Re-imagining schools to support psychosocial well-being of teachers and students as a foundation for effective teaching and learning during COVID-19 and beyond
Policy Brief I: Re-imagining schools to support psychosocial well-being of teachers and students as a foundation for effective teaching and learning during COVID-19 and beyond

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Executive Summary

The Policy Brief starts with broader questions on the purpose of schooling and focuses on cultivating the ethics of care, especially as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. With this framework, the brief discusses the deep impact school closures have had on children’s well-being globally due to the pandemic. Children from the most marginalized backgrounds have been hit the hardest, with the pandemic exacerbating socio-economic and racial inequities. For the majority of children, school closures have meant lack of access to physical space for play, decreased physical activity and social interaction with peers, increased screen time, irregular diets and irregular sleeping patterns. These have in turn contributed to increases in psychological challenges and loneliness in the short term which could result in long-term educational disengagement.

The National Education Association in the United States has put out a statement that social-emotional learning (SEL) should be the priority during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.1 Many teachers and experts are calling to include SEL in all aspects of existing curricula. World Bank education experts agree that the SEL component has been neglected and given that millions of children are out-of-school and families continue to suffer financial, mental, emotional and health risks, SEL must be prioritized2. This brief recommends immediate strategies that are currently in place and need to be scaled-up to support well-being for students, teachers, and families and support continued learning. For students, strategies include facilitating outdoor play and activities as much as possible in safe, socially-distanced ways, maintaining routines for children at home, and providing SEL and support in schools. Schools should continue to provide lunch support for the economically marginalized, and children with special needs must be provided online speech and social skills training services. For families, schools should support families with resources to know how to watch out for stress signs in their children, and provide bereavement support as needed. Beyond school of if the school identifies through a religious institution, online spirituality classes provided by religious institutions may help children who are used to going to religious institutions, and other spiritual practices need to be continued to cultivate inner well-being. For older students, well-being can be fostered if some flexibility with regard to school exams is facilitated, and student expectations about upcoming transitions are well managed.

Teachers’ own personal well-being needs to be brought to be considered as a foundation upon which effective teaching and support for learners’ SEL can take place. Teachers are juggling between learning new digital platforms to teach or learning new hybrid forms of content delivery. This adds to stress and more numbers of hours in planning and teaching on top of increased personal challenges that many teachers are facing. Well-being of educators needs to be supported through continued online professional development that addresses the challenges posed by COVID-19. Teacher professional development should not only include content and pedagogical skills but also focus on their social emotional competencies and coping mechanisms. This will help in translating some of the same skills to the students. On the curriculum side, children should be seen as co-creators of blended learning content. Schools should ensure that SEL is prioritized upon re-opening.

Another factor that has impacted both teachers and students is the increased use of technology. Many blended learning models have emerged during the pandemic. However, surveys show that students have increased anxiety and face higher risk of
mental health challenges in part due to the increased use of technology. Screen time that is teacher facilitated, or guided technology experiences are much better than individual viewing. However, there is still a big digital divide and many students are hard to reach and don’t have equitable levels of technology and learning support at home.

This brief also recommends a much bolder agenda on SEL going forward for schools and education systems. SEL should not be implemented in silos as an extra-curricular activity, but should be woven across all subjects. Linkages to the environment and climate change can be made by promoting empathy and the role a healthy environment plays in promoting human well-being. This will provide a holistic treatment where students are connected to their contexts and realities. Schools should become hubs for community well-being. Schools should play key roles in helping to reach out to the parents with materials that will support their parent-child interactions at home, such as providing educational materials for children and their parents to work together on, helping to build close connections between families and schools. Expanding Vygotsky’s 3 C approach on creativity, connection with the social and physical surroundings as well as communication with adults and peers needs to be revisited. This partially aligns with the guiding principles for use of technology by early learners, provided in a U.S. educational policy brief, suggesting strengthening involvement and relationships among parents, educators and the children. Schools’ resources and materials are not only meant for the children, but should be expended to parents for a healthy child-parent-school relationship.

SEL needs of teachers should be prioritized and pre-and in-service training should include SEL content as well as broader integration of SEL in how education systems are managed and how they support their staff. Western SEL models should not be transferred as is to other countries to be implemented without local, culturally-relevant adaptation or development. Play-based teaching methodologies provide children with a range of skills to develop their social, emotional and cognitive skills. Simple, culturally-sensitive diagnostic assessments will help to quickly diagnose the problem areas for continued support to the learner’s well-being. Integrating SEL concepts into blended learning models will help the students to be supported holistically, not just in cognitive skills.

Alongside the pandemic, many children are facing systemic violence at homes and in communities. This includes racial violence against, for instance, Asians and Black communities in the United States, the Rohingya community in Myanmar, and Muslims and Dalits in India. These communities have long histories of experiencing oppression and violation which have been heightened during the pandemic. SEL approaches are increasingly being implemented in school systems, with tools like mindfulness and breathing exercises being used as tools to manage difficult emotions and promote positive feelings, but these approaches need to be bolder and deeper to address different experiences of oppression that learners from different backgrounds face. Educators must be trained to facilitate discussions of difficult issues, with educators and facilitators validating student experiences. Transformative change will require more than just curricular adjustments to tackle these complex issues. This brief suggests to go beyond temporary fixes and “feel-good” curriculum to more system-wide transformative changes that provide space for dialogue to challenge the status-quo. Implementation of effective SEL programs implicitly implies taking care of the people and the planet. Connection with the immediate environment and taking care of community is not optional, it needs to be the educational mandate for curriculums. Developing anti-racist
Policy Brief I: Re-imagining schools to support psychosocial well-being of teachers and students as a foundation for effective teaching and learning during COVID-19 and beyond approaches, dialoging about peace and social justice, discussing the SDGs especially SDG 4.7 should be ingrained in education policies of the nations going forward.
Introduction

The objective of this policy brief is to become aware of the impact of school closures on the social and emotional well-being of children and other key stakeholders within education ecosystems. The brief will provide a birds-eye view on the damage that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused to children’s well-being, and discuss strategies emerging in light of the pandemic. These strategies cover school-wide initiatives that reach parents, teacher support systems, and question traditional modes of content delivery in classrooms. The note then discusses bolder approaches that should continue beyond the pandemic and which require transformative changes in education policies and nationwide implementations. Readers should keep in mind the larger purpose of education and the support that the children need during and beyond the pandemic. How should we build a resilient society? How should we cultivate the ethics of care to “build back better” communities that care for each other? How should children and families be supported starting where they are at - giving special attention to loneliness, sense of loss, and experiences of oppression and inequality - to lead towards activating empathy, endurance, resilience, and hope and courage to take action for change?

The pandemic has brought renewed urgency to age-old societal questions about the broader purpose of education. Over a century ago, foremost education thinker John Dewey explained that “In education meet the three most powerful motives of human activity” which he describes as “social and institutional motives” to promote informed citizenship and the welfare of society, “intellectual and scientific motives” to seek further knowledge, scholarship, and truth, and, pertaining to the social and emotional well-being of educators and learners, “sympathy and affection” shared between them.4 Near the end of the 20th century, UNESCO formed the Commission on Education for the 21st Century, which sought to set out a roadmap for what education should aim to achieve in the 21st century. The commission came up with four pillars of learning that span formal, nonformal, and informal education – Learning to Be, Learning to Know, Learning to Do, and Learning to Live Together, with “Learning To Be” addressing the role of education in guiding learners on their journey to self-fulfilment and meaning, and “Learning to Live Together” dealing with education’s role in equipping citizens to have empathy and skills to promote the betterment of society.5 Dewey’s acknowledgement of the role of education to provide some emotional support to children and the UNESCO Commission’s inclusion of learning to be and to live together are but two examples of how scholarly thinking on the purpose of education have long considered concepts relating to social and emotional learning and well-being as core components.

In recent years prior to the pandemic, these ideas have taken more definitive shape as SEL has been elevated as a core curricular area of education, necessary for building self-awareness and empathy for others in an increasingly diverse, connected, and interdependent world. SEL can be defined as a process for cultivating the necessary skills, attitudes, competencies, and knowledge to learn and achieve well-being6, and to be effective in social interactions7. This brief begins with a review of literature from the past year that highlight where we stand a year into the pandemic, and how schools and education systems are approaching support for adult and student well-being, including through SEL, using online and blended models. The brief continues with a discussion of strategies for support student and teacher well-being. The paper concludes with two sets of recommendations – first to propose actions to address immediate needs of remediation and support during the remaining term of the pandemic, and second to
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propose how SEL and interventions aimed at supporting well-being for education stakeholders can play more focal roles in school environment, education administration, curriculum, planning, and classroom practice beyond the pandemic.

Where We Stand One Year into the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is widely considered to be among the most challenging health crises the world has ever faced, attacking societies at their core. The novel coronavirus has caused unprecedented loss of lives, jobs, and opportunities for people around the world, affecting all segments of the population. The varying tolls the COVID-19 pandemic has taken in different communities and countries have laid bare the stark inequalities that exist along socioeconomic and racial lines, with communities of color hardest hit in terms of health outcomes, and playing disproportionately large roles as essential workers keeping economies and communities afloat. Measures to slow the spread have interrupted conventional schooling drastically with many countries facing school closures, and some areas losing an entire academic year of in-person learning, requiring remediation that may take up the bulk of time once children do return to in-person schools, leading to closer to two years of delayed learning for many children. According to World Bank data, 190 countries have faced complete or partial school closure, affecting more than 1.6 billion students. This has forced Education Sectors to shift dramatically to virtual and blended modes of teaching and learning using various Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools.

Alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is also reckoning with legacies of systemic injustice as is the case with the Black Lives Matter movement, and facing increase in hate-fueled violence, such as that targeted toward Asian Americans in the United States, and targeted towards Muslims in places like India and Myanmar, among many other conflicts. Taken together, these societal disruptions have pushed education systems to rethink their priorities, with many identifying SEL as an area in need of elevation within the curriculum and the wider infrastructure of how education systems support their teachers and staff.

A report by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) on efforts in the United States to elevate SEL during the pandemic found that, among 37 states responding to their survey, 25 (67.5%) considered SEL a top priority alongside COVID-19, with 31 (83.8%) saying SEL had increased in priority since the pandemic. District requests to the state for more SEL content and support increased in 29 (78.4%) of states. States engaged in a number of strategies to support districts and schools, including addressing mental health needs and supporting SEL for teachers and staff, providing professional development for teaching SEL, and implementing SEL strategies through distance learning.

With this drastic increase in demand for SEL, education decision-makers must explore how social and emotional skills and support can be facilitated in flexible, blended ways, particularly in places where physical togetherness is still limited.

Impacts of School Closures on Students’ Well-being

Education has been viewed as a buffer against potential long-term damage of exposure to stress and adversity by offering reliable daily routines in safe environments that can
help learners feel hope\textsuperscript{10}. However, with schools being closed, an important outlet for children and adolescents to interact with peers and develop their social cognition skills was largely taken away\textsuperscript{11}. Many studies point out that schools are one of the most important social environments where interaction with peers affect adolescents’ developing self-concepts, sense of well-being, and behavior\textsuperscript{12}. For younger children, schools are also a place for physical activity and thus school closures during COVID-19 resulted in decreased physical activity, increased screen time, irregular sleeping patterns and less healthy diets\textsuperscript{13}. Many children relied on school to provide meals and to act as safety nets and safe spaces. Cumulatively, the withdrawal from social life and regular daily activities such as attending school, combined with fear and anxiety due to the more unpredictable circumstances presented by COVID-19, could result in increased risk of psychiatric disorders, particularly for children of parents with psychiatric disorders who are also faced with increased fear and uncertainty\textsuperscript{14}. Economically marginalized children with low SES are more likely to face increased psychological challenges, poorer technology management, digital exclusion and long-term educational disengagement\textsuperscript{15}. The move to what Literat calls “emergency remote education”, highlighting the unplanned and underprepared nature of online education during COVID-19, has deepened existing achievement gaps that often fall along socioeconomic and racial lines, bringing additional factors into play such as parents’ digital literacy and availability of quiet, dedicated space in the home where online learning can take place\textsuperscript{16}. Learners from households that struggle to provide these enabling supports for learning at home will fall further behind.

Children with special needs such as those on the autism spectrum are also greatly at risk. Neural atypical children have an increased need for in-person social interaction compared to children who are typically developing, and can become frustrated when daily routines are disrupted\textsuperscript{17}. For children with mental health needs, school closures often mean lack of access to resources they usually receive through school\textsuperscript{18}. A YoungMinds survey of 2111 youth below 25 years old found that 83% of UK based participants said that their mental illness history has worsened due to the pandemic; 26% said that they were unable to access mental health support through peer support groups or through face-to-face services\textsuperscript{19}. Teachers and school administrators have significantly less opportunity to identify and support children who are living in an abusive household due to the lack of in person school, and these physical distancing measures could make children increasingly isolated and more vulnerable to mental illness in an abusive home environment\textsuperscript{20}. China has reported more than a tripling of domestic violence cases during the lockdown (47 to 162 in 2020), disproportionately impