

Social-Emotional Learning: Preschool Teachers’ Perspectives from Urban and Rural Contexts

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Abstract

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of holistic child development. The early years of life are the best window of opportunity when children acquire self-regulation which stays with them throughout their lives. A qualitative exploratory design with focus group discussions (FGDs) was used for preschool teachers’ perspectives on SEL from urban and rural areas of Pakistan. Five (5) FGDs were organized, each with 8 to 10 teachers. Insights were highlighted by teachers from urban and rural contexts. Urban schoolteachers demonstrated a better understanding of SEL as compared to rural schoolteachers. The main themes identified during the analysis were teachers' perspectives on; the importance of social-emotional skills for school readiness, adjustment problems faced by newly enrolled children due to lack of social-emotional skills, existing school practices for the promotion of SEL, and how teachers can contribute to building SEL among preschool children. Teachers underscored the importance of parents, curriculum, and teacher training for the promotion of social-emotional learning among preschool children. Urban-rural disparities were profound where urban teachers were found to be more aware of the social-emotional needs of preschool children and classroom management required for optimal learning experience.

Keywords: *School readiness, behaviors and relationships, qualitative research, SEL knowledge and classroom practice, barriers and contributing factors*

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Background and Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) involves understanding, managing, and expressing emotions and relationships. SEL enables a child to learn, problem-solve, and adapt to complex demands that an individual comes across every single day. In addition, it includes self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about self and others (Denham, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Yoder, 2014; Payton et al., 2008; Weisberg & Cascarino, 2013). Social-emotional skills are strongly associated with academic performance (Biermann et al., 2008), and behaviors and relationships that are created both at home and school (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Teachers are key figures for the implementation of classroom based SEL programs (Sheridan et al., 2009; Winton, 2010). Research studies indicate that teachers have very little or no training on SEL during pre-and in-service training programs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Humphries et al., 2018), which calls for exploring and understanding what teachers perceive regarding SEL during early years.

Research studies have found contrasting results on SEL in urban and rural preschool children in the United States. According to Humphries and colleagues (2018), urban schools in the USA are more likely to have students with compromised social-emotional functioning as reported by National Center for Education Statistics (1996).

The urban-rural divide for education in Pakistan is far greater creating and exacerbating inequalities at many levels. Among the many problems that schools in rural areas face, access and infrastructure are just the tip of the iceberg. Preschool education in urban and rural areas has huge disparities in terms of access and quality. Sixty-one percent of preschoolers in rural areas are out of school as compared to 42% in urban areas. In addition, huge disparities are found in learning outcomes among urban and rural preschoolers. Other than that, wide differences are reported in teachers' qualifications, preservice training, and in-service professional development opportunities (ASER, 2019).

The main aim of this qualitative exploratory research study is to understand preschool teachers' perceptions for social-emotional learning and to identify gaps in knowledge and practice from urban and rural areas in Pakistan. The authors could not find any literature from Pakistan reporting comparative accounts for SEL among urban and rural preschool teachers. Hence, this formative study will shed light on the unique needs and challenges of preceptors in different settings aiding in the development of contextually relevant interventions.

Methodology

Research Design and Study Setting

A qualitative descriptive exploratory study design was employed. Research participants were teachers from public and private schools of Pakistan. Three study settings were purposefully selected for data collection. The first group of teachers was from public and private schools from all over Pakistan. These teachers came together to attend an SEL workshop in Karachi towards the end of 2017 (2 FGDs were held). The second group of teachers was from Gilgit urban areas, one FGD was undertaken with this group of teachers, all these teachers were employed in private schools. Two FGDs were organized with rural public-school teachers in Sindh.

Data Collection

The method of data collection was Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured FGD guidelines were developed based on literature review and past research experience. These were reviewed by experts in the field of early childhood development for appropriate phrasing and clarity of the questions. The guides were finalized after incorporating experts' feedback. In total, there were Five (5) focus group discussions (FGDs), each with at least 8 to 10 participants. Three (3) of the FGDs were conducted in urban areas, 2 in Karachi and 1 in Gilgit. Two (2) more FGDs were held in rural schools in Sindh. Three FGDs were moderated by the first author and two by the second. Each FGD lasted for 50 – 55 minutes. The interviews were recorded, and the moderator also took notes at the end of the discussions. Transcriptions of recordings were entered on MS word.

Data Analysis

Focus group discussions transcripts were analyzed manually. Analysis followed the “data analysis spiral” as advised by Creswell (2007). Transcripts were read and reread progressively exploring the data, comparing different parts to evolve a more sophisticated understanding by taking memos at the margins of the transcripts. More data was gathered and reviewed iteratively to identify major organizing ideas and patterns. The second and third authors generated codes on separate transcripts based on predetermined and emerging themes. This analysis was reviewed by the first author to see similarities and differences, further discussions were

held between all the authors to get to the point of finalization of codes and subcategories. Some codes were dropped or merged in order to get a clear picture. The final list of codes was refined further as themes and subthemes were generated. All relevant quotes were identified according to the themes from each of the transcripts. These quotes were further reviewed, and the finalized list of quotes was translated into English language.

Finding's

Case 1: Rural Context

Views and experiences of public preschool teachers from the rural context of Sindh regarding SEL are presented in this section. These perspectives are categorized into six thematic areas in relation to SEL; school readiness, teacher's knowledge, and understanding, contributing factors, teacher's practices in the classroom, strategies to overcome problems, and teachers' personal social-emotional competence.

Teachers' knowledge and understanding

Teachers in rural contexts perceived SEL as a construct that dealt with an individual's feelings towards someone or something and whether the person was in a state of happiness or sadness. Teachers stated that as a domain, social-emotional development was completely different from cognitive, physical, and language development. Teachers' reasoning for such a distinction was based on SEL being linked with feelings while other domains have distinct functions. Teachers also shared that while in the context of the school setting, SEL is also perceived as an ability for children to observe a teacher's affective state while teaching. *"Physical, cognitive and language domains are completely different from SEL because the emotional domain looks into the feeling component as to how the teacher is teaching, also the behavior and if she teaches affectionately or not..."* (R B- 2/3/4)

SEL and School Readiness

Teachers from rural contexts had a fair understanding of the adjustment skills required for preschoolers at the time of enrollment. According to them, the prerequisites for school readiness involve children having some basic skills including the ability to communicate their needs and wants in their mother tongue or any other language. Moreover, rural teachers also regarded a sense of responsibility as another important skill

required for children to adjust in school (R 2-A). When asked to explain what sense of responsibility was expected from preschoolers, the teachers mentioned that children should be able to take care of their own and other people's belongings. When teachers were asked about the meaning of self-regulation, one teacher thought self-regulation was a person's ability to comply with what has been assigned. She further added that self-regulation is when an individual accepts responsibility for their actions or decisions instead of blaming others for what did not turn out correct. Furthermore, most rural teachers believed confidence is another attribute which is a prerequisite for school readiness. Teachers further added that newly enrolled children should not feel hesitant, instead, they should be confident enough to interact with their fellow students.

While sharing their experiences of SEL problems faced at the time of enrollment, rural teachers shared that new children have problems having a good relationship with peers. *"The reason being that these children are shy and fearful when they come to school for the first time since everything is new to them."* (R 2-B)

"They are unable to make friends and feel uncomfortable sitting with new fellows which leads them to feel lonely and stressed out." (R 6-B)

Teachers viewed this as the major reason because children are unable to communicate their problems and needs to teachers. Apart from this, another problem shared by teachers was the inability of children to form queues while coming in and going out of the classrooms or during school assembly time. Rural teachers believed this to be an important social skill that every child must develop in their early years and hence teachers give their best to develop this skill in their students. *"We teach them to make lines and take an approval before borrowing. Teachers being a role model, they should be observant and see what is happening with children"* (R 6-A)

SEL in Practice

Although teachers had a fair amount of understanding of SEL, there was a wide gap between knowledge and practices according to preschool standards. Group discussions with teachers revealed a very limited range of SEL strategies being practiced in rural preschool classrooms. Teachers shared circle time, group work, role play, and behavioral management techniques as SEL practices happening in the classroom. A teacher while sharing an example of SEL practices quoted, *"When a child is crying, we send him/her to their siblings in higher classes so that he/she does not feel alone"* (R 3-B)

According to teachers, these classroom strategies were not being employed as part of SEL they were used as a general classroom management technique, and the teachers did not consider this to be part of SEL.

Contributing Factors for SEL

Contributing factors may either support or hinder the developmental process; these factors can be internal or external. Similarly, SEL is the result of some contributing factors in children's internal and external environment. According to rural schoolteachers, a major contributing factor for SEL is the quality of interaction and involvement from teachers and parents. Teachers felt that schools should be like a second home for children. Teachers further added that when children perceive school as a second home and teachers as their parents then children's SEL automatically begins. Teachers also mentioned that school and classroom environment is another factor that promotes SEL among preschoolers. Therefore, the environment should be developed so that children feel comfortable and happy so that they grow socially and emotionally (R 5-A; R-B). *"A teacher is responsible to make children comfortable and create rapport with them making them willing to stay and learn in school. Teachers should be friendly, encouraging and should try to create a homely environment"*. (R1-A; R3-B; R4-B)

Attractive classroom interiors, teachers' level of social competence, their behavior, and attachment towards children were also considered additional attributes towards SEL (R 4-A). Besides this, teachers considered the family's socioeconomic status to be the most powerful factor in children's SEL. They believed that a strong economic background was directly related to better SEL skills among children. *"Financially sound Parents can take care of their children's needs and raise them in a good way. While poor families are unable to take care of their children's educational needs which in turn affects their (social-emotional) development"* (R 4-A)

Fostering SEL – Teachers' insights

Teachers suggested various strategies to address issues, problems, and challenges related to SEL in preschoolers. They believed that parental involvement in schools may lead to a better understanding of children's problems (R A-1). In addition, clearly defined classroom rules and routines and following daily activities may also be used as a strategy to overcome emotional and behavioral problems among preschool children. (R 3-A). Moreover, teachers also added that support from older siblings studying in the same school can also be used as a strategy to understand

children's problems (R 3-B). Teachers also suggested that friendly relationships can help children open up about the problems that they have. These problems can then be discussed with parents to effectively implement SEL (R 6-A). Teachers also suggested the use of games and activities that helped build SEL among students. The classroom's physical environment and parental involvement were identified as key factors in resolving SEL issues. Teachers also shared that at times involvement from school management was also found to be necessary to manage and overcome emotional and behavioral problems among preschoolers.

Teachers' Social-emotional Competence

Teachers' personal social-emotional skills were found to have a huge impact on their performance. Teachers identified various factors at teachers' level which are responsible for lack of appropriate considerations to SEL. A few of those concerns shared by teachers involved; being new at certain tasks, undue pressures from school management and fear of losing a job. These factors were reported to affect teachers' social-emotional skills to a greater extent. Teachers also reported non-availability of SEL curriculum and teachers' training, as factors being the root cause of ineffective implementation of SEL in preschool classrooms.

Case 2: Urban context

Views and experiences of teachers from the urban context of Karachi and Gilgit-Baltistan regarding SEL among preschoolers were captured through Focus Group Discussions and findings are presented here. These perspectives are categorized into four thematic areas in relation to SEL: school readiness, fostering SEL, teacher's practices in the classroom and teachers' personal social-emotional competence.

SEL and School Readiness

Urban teachers had diverse opinions regarding school readiness skills required for preschoolers at the time of enrollment. Teachers emphasized the role of the home environment as an important contributing factor to enable preschoolers to engage in pro-social behaviors. *"The child must be well mannered and should have sound family background"* (R 1-b)

Teachers thought children's social-emotional development begins at home. Teachers further added that preschool children should be able to adjust to environments other than their home and hence overcome accompanying challenges (R 2-b). A teacher further added that for the child to cope with internal and external challenges along with conveying

and communicating messages, the development of certain language, emotional and psychomotor skills are essential (R 3-b).

They further asserted that physical stability along with adjustability to a pristine environment is part of any child to develop and grow. Most teachers believed that having strong, positive self-esteem is also essential for ensuring school readiness. *“(the child’s) self-esteem should be high because they have to interact with different people in the school, if their self-esteem is low then they will be in trouble”* (4-b)

Teachers considered the act of sharing to be an important skill for every child. They also put equal emphasis on independent and individual learning to further strengthen children’s ability to adjust to an unfamiliar environment (R 2-b). *“We have limited resources in classrooms. The habit of sharing is essential and should be inculcated in children before they start schooling”* (R 3-a)

While discussing SEL among preschoolers, teachers also stressed the importance of interpersonal skills, such as anger management and willingness to collaborate on child’s part when coming to school for the first time. Teachers thought children should be able to express their basic needs, such as those about hunger and sanitation without hesitation (R 5-a). They further stated that the child must be mentally and physically ready to come to school rather than being sent by force. *“The child should be mentally prepared that he/she is going to enter school, it is going to be his/her first experience communicating with the world and meeting new people.”* (R 3-a, R 4-b)

Urban teachers enlisted various problems and challenges faced by children during their early days of school. These problems differed from child to child, as some students feel shy and uncomfortable while others have an egocentric attitude. *“...one day I sent him to the washroom, but he was not ready to wear his clothes and said his clothes were soiled and kept asking for a change of clothes.”* (R 4 & 3-a)

Adding to the discussion, teachers stated that children who come from low SES family backgrounds struggle with vocabulary as compared to children who come from middle and upper-class families. *“... children who come from poor families do not have that much vocabulary as compared to children who come from affluent families, they are more professionally oriented and have the adequate vocabulary.”* (R 4-b)

Participants also mentioned that most often children are anxious and take time to accept the new classroom environment and teachers.

Fostering SEL – Teachers' insights

Diverse opinions came up from urban teachers to foster SEL among preschoolers. The first skill shared by urban teachers was the need to maintain student profiling to document every child's academic and non-academic record. *"Teachers need to have a strong student profiling. They need to know each, and every child, and this student profiling should be made with keeping the parents in the loop."* (R 2-B)

Besides this, a teacher's ability to understand the child and thereby set reasonable expectations for children's optimal development was also considered important by teachers. Teachers further highlighted the importance of knowing age-appropriate expectations for social-emotional developmental process happening during preschool years (R 2/4-B). *"...because the child is doing what he can and what he is capable of doing at that age, but your (teacher's) high expectations cause the child's self-esteem to suffer because it becomes too hard for the child when your (teacher's) expectations are very high ..."* (R 1-A; R 2/4-B)

Teachers further believed that children must be able to differentiate between right and wrong. Since that is the very foundation of life for any human being, teachers must have the skills to enable children to differentiate between right and wrong, good and bad. *"How do you cut your beliefs, put them away and then teach them what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad"* (R 1-B)

Other key points teachers believed important were positive and effective body language/gestures and facial expression. In addition, selection of words, positive interaction with children, sense of responsibility, and stress management were identified as additional points for teachers to ensure an effective SEL environment. *"...teacher's gestures, body language, interaction means a lot. Because when you feel something unpleasant you are not saying it in words but still showing it by gestures, your facial expressions, your tone. (You think) children do not understand that but remember they do see and absorb"* (R 6-B; R 5-B)

SEL in Practice

Interesting points were raised during the discussion regarding SEL practices in urban schools. Several strategies were found to be implemented, such as at the time of admissions the interview panel conduct interviews with parents to explore school readiness skills, such as, adequate vocabulary and SEL skills to survive and thrive in the classroom environment (R 3/4-B). Secondly, school management also puts due emphasis on advising and instructing teachers to build strong bonds with newly enrolled children. *"Our school believes in bonding and providing a*

safe environment, we are working on providing a conducive environment. Greeting them, smiling, and making them comfortable to talk and involve in classroom activities” (R 3-B)

Few teachers also shared that their schools are equipped with a proper SEL curriculum. Learning corners have been developed according to SEL competencies accordingly based on the curriculum (R 2/6-B; R 1-A). Several strategies were reported by teachers being used in the classrooms, such as, circle time, Yoga, song recital (R 3-A), discussion, role-play, problem-solving, group work, show and tell, doing 2 by 10 activity¹ (R 3-A; R 2/ 6-B). In addition, schools have purpose-built learning resource centers where children are taken twice or thrice a week for 40 to 45 minutes (R 2-A; R 3-A). During that time, children are given the choice to play with available learning resources. Schools also organized awareness programs through role-plays regarding social evils, like child abuse and more. Interestingly, some teachers also mentioned that their schools have a child protection policy in place that is strictly followed to provide and ensure a safe and secure environment for the children: *“People do not discuss how to take care of child abuse... we do not discuss this directly with children rather we discuss it with a doll relating it with child and our policy for child abuse helps us to guide regarding children’s safety and security” (R 4-B)*

Teachers also shared that in the event of a major issue with a child which is beyond teacher's control, parents are called to intervene and to take the child back home if necessary. Likewise, daily plans are made by teachers with emphasis on SEL, and these plans are evaluated by teacher coordinators or headteacher. Apart from this, SEL capacity development activities are organized for teachers (R 3/4-A).

Teachers’ Social-emotional Competence

Multiple suggestions and recommendations were given by the teachers to promote SEL in ECE classrooms. Teachers believed that successful implementation of the SEL plan in one way or another was linked with teachers or parents; therefore, teachers must be role models. Because at this stage children follow what they watch teachers or other adults around them doing more than their verbal instructions, there should be no conflict between what is being said and done. Furthermore, teachers were also in favor of a proper mechanism for teachers’ accountability which would keep a check on the SEL practices being implemented by teachers. (R 6-

¹ “2 by 10 activity” is done with between teacher and child on a single day for ten minutes to develop a strong attachment between teacher and student.

B). *“Teachers should be role models because children adopt the actions and practices of their teachers”* (R 6-B)

The barriers to SEL implementation as identified by teachers were insufficient time, lack of support from school management, and SEL not considered as important as reading and writing. An important suggestion proposed by teachers was to reduce the workload on teachers, as the existing load is overwhelming and does not allow teachers to have due focus on SEL. *“They (management) overburden the teachers....so teachers have different levels of pressure on them”* (R 5-B)

Similarly, effective implementation of innovative ideas and initiatives was also found directly linked with teachers' salaries; therefore, teachers proposed that they should be duly compensated (R 1-B). Teachers further suggested that professional training on SEL should be provided not just to teachers but also to school management (R 4/5-B). They further added that having sound knowledge and understanding of social-emotional development is crucial for school management to effectively guide, monitor, and support teachers. A teacher shared, *“Saturdays should be kept for lesson planning which normally does not happen to that extent...if things were a little relaxed and easy for us teachers, we could be more productive”* (R 5-B)

Adding to the discussion, teachers suggested that more evidence-based teaching and learning practices should be introduced in schools (R 2-B). They also thought parents should be allowed to stay with children in their early days till they are well adjusted to the school environment. *“Parents should be there at school for some time till the child develops affiliation with the school and feels comfortable”* (R 2 & 3-A)

Teachers also recommended introducing demos for newly appointed teachers which would help assess the incumbent's understanding and knowledge of SEL. Teachers also commented that content and pedagogical understanding along with command should not be the only criteria for teacher recruitment (R 3-A). Most importantly, teachers' interpersonal skills should also be the focus of attention while hiring instead of basing the decision solely on their academic qualifications. Some of the participants were of the view that even though certain teachers lacked high qualifications, they have very strong knowledge and understanding of social-emotional development as compared to teachers who have higher qualifications. *“Schools are not trained enough to see past a prospective teacher's qualifications to emphasize his/her interpersonal skills and ability to work with children”* (R A-4)

Finally, awareness sessions and training for parents on SEL were also considered important by all teachers (R 2/3-A).

Discussion

The current study explored early childhood education (ECE) teachers' perspectives regarding their knowledge and practices of SEL in a public and private, urban and rural context in Pakistan. The themes yielded from group discussions with teachers involved: Teachers' knowledge of SEL, classroom practices, SED for school readiness, contributing factors for SEL, teachers' recommendations to promote SEL, and teachers' personal social and emotional competence.

While teachers from rural and urban settings endorsed the importance of SEL, our findings revealed an absence of SEL curriculum and lack of teacher training and limited classroom implementation on SEL in rural school settings. A similar trend for teacher training has been observed in published literature (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Humphries et al., 2018). In urban settings, however, not only was there a relevant curriculum present, but schools were also investing in developing such skills for teachers and following up on their progress and implementation in classrooms. Both urban and rural preschool teachers had some interesting ideas for implementing SEL in classrooms. The cultural and contextual relevance of SEL teaching and learning was given due emphasis by urban teachers. Studies assessing formal SEL curricula have reported improved emotional regulation and relationships with peers in preschool children (Gunter et al., 2012; Blewitt et al., 2018). Given the benefits of having a formal SEL curriculum in place, and a higher prevalence of less than optimal social-emotional learning in preschool children in rural settings (Mitchell, 2020), it is important that the curricula implemented in urban settings are also scaled to schools in rural areas according to the resources available to implement them.

School readiness and SEL are strongly linked (Denham, 2006; Blair, 2002; Bierman et al., 2008). Regarding school readiness skills, teachers from rural and urban settings considered children's ability to communicate as the most important skill for them to adjust and thrive in the school environment. Teachers from rural schools placed due emphasis on children having a sense of responsibility regarding everyone's belongings and actions. This is in line with a study of over 300 kindergarten teachers who considered the act of taking care of one's belongings as the most important social and emotional skill for preschool children's school readiness (Abu Taleb, T. F., 2013). Whereas teachers from urban schools considered sharing, anger management, psychomotor ability, positive self-esteem, adjustability, willingness, and acceptance to come to school as important school readiness skills. Children being shy and fearful during

their early days at school was a common problem faced by teachers in both rural and urban settings.

Teachers participating in this research graciously accepted their contributions and willingness to impart SEL skills to preschool children. However, parents' role was highly emphasized for children's social-emotional development. A crucial point discussed by both rural and urban teachers was parental unawareness regarding their child's social and emotional development. Teachers from both rural and urban preschools believed that parents were required to initiate the foundation of social-emotional development prior to school enrollment. This would support teachers to further enhance and build upon in classroom teaching and learning. Teachers viewed SEL as a partnership between parents and teachers. Teachers also believed that SEL is a prerequisite for school readiness, literature on SEL also reported similar findings (Buchanan et al., 2009; Zinsser et al., 2014).

The role of supportive school management and leadership was viewed as a strong contributing factor for the successful implementation of SEL, by both urban and rural preschool teachers. Teachers demanded support for reducing the workload, training, improved salaries and a better working environment. Both urban and rural teachers emphasized SEL training for school leadership to best support teachers and SEL implementation in a classroom context. School support has also emerged as a crucial factor in classroom implementation of SEL in other studies (Joseph & Strain, 2003; Elias et al., 2003).

Teachers from urban settings had some interesting insights to offer in this regard. They equally valued the SEL curriculum and had suggestions on how it could better be implemented. Firstly, they believed that not only should teachers be familiar with such a curriculum and undergo relevant training, but the school management should also equip themselves with this knowledge. This sound understanding will then help the school in allocating adequate time and resources to such activities since this was not the case currently as reported by teachers. Lack of administrative support has been reported as a major barrier by preschool teachers in implementing SEL curricula in their classrooms (Humphries et al., 2018). Secondly, the reason behind educating school management regarding SEL will also make teachers accountable for their activities or actions. Further when the new teachers are hired school management can make sure new teachers have acquired SEL training and orientation. Strengthening teachers' knowledge of SEL skills through mentoring has also been suggested in the literature (Blewitt et al., 2021).

In addition, teachers from both urban and rural context reported SEL practice very challenging due to more emphasis on academic performance. Teachers are accountable for completing the syllabus within the allocated time and then producing good results rather than social-emotional development. Fegan and Mihalic (2003) also found less attention on SEL because of increased efforts on the academic side and standardized testing. Therefore, this has become very challenging for both contexts to focus on the SEL. Multiple studies around the world have shown that pre-school teachers consider social-emotional skills of children to be more important than academic skills for school readiness (Curby et al., 2018; An et al., 2018). Given that teachers spend the greatest amount of time with preschoolers in classrooms, and can observe their everyday behaviors and problems, schools should incorporate their feedback in the curriculum objectives to optimize learning and development.

Gaps between the main curriculum and that of SEL need to be assessed since according to urban schoolteachers it was sometimes difficult to implement it whilst other academic objectives needed to be covered. If possible, maybe a new holistic curriculum needs to be designed that has aspects of both mainstream academics and SEL so that instead of the later feeling like an additional feat, it becomes convenient to implement. This will ensure systematic implementation of SEL while maintaining its efficacy.

Conclusions and Recommendations

SEL outcomes do not operate in isolation, they are influenced by environmental factors in home, schools, and community context. Our study revealed differences in the understanding of SEL and implementation of SEL curricula in urban and rural preschool settings. For preschoolers, an important contributing factor for SEL is grounded in the role of teachers, classrooms, and schools supporting the holistic developmental outcomes. An important prerequisite for SEL is classroom climate and culture which is largely based on teachers' qualifications and experience, their social-emotional competence, pedagogical skills, and at a broader level, the policy environment in the country. While teachers from urban settings reported the presence of formal SEL curricula, the same was not true for rural school settings. Efforts aimed at integrating SEL curricula in rural preschools need to be initiated to bring the level of education up to par with urban schools.

Early Childhood Education can play a crucial role in the social-emotional development of young children. In addition, the importance of

teacher training for nurturing the social-emotional well-being of preschool children can never be overstated. In this regard, SEL teacher training and professional development can play a crucial role as it can enable teachers to model and communicate caring behavior, establish trust, and create a positive culture and climate in Preschool classroom.

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