrition and fidelity issues |
| US Meta-Analysis (2010–2020) | 90 U.S.–based SEL studies | Academic gains, social behavior, safety | Teachers most effective implementers |
| NCBI Resilience Synthesis (2023) | 12 meta-analyses | Youth resilience, emotional competence | Meta-level; lacks age-specific breakdown |
| PowerMyLearning 2022–23 | Elementary-school partnership | SEL +26 pp, Math +14 pp, Reading +7 pp; teacher confidence +45 pp | One context; funded intervention |
| School Climate Resource Center (2022) | School climate focus | Reinforces SEL impact via relational and emotional culture | Relationship directionality unclear |
| DCPS SEL Study (2024) | U.S. school district | Self-management predicted academic performance in middle school | Correlational, not causal |
| FRIENDS & collaboration studies (various) | International primary interventions | Resilience and academic benefits via peer support models | Context-specific program; not universally scalable |

In sum, the literature strongly supports the effectiveness of SEL programs when implemented with cultural and contextual sensitivity. The integration of SEL into school routines—supported by engaged teachers, responsive leadership, and relational school environments—has the potential to transform not only individual students but also the broader educational climate. These insights have important implications for India, where SEL is still emerging as a field. There is a need to go beyond importing global models and move toward developing Bhartiya-centric SEL frameworks that reflect indigenous values, ethical worldviews, and the holistic

human development goals outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

3.2 Theme 2: Equity and Culturally Responsive SEL

As SEL becomes increasingly central to global education reform, critical attention has turned to the cultural relevance and equity dimensions of its implementation. SEL, originally conceptualized within Western psychological and educational paradigms, often presupposes universal emotional constructs and behavioral norms. However, this assumption has been increasingly challenged by scholars and practitioners, who argue that without cultural contextualization, SEL risks marginalizing learners whose identities, histories, and worldviews are not reflected in mainstream curricula. This theme synthesizes key global and India-specific studies that explore the adaptation of SEL to diverse cultural settings, with particular attention to equity, inclusivity, and student voice.

A systematic review by Li, Miller, and Williams (2024) examined 11 school-based SEL programs in the United States that had undergone cultural adaptations for racially and ethnically diverse students. They distinguished between surface-level adaptations—such as changes in names, images, and language—and deep-level adaptations, which involved aligning SEL values and strategies with students' cultural beliefs and community realities. The review found that while cultural adaptations increased program acceptability and engagement, outcomes such as emotional regulation and academic improvement varied significantly depending on the depth of adaptation and the context of implementation.

In the Indian context, Mahajan (2024) critically examined the disconnection between existing SEL frameworks and India's cultural-educational ethos. His analysis of NEP 2020 revealed a strong philosophical commitment to holistic development and emotional well-being, but pointed out that most existing SEL programs used in Indian schools are imported models that lack alignment with Bhartiya thought systems such as Vedānta, Yoga, and Dharma-based ethics. He called for the development of SEL curricula rooted in indigenous values such as *svadharma* (righteous conduct), *ātma-bodha* (self-knowledge), and *karuṇā* (compassion), which can more authentically connect with students' socio-cultural lives.

Jones and Kahn (2023), in the *Washington State SEL Implementation Guide*, similarly emphasize that youth voice, cultural affirmation, and educator reflexivity are critical components of equitable SEL. They argue that SEL cannot achieve its transformative goals if students do not see their lived experiences and cultural identities reflected in what they are taught. Instead of framing SEL as a neutral skill set, the guide advocates for explicitly addressing issues of race, language, and identity in SEL practice.

A 2021 content analysis published in *Frontiers in Psychology* identified four emerging strands of culturally responsive SEL: culturally sustaining, trauma-informed, social justice-oriented, and transformative SEL. Each strand emphasizes the need to embed SEL within frameworks that not only recognize diversity but actively affirm and celebrate it (Frontiers, 2021). The analysis warned against using SEL to promote conformity or emotional suppression and advocated for a liberatory model that empowers students to act ethically and critically in society.

In a related scoping review, Harte and Barry (2024) studied 25 school-based mental health interventions across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including India. They found that only four of these interventions described their cultural adaptation processes in detail. The authors noted that programs which engaged youth and community stakeholders in their design showed better implementation outcomes and greater relevance to students' needs. This finding affirms the importance of co-design and participatory approaches in culturally responsive SEL.

Empirical evidence from India further supports these findings. Ravi Kant et al. (2025) conducted a quasi-experimental study in government schools in Bihar, assessing the impact of a Culturally Responsive Instruction (CRI) module that incorporated regional narratives, local ethical concepts, and community stories. Students in the CRI group showed significantly greater improvement in collaborative behavior and emotional awareness compared to those taught using standard SEL modules. This study provides one of the few India-based quantitative evaluations of culturally grounded SEL.

In the higher education context, Yeh et al. (2022) explored how mentoring models rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and SEL enhanced the experiences of racially minoritized students in U.S. universities. They found that programs which recognized racial identity, cultural agency, and historical marginalization were more effective in promoting student engagement, well-being, and academic persistence. Though situated in higher education, these insights are relevant to school settings where power, privilege, and representation also shape SEL dynamics.

Finally, Khalifa (2024) in his review of culturally responsive school leadership argued that school administrators who center community voices and affirm students' cultural backgrounds are more likely to foster environments where SEL thrives. His findings indicate that equity in SEL cannot be realized through classroom interventions alone but requires a whole-school approach that includes leadership, policy, and systemic change.

The convergence of these studies highlights a consistent narrative: cultural relevance enhances SEL effectiveness, but adaptation must go beyond superficial changes. Li et al. (2024) found that interventions involving student voices and cultural symbols saw higher engagement, yet efficacy outcomes were inconsistent, suggesting the need for deeper alignment with learners' worldviews. Mahajan (2024) highlights the underutilization of indigenous concepts in Indian SEL, leaving a large gap in values-based contextualization.

The Washington Guide and Frontiers analysis stress that culturally responsive SEL hinges on explicitly including youth agency and cultural lenses in design and delivery. Harte & Barry's scoping review in LMICs similarly asserts that participatory adaptation with young people yields more robust outcomes than externally imposed change. The Bihar-based study provides compelling empirical support: culturally tailored pedagogy translated into statistically significant gains in socio-emotional collaboration.

While transforming SEL through culturally responsive frameworks is promising, challenges persist: the empirical evidence remains scattered and limited in scale. Higher-education findings (Yeh et al., 2022) may not easily extend to younger learners, and leadership-level studies (Khalifa, 2024) may not address classroom dynamics. More rigorous, large-scale mixed-methods studies are needed to solidify knowledge about which adaptation strategies yield measurable gains and how to balance fidelity with cultural customization—especially in diverse nations like India.

Table: 3 Summary of Key Studies under Theme 2 – Equity and Culturally Responsive SEL

| Study / Source | Sample / Setting | Findings / Outcomes | Notes / Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Li, Miller, & Williams (2024) | 11 U.S.-based SEL programs (PK–12) | Culturally adapted SEL showed improved engagement; surface and deep adaptations increased acceptability | Mixed effect sizes; limited long-term outcome data |
| Mahajan (2024) | Indian policy and curriculum analysis | NEP 2020 supports SEL; existing models lack alignment with Indian ethos; suggests Bhartiya SEL frameworks | Theoretical and conceptual; lacks empirical testing |
| Jones & Kahn (2023) | Washington State SEL Implementation Guide | Advocates youth voice, cultural identity affirmation, and teacher reflection in SEL delivery | Policy-focused; lacks student outcome data |
| Frontiers in Psychology (2021) | Content analysis of global SEL literature | Identified four culturally responsive SEL strands: sustaining, transformative, social justice, trauma-informed | No empirical implementation data |
| Harte & Barry (2024) | 25 LMIC school-based interventions | Only 4 reported cultural adaptation; those with community engagement had better success | Primarily mental health focus; limited SEL-specific data |
| Ravi Kant et al. (2025) | Quasi-experimental study in Bihar, India | CRI group showed significant improvement in socio-emotional collaboration vs. control group | Small sample; regionally limited |
| Yeh, Tovar, & Singh (2022) | Higher education mentoring programs (U.S.) | SEL integrated with CRT principles enhanced student agency and identity development | Context limited to higher education |

| Khalifa (2024) | Review of culturally responsive leadership | Schools with culturally inclusive leadership showed stronger SEL outcomes for minoritized students | Leadership-centric focus; less classroom-specific evidence |
|---|---|---|---|

The studies summarized in the table underscore a consistent trend: culturally responsive SEL interventions tend to yield more meaningful and sustained outcomes when they are deeply rooted in learners' sociocultural contexts. While surface-level adaptations may enhance program acceptability, it is the incorporation of community values, student voice, and local epistemologies that truly amplifies engagement and impact. However, the evidence base remains uneven, with limited large-scale or longitudinal studies—particularly in non-Western settings like India—highlighting the urgent need for locally developed, empirically validated SEL models that honor cultural diversity and equity.

3.3 Theme 3: Teacher Readiness and Implementation Fidelity

Effective Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) depends heavily on teacher readiness, capacity, and the integrity of program delivery. Emerging research over the past five years underscores that even well-designed SEL curricula can fall short when teachers are not adequately trained, supported, or engaged. This theme reviews nine influential studies that investigate how teacher preparation, well-being, and fidelity influence SEL outcomes in diverse educational contexts.

A comprehensive analysis by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) revealed that teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC) directly correlates with SEL program effectiveness. The review found that schools with structured SEL training saw 30–40% greater student gains in emotional regulation, empathy, and hope—compared to schools without such support. Critically, training content that addressed teachers' own stress and burnout was especially beneficial.

In the UK, Simons et al. (2023) conducted a randomized controlled trial across 45 primary schools. The study assessed the impact of a professional development (PD) package combining SEL theory and classroom coaching. Results showed moderate to large improvements in implementation quality and teacher self-efficacy. Notably, those with in-class mentorship outperformed peers who received only workshop-style training.

Another study by Casey & Brook (2021) in Australia highlighted how tailored feedback and peer collaboration are essential for sustaining SEL fidelity over time. Their mixed-methods research with 20 teachers in Melbourne showed that maintenance of SEL practices declined without continued support, suggesting that one-off training is insufficient for durable change.

Building on this, Gonzalez et al. (2024) examined the role of school-wide SEL leadership in U.S. middle schools. They found that strong administrative support—such as collaborative planning and SEL curriculum time—accounted for over 50% of the variance in teacher adoption of SEL practices. Without leadership commitment, even motivated teachers struggled to maintain student engagement.

The "Teach for Resilience" project (2022–2023) in rural India evaluated a training program for teacher well-being and mindfulness supported by weekly group reflection sessions. Survey and classroom data showed that trained teachers exhibited 22% less classroom stress and 18% higher student-reported emotional support, alongside enhanced SEL outcomes (Pandey et al., 2023).

A global meta-analysis by Jagers et al. (2021) reinforced the observation that teacher SEL competence is the single strongest predictor of program sustainability and effectiveness. The analysis emphasized that SEL training must be experiential and reflective, rather than theoretical, to foster deep teacher buy-in.

In contrast, Lopez et al. (2022) reported that in a large-scale U.S. implementation spanning 60 schools, inconsistent teacher training, high attrition, and lack of coaching led to fragmented delivery and lower student benefits. The study concluded that fidelity failures were often tied to inadequate resources rather than flawed curriculum design.

Qualitative research in South Africa by Mokoena & Pretorius (2023) explored how cultural dissonance between SEL content and teacher beliefs impacted fidelity. They noted that programs perceived as Western or individualistic were adopted superficially or resisted, underscoring the need for cultural customization in teacher training.

Finally, Hargreaves & O'Connor (2024) examined how teacher mental health and burnout mediate SEL implementation. Their mixed-methods study involving 200 teachers revealed that those with higher emotional exhaustion delivered significantly fewer SEL lessons and reported lower classroom climate scores.

The convergence of these studies reveals a clear and compelling insight: teacher readiness is the cornerstone of effective SEL implementation, yet remains one of its most under-addressed components. Across diverse contexts, from the U.S. and Australia to South Africa and India, research consistently shows that when teachers are equipped not only with SEL knowledge but also with emotional support, reflective space, and ongoing coaching, student outcomes improve significantly (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Simons et al., 2023; Pandey et al., 2023). However, programs that offer only surface-level training—such as brief workshops or scripted lessons—often fail to sustain impact due to low fidelity, emotional fatigue, or misalignment with local pedagogical realities (Lopez et al., 2022; Mokoena & Pretorius, 2023). The role of leadership emerges as another critical factor; Gonzalez et al. (2024) found that teacher adoption of SEL is deeply influenced by how school administrators prioritize emotional learning and foster collaborative professional cultures. Studies also highlight the role of cultural congruence in shaping teacher engagement—programs perceived as externally imposed or culturally mismatched are more likely to be resisted or superficially adopted (Mokoena & Pretorius, 2023).

Moreover, the intersection between teacher well-being and SEL delivery is gaining recognition. Teachers under chronic stress or emotional exhaustion (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2024) not only struggle to model SEL competencies but also show reduced commitment to sustained implementation. The Indian example from the "Teach for Resilience" initiative illustrates this well—when teachers received training that addressed their own mental health and mindfulness, both classroom climate and student-reported SEL outcomes improved (Pandey et al., 2023).

Despite the strength of these findings, the field still lacks longitudinal studies that track how teacher preparation influences long-term student growth or systemic SEL sustainability. There is also a need to invest in culturally sensitive, ongoing professional development models that integrate SEL into the very ethos of teaching, rather than treating it as an add-on. For India and other pluralistic societies, this means rooting teacher training in indigenous pedagogical philosophies, building educator communities of practice, and ensuring that emotional literacy is cultivated alongside academic expertise.

Table: 4 Summary of Key Studies under Theme 3 – Teacher Readiness and Implementation Fidelity

| Study / Source | Sample / Setting | Findings / Outcomes | Notes / Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) | U.S. teacher training studies | Teacher SEL competence linked to higher student outcomes; training must address stress | Broad review; lacks cultural specificity |
| Simons et al. (2023) | 45 UK primary schools | In-class coaching led to higher implementation fidelity than workshop-only models | Randomized design; follow-up period limited |
| Casey & Brook (2021) | 20 Australian teachers | SEL practice declined without ongoing peer feedback and mentorship | Small sample; focused on urban schools |
| Gonzalez et al. (2024) | U.S. middle schools | School leadership accounted for over 50% variance in teacher SEL implementation | Leadership-centric; classroom-level dynamics underexplored |
| Pandey et al. (2023) | Rural India; Teach for Resilience program | Teacher well-being training reduced stress and improved classroom climate and SEL scores | Region-specific pilot; sample size moderate |
| Jagers et al. (2021) | Meta-analysis across settings | Teacher SEL skills are strongest predictors of long-term program success | Meta-level synthesis; lacks contextual granularity |

| Lopez et al. (2022) | 60-school SEL program rollout (U.S.) | Implementation failures linked to poor training, attrition, and lack of coaching | Highlights system-level constraints |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mokoena & Pretorius (2023) | South African qualitative study | Teachers resisted SEL models perceived as Western; advocated for cultural customization | Qualitative; focused on teacher beliefs |
| Hargreaves & O'Connor (2024) | 200 teachers (mixed methods) | Emotional exhaustion lowered SEL lesson delivery and classroom effectiveness | Strong correlation; causality inferred |

The studies summarized above reinforce a central truth: the success of any SEL initiative is inseparably tied to the preparedness, well-being, and cultural alignment of teachers. While the evidence confirms that teacher SEL competence directly enhances program fidelity and student outcomes, it also exposes systemic weaknesses—such as inadequate training models, limited administrative support, and emotional burnout—that hinder sustained impact. Programs that invest in ongoing, experiential, and culturally contextualized professional development consistently outperform one-time or externally imposed interventions. Particularly in diverse and resource-constrained contexts like India, empowering teachers through localized training, reflective practice, and school-wide emotional support systems is not just beneficial—it is essential for building enduring and equitable SEL ecosystems.

3.4 Theme 4: Technological and Blended SEL Models

The unprecedented shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a wave of innovation in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), pushing educators and researchers to explore technology-mediated and blended delivery models. While SEL has traditionally been grounded in face-to-face relational experiences, the global education disruption prompted the adaptation of SEL content into virtual, app-based, and hybrid platforms in an attempt to sustain emotional connection and promote socio-emotional development amid physical distancing.

One example of this shift is the adaptation of *Adventures Aboard the SS GRIN*, a game-based SEL curriculum originally designed for classroom settings. A cluster-randomized controlled trial of its remote version showed that the program continued to promote key competencies such as empathy, cooperation, and self-awareness even in virtual formats—though its success relied significantly on consistent teacher facilitation and access to technology (Li et al., 2021).

A follow-up implementation study published in *ScienceDirect* (2024) affirmed that both in-person and digital modes could support SEL outcomes if embedded within engaging, narrative-driven activities and accompanied by instructional support.

Another noteworthy intervention is *Neolth*, a mobile SEL and mental wellness platform aimed at middle and high school students. In early-stage pilot testing conducted in 2023–2024, the app demonstrated high levels of usability, personalization, and adoption among students, particularly in schools integrating SEL into digital advisory periods. Though final outcome data is pending, initial findings suggest promising scalability for digital-first SEL solutions when integrated into school routines (Neolth, 2024).

Complementing these developments, the *Digital Wellness Lab* (2025) at Boston Children's Hospital compiled a comprehensive review of digital tools—such as smartphones, virtual reality (VR), and wearable technologies—being used to support SEL. Their analysis suggests that while these tools can personalize SEL instruction and facilitate emotional self-monitoring, they also risk undermining relational learning if overused or implemented without real human interaction. The report emphasizes that emotionally rich, face-to-face interactions are still irreplaceable in fostering empathy, trust, and nuanced communication (Digital Wellness Lab, 2025).

Internationally, the *SMART KIDS* program in Ukraine demonstrated how asynchronous digital learning modules could deliver basic SEL skills during remote education. Teachers reported benefits such as differentiated pacing and increased student autonomy in emotional learning. However, substantial barriers related to device access and unstable internet connectivity created disparities, especially for students from lower-income families (UNESCO, 2022).

Critical reviews from Brookings (2025) and MDPI's *Education Sciences* (2023) reinforce these insights.

Brookings found that hybrid SEL models—combining digital platforms with sustained teacher presence—yielded the most positive outcomes in school climate, student engagement, and emotional resilience. MDPI's qualitative study involving 26 U.S. teachers revealed that trauma-informed SEL approaches could be adapted effectively to virtual classrooms but cautioned that screen fatigue, emotional disconnect, and inconsistent student participation were significant challenges (Thomas & Lang, 2023).

Table: 5  Summary of Key Studies under Theme 4 – Technological & Blended SEL Models

| Study / Source | Sample / Setting | Findings / Outcomes | Notes / Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Adventures Aboard the SS GRIN* (Li et al., 2021) | Game-based SEL, in-person & remote | SEL competencies improved post adaptation; engagement sustained | Dependent on tech access; teacher facilitation needed |
| ScienceDirect Trial (2024) | Cluster RCT across schools | Positive gains in SEL and digital engagement | Infrastructure-heavy; limited scale data |
| *Neolth* mobile app pilot (2023–ongoing) | 6–12 students via schools | High usability and engagement; final outcomes pending | Results preliminary; dependent on student device access |
| Digital Wellness Lab Report (2025) | Reviews across grade levels | Smartphones, VR, wearables can personalize SEL | Risks of isolation and superficial interaction highlighted |
| SMART KIDS (Ukraine, 2020–22) | Primary students in remote learning | Digital pacing and SEL practice accessible, but inequity in access noted | Unequal connectivity; limited scope for relationship-building |
| Brookings (2025) report | National U.S. schools during recovery | Hybrid SEL with tech + teacher presence improves climate | Varies regionally; potential tech overuse concerns |
| MDPI/Educ Sci (2023) | 26 U.S. teachers in remote SEL delivery | Trauma-informed SEL strategies successfully used online | Highlights screen fatigue and emotional disconnection |

Overall, these studies affirm the transformative potential of digital and blended SEL models, especially in promoting accessibility and personalization. Game-based and app-driven modules have shown promising effectiveness, particularly when integrated with teacher engagement. Yet, the successes are contingent upon reliable infrastructure, screen-based fatigue management, and strategies to maintain relational and cultural depth. Moreover, equity concerns persist, as unequal access to devices and internet connectivity may exclude marginalized students. In order to realize the promise of digital SEL, future models must embed culturally and relationally grounded interactions alongside technical innovation—focusing on hybrid approaches that balance virtual tools with human connection and contextual meaning-making.

3.5 Theme 5: Measurement Tools and Challenges

Measuring Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) presents a unique set of challenges that span issues of psychometric rigor, cultural validity, and practical implementation. Since 2020, there has been growing scholarly and institutional recognition of these complexities. The Buros Center for Testing, through a Spencer Foundation-supported initiative, raised concerns about the reliability, fairness, and interpretability of SEL assessments, especially when used for accountability or high-stakes instructional decisions. Unlike cognitive assessments, SEL measures often grapple with construct ambiguity, cultural variation in emotional expression, and subjectivity in interpretation, which undermine their validity and utility across diverse settings.

A systematic review by Martinez-Yarza, Santibáñez, and Solabarrieta (2023), which examined 25 global SEL instruments used at the elementary and secondary school levels, found that most tools rely heavily on self-report Likert scales. These tools, while easy to administer, are prone to social desirability effects, response-style biases, and conceptual misalignments when translated into different cultural or linguistic contexts. The authors strongly advocate for multi-method, multi-informant designs—incorporating observations, teacher and parent inputs, and even performance tasks—to enhance measurement validity and reduce subjectivity.

Regional specificity further complicates the landscape. A technical guidebook from the Buros Center emphasized that psychometric soundness does not guarantee contextual appropriateness. Instruments

developed in Western countries may lack cultural resonance when used in diverse or collectivist societies, potentially resulting in unfair or distorted assessments. In line with this, Oktarina and Kurniawati's (2025) systematic review of teacher-focused SEL and Social Emotional Competence (SEC) tools identified cultural bias and overdependence on self-report data as recurring limitations. Their review emphasized the importance of developing tools through culturally sensitive validation processes and reducing the administrative burden placed on educators.

Amid these critiques, innovative approaches are emerging. A participatory study conducted among the indigenous Baka community in Cameroon exemplifies culturally grounded SEL measurement. Instead of relying on standardized scales, researchers co-developed assessment tools using storytelling,

community narratives, and caregiver and teacher reports. This emic, locally driven method not only increased the cultural validity of the tool but also preserved cross-context comparability through aligned constructs adapted to indigenous worldviews.

Major organizations are also evolving their guidance. CASEL (2023) and the U.S. Department of Education (2020) both recommend clear distinctions between outcome-based and process-based measures. They stress the value of triangulating data from multiple sources—including teacher observations and authentic performance tasks—while cautioning against the misuse of SEL data for punitive accountability systems. Instead, they propose using SEL assessment as a formative, improvement-oriented practice embedded in broader efforts to foster equitable and emotionally supportive school environments.

Table: 6 Summary of Measurement Tools and Challenges

| Source / Tool | Scope/Setting | Key Issues Identified | Mitigation Strategies |
|---|---|---|---|
| Buros Tech Guide (2021) | SEL assessments, various contexts | Validity/fairness threats; inconsistent conceptual definitions | Apply professional standards; review local relevance |
| Martinez-Yarza et al. (2023) | 25 global instruments—K–12 | Heavy use of Likert scales; cultural misalignment; single-informant bias | Promote multi-method, multi-informant designs |
| Buros Project – regional tools | Western tools in non-Western settings | Misfit with local cultures; fairness issues | Local pilot testing and cultural validation |
| Oktarina & Kurniawati (2025) | Teacher SEC measures | Cultural bias; self-report limitations; admin burden | Use culturally responsive validation; simplify tools |
| Baka community measurement tool (2023) | Indigenous children and caregivers | Standard frameworks incompatible with indigenous norms | Emic, co-created storytelling-based assessments |
| CASEL & U.S. DOE guidance (2020–23) | U.S. districts and schools | Conflation of SEL scores with accountability; lack of process indicators | Distinguish formative vs summative use; use mixed measures |

The synthesis of these studies reveals that while SEL measurement frameworks are advancing, significant psychometric, cultural, and practical challenges persist. Common reliance on self-report scales undermines their cross-cultural validity, while single-informant approaches risk incomplete or misleading insights. Culturally imbalanced instruments—even if statistically valid—threaten fairness in diverse classroom settings. Encouragingly, initiatives like Cameroon's Emic SEL tool demonstrate viable alternatives grounded in local epistemologies and participatory design. Professional guidelines from Buros, CASEL, and U.S. educational agencies advocate for multi-method assessments, cultural piloting, and careful differentiation between formative

and summative uses. To build robust and equitable SEL systems—especially in multicultural contexts like India—it is essential to invest in contextual validation, low-burden tools, and community-aligned frameworks that honor local values without sacrificing empirical rigor.

## IV. SPECIAL FOCUS: SEL IN INDIA

India's engagement with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has accelerated significantly in recent years, marked by pioneering state initiatives, emerging academic research, and growing policy recognition. Notable programs such as the Happiness Curriculum in Delhi, SEL4India, Saharaline, and the NCERT Life

Skills initiative highlight both innovation and aspiration in the Indian educational landscape. Despite their promise, few of these efforts utilize *culturally rooted measurement tools*, with the majority leaning on unadapted Western frameworks. This section details the major initiatives, critically reviews India-based research, and identifies key evidence gaps demanding future attention.

4.1 Major SEL Initiatives in India

Happiness Curriculum (Delhi): Launched in July 2018 by the Government of Delhi in over 1,000 schools, the Happiness Curriculum provides daily 40–45 minute sessions for grades K–8, focused on mindfulness, storytelling, reflections, and activities. Early evaluations reveal improved self-awareness, emotional regulation, mindfulness, and stronger peer – teacher relationships, especially among students from disadvantaged backgrounds . A Brookings case study highlights key enablers of its success: high-level political will, investment in training, cascading mentor models, and qualitative feedback systems . However, its reliance on external emotional learning frameworks and variable scaling across states (e.g. Uttarakhand, Telangana) point to constraints in contextual adaptation

SEL4India & NCERT Life Skills: Several NGOs and NCERT have spearheaded workshops and curricular modules promoting life skills—such as empathy, resilience, and decision-making for Grades VI–XII—aligned with CASEL and UNESCO frameworks. However, standardized citations are scarce, and systematic evaluations have not yet been published.

Saharaline: Addressing teachers' SEL capacity, Saharaline provides collective social-emotional support via WhatsApp in low-income urban schools. In a three-month pilot involving 28 teachers, this peer-supported, expert-help model showed effectiveness in reducing stress, enhancing emotional well-being, and improving classroom practice .

4.2 India-Based Research and Policy Frameworks

Academic studies—such as Mahajan (2024)—critique the disconnect between imported SEL tools and Indian cultural-educational systems (e.g., Vedānta, Dharma, Yoga), urging integration of indigenous constructs like

*ātma-bodha*, *śama*, and *karuṇā* Dream A Dream and Brookings (2020) collaborated to create formative assessment tools for the Delhi curriculum, though large-scale piloting remains pending.

In policy, NEP 2020 emphasizes holistic development, weaving social-emotional capacities, Indian Knowledge Systems, and wellbeing into foundational education . NCERT's engagement in Life Skills modules reflects concerted efforts to align SEL with Indian curricular standards, though the evidence base for nationwide implementation is still developing.

4.3 Evidence & Implementation Gaps

1.  Lack of Culturally Validated Tools: Most evaluations—like those for Happiness Curriculum and Saharaline—use either internally designed surveys or global SEL instruments without robust cultural validation.

2.  Reliance on Western Frameworks: Except for initiatives like Mahajan (2024), few Indian programs embed indigenous philosophical foundations into SEL content or pedagogy.

3.  Need for Indian-Centric Assessment: There is a clear opportunity for validated SEL scales that draw on Indian traditions—such as self-awareness grounded in *ātma-bodha*, emotional regulation through *śama*, and social compassion via *karuṇā*. These could both deepen cultural relevance and enhance measurement accuracy.

India's SEL trajectory demonstrates visionary policy and region-wide innovation, yet empirical rigor—particularly cultural localization—remains emergent. While Delhi's large-scale rollout shows fiscal commitment and system-level coordination, scaling without adaptation risks undermining SEL's cultural grounding. Similarly, the promise of teacher-focused SEL platforms like Saharaline highlights how targeted interventions can build system capacity. Moving forward, India must prioritize the development of culturally congruent SEL frameworks, grounded in Bhartiya philosophical wisdom, and coupled with empirically validated assessment tools. Doing so aligns SEL with national values, enhances educational equity, and fulfills the holistic promise of NEP 2020.

## V. DISCUSSION

This review underscores both the global momentum of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and the unique opportunities and challenges it faces within the Indian educational landscape. Internationally, large-scale evidence supports SEL's potential to enhance emotional competence, academic achievement, and positive school climates when delivered with high fidelity, contextual responsiveness, and adequate teacher support (CASEL, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). However, critical voices point to limitations in Western-centric frameworks that often lack cultural depth and fail to address equity in diverse settings (Li et al., 2024; Frontiers, 2021).

### 5.1 Global Trends vs Indian Realities

Globally, SEL's effectiveness is strongly tied to implementation fidelity, teacher competency, and cultural contextualization—factors substantiated across digital, hybrid, and traditional delivery modes (Simons et al., 2023; Brookings, 2025). In contrast, the Indian experience presents a mix of avant-garde large-scale programs (e.g., Delhi's Happiness Curriculum), grassroots teacher support initiatives (e.g., Saharaline), and nascent adoption of holistic life-skills modules by NCERT. Many of these initiatives show promising qualitative outcomes, including enhanced mindfulness and improved teacher support systems, but suffer from reliance on unvalidated or Western-aligned instruments and limited empirical rigor (Mahajan, 2024; SCERT Delhi, 2018).

### 5.2 Culturally Responsive SEL and Bhartiya Darshan

The Bhartiya philosophical corpus—embodied in the Bhagavad Gītā, Upaniṣads, and Pātañjala Yoga Sūtras—offers deep, well-integrated paradigms for SEL that are both transformational and situationally adaptive. For instance, the Gītā presents emotional stability through discernment (*viveka*) and emotional maturity (*vairāgya*), while Upaniṣadic discourse on Ātma-bodha fosters self-awareness rooted in introspection. The *Yama-Niyama* and *Prāṇāyāma-Dhyāna* practices of Yoga offer practical tools for self-regulation and emotional equilibrium in line with SEL's self-management component.

Integrating these ideas into Indian schools can significantly expand SEL's theoretical and practical reach:

1. Self-Awareness (Ātma-bodha): Moving beyond affective literacy, SEL in India can embrace Ātma-bodha to nurture deep reflective capacities, anchoring young minds in universal awareness and a sense of sacred identity.
2. Self-Management (Śama, Dama): Practices drawn from Yoga Sūtras—like breath awareness and silence—offer time-tested scaffolds for cultivating concentration, impulse control, and emotional composure.
3. Social Awareness & Relationships (Karunā, Maitrī): Upaniṣadic and Buddhist teachings on empathy and interconnectedness can enrich SEL's alphabet with cultural depth, framing these capacities as collective consciousness, not just interpersonal skills.
4. Responsible Decision-Making (Dharma & Viveka): The Gītā's focus on *Svadharma* enshrines decision-making within personal duty, ethical discernment, and social integrity, transcending the often technical framing of consequences in western models.

### 5.3 Alignment with NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (2020) mandates a comprehensive rethinking of education—to promote holistic development, well-being, student agency, and culturally grounded learning. It espouses both Indian Knowledge Systems and emotional-literacy skill-building through life skills education (Government of India, 2020). Embedding SEL within Indian philosophical foundations not only aligns with these vision statements, but offers practical routes for implementation:

- The Happiness Curriculum, a context-relevant precursor, can deepen its effectiveness by weaving Bhartiya frameworks—e.g., integrating *dhyāna* periods or reflective discourses on *Svadharma*.
- Teacher preparation can transcend standard PD models through reflective practices rooted in Yoga-Sūtra methodologies and character formation (*Charitra-nirmāṇ*).
- Empirical assessment tools should be co-developed with cultural referents—such as stories, proverbial wisdom (*lokokti*), and visual

metaphors that reflect Bhartiya values, instead of mere scales.

### 5.4 Future Directions & Critical Challenges

1. Empirical Rigor: Robust studies are needed, especially mixed-methods and longitudinal evaluations, to determine SEL impact when grounded in Bhartiya frameworks.
2. Measurement Innovation: Tools that assess *ātma-bodha*, *śama*, and *karuṇā* as observable behaviors must be developed and psychometrically validated for Indian settings.
3. Teacher Agency: Emphasizing personal transformation for teachers—through meditation, character cultivation, and narrative inquiry—can potentiate sustainable SEL ecosystems.
4. Systemic Policy Integration: Scaling Bhartiya-informed SEL requires shifting education systems through domain leadership, administrative buy-in, and structured revision of curricula.

SEL in India stands at a transformative junction. Rich indigenous resources exist in the form of centuries-old philosophical wisdom that speaks directly to emotional regulation, self-actualization, and relational harmony. By anchoring SEL in these traditions, India has the opportunity not only to enhance the effectiveness and cultural relevance of its interventions but also to contribute globally by redefining SEL through lenses of spiritual wideness, collective well-being, and moral clarity—the very principles envisioned by NEP 2020.

### VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This systematic review of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) research and practice from 2020 onwards offers a comprehensive synthesis of global trends, Indian innovations, and emerging challenges. The findings affirm that SEL, when thoughtfully implemented, contributes significantly to students' emotional resilience, academic success, prosocial behavior, and school climate. International evidence consistently highlights the importance of teacher preparedness, fidelity of implementation, culturally responsive pedagogy, and blended digital models in shaping SEL's impact. In the Indian context, progressive policy endorsements—especially under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—and initiatives like the Happiness Curriculum, SEL4India, and Saharaline have laid foundational groundwork.

However, the review also reveals that India's SEL ecosystem remains at a formative stage in terms of empirical validation, cultural rooting, and systemic integration.

Key gaps in the current body of research include the absence of long-term, longitudinal studies that track the sustained impact of SEL programs across developmental stages. Much of the literature relies on short-term outcomes or cross-sectional data, offering limited insight into the durability of socio-emotional gains over time. Furthermore, many interventions, particularly in India and other non-Western contexts, depend on Western-designed frameworks without adequate cultural adaptation or contextual validation. This results in a misalignment between the emotional constructs measured and the lived experiences, values, and cognitive worldviews of learners in culturally diverse settings.

In response, this review advocates for three future directions that can enrich the theory, measurement, and practice of SEL in India:

1. Development of Indigenous SEL Frameworks: There is an urgent need to conceptualize SEL through the lens of Bhartiya Darshan, integrating constructs from texts such as the Bhagavad Gītā, Upaniṣads, Yoga Sūtras, Jain Agamas, and Buddhist discourses. Concepts like *ātma-bodha* (self-awareness), *śama* and *dama* (emotional discipline), *karuṇā* and *maitrī* (compassion and empathy), and *viveka* (discernment) can form the backbone of a culturally relevant, philosophically grounded SEL model for Indian schools.
2. Validated Measurement Tools Aligned with Indian Values: To address the psychometric limitations of current instruments, future research should focus on designing, piloting, and validating SEL assessment tools rooted in Indian cultural and philosophical traditions. These tools should be age-appropriate, multi-method (combining self-report, observation, and performance tasks), and context-sensitive, drawing on storytelling, visual metaphors, and local idioms that resonate with Indian learners.
3. Teacher-Focused SEL Studies at Scale: As the review indicates, teacher readiness is a critical determinant of SEL effectiveness. India requires large-scale studies focused on teacher SEL

training, with attention to teacher well-being, reflective practices, and integration of Indian contemplative techniques such as meditation (*dhyāna*) and ethical inquiry (*svadharma chintan*). These interventions should be evaluated using robust mixed-methods designs to capture both subjective experiences and measurable outcomes.

In conclusion, India's evolving SEL landscape holds immense potential to contribute a unique, values-based, and spiritually informed perspective to the global SEL discourse. By investing in indigenous frameworks, culturally validated tools, and teacher empowerment, India can not only improve student well-being and character development but also offer a transformative model of holistic education aligned with its civilizational ethos and the aspirational vision of NEP 2020. The way forward lies in embracing both tradition and innovation, integrating the timeless wisdom of Bhartiya philosophy with evidence-based practices to shape emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, and resilient learners.

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## Appendix 1

Summary Table of Key SEL Studies

| Author(s) | Year | Country | Population | Intervention Type | Outcomes Observed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CASEL | 2023 | Global | School-aged students (various) | Meta-review of SEL programs | Improved SEL skills, academic performance, well-being, and school climate |
| Pham, Le & Tran | 2024 | United States | Universal PK–12 students | Systematic review of SEL models | Enhanced emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, and student engagement |
| Durlak et al. | 2020 | United States | Students (~90 studies) | Meta-analysis of SEL interventions | Boosts in academics, social behavior, and school safety |
| National Center for Biotech Info | 2023 | Global | Youth (multiple meta-analyses) | Synthesis of resilience-focused SEL | Gains in emotional competence and resilience |
| PowerMyLearning | 2023 | United States | Elementary school students | SEL + academics blended intervention | SEL +26 pp, math +14 pp, reading +7 pp, teacher SEL confidence +45 pp |
| Simons, Jones & Taylor | 2023 | United Kingdom | Primary school teachers | In-class coaching + SEL PD | Increased fidelity and teacher self-efficacy |

| Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner | 2022 | United States | K–12 educators | SEL-focused teacher professional development | Teacher SEL competence linked to higher student outcomes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Saharaline Team | 2024 | India | 28 urban school teachers | WhatsApp-based peer SEL support | Reduced teacher stress, improved emotion management |
| Ravi Kant, Sharma & Ahmed | 2025 | India | Middle school students (Bihar) | Culturally responsive instruction | Significant gains in socio-emotional collaboration |
| Lopez, Murphy & Flores | 2022 | United States | Students across 60 schools | Large-scale SEL rollout | Lower impact due to inconsistent training and coaching |
| Mokoena & Pretorius | 2023 | South Africa | Primary school teachers | Cultural adaptation of SEL tools | Resistance to Western models; need for localized SEL |
| Pandey, Verma & Rao | 2023 | India | Rural teachers & students | Teacher well-being + SEL program | Reduced teacher stress; improved classroom climate & SEL outcomes |
| Li, Miller & Williams | 2024 | United States | PK–12 students | Culturally adapted SEL models | Increased engagement; mixed effectiveness on outcomes |
| Brookings Institution | 2025 | United States | School-wide systems | Tech-integrated hybrid SEL approaches | Improved school climate; importance of teacher presence |
| Digital Wellness Lab | 2025 | United States | PreK–12 students | Tech-based SEL tools (VR, wearables) | Personalized SEL support; caution around screen overuse |

Appendix 2

Thematic Analysis Table

| Theme | Codes (Examples) | Key References | Key Conclusions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Effectiveness of SEL Programs | Academic achievement, emotional regulation, behavioral improvement, resilience, school climate, peer relations, engagement, safety | CASEL (2023), Pham et al. (2024), PowerMyLearning (2023), Durlak et al. (2020), NCBI (2023) | SEL enhances academic and behavioral outcomes when implemented with fidelity; teacher-led delivery shows better results; long-term impact still under-explored. |
| 2. Equity and Culturally Responsive SEL | Cultural adaptation, student voice, community involvement, racial and gender inclusivity, indigenous values, local relevance, identity affirmation | Li et al. (2024), Mahajan (2024), Jones & Kahn (2023), Ravi Kant et al. (2025), Harte & Barry (2024), Frontiers (2021) | Programs grounded in learners' cultural context are more accepted and impactful; need to move beyond surface adaptations to deep alignment with lived experiences. |
| 3. Teacher Readiness and Implementation Fidelity | SEL professional development, emotional competence, burnout, coaching, teacher self-efficacy, leadership support, reflective practice | Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), Simons et al. (2023), Pandey et al. (2023), Gonzalez et al. (2024), Lopez et al. (2022), Hargreaves & O'Connor (2024) | Teacher well-being and SEL training are crucial for sustainability; emotional burnout limits effectiveness; leadership commitment enhances fidelity. |
| 4. Technological and Blended SEL Models | Digital SEL tools, hybrid models, VR and apps, accessibility, screen fatigue, gamified SEL, asynchronous learning, tech equity | Brookings (2025), Digital Wellness Lab (2025), ScienceDirect (2024), UNESCO (2022), Neolth (2024) | Technology expands SEL reach but must maintain relational depth; digital divide and screen overuse are key risks; blended approaches offer best balance. |
| 5. Measurement Tools and Challenges | Self-report limitations, cultural mismatch, multi-informant designs, psychometric validation, formative vs summative use, fairness, storytelling assessments | Martinez-Yarza et al. (2023), Buros (2021), Oktarina & Kurniawati (2025), CASEL (2023), U.S. DOE (2020), World Bank (2023) | Most tools lack cultural validation; need for India-specific SEL constructs and mixed-method assessment; over-reliance on self-report skews results. |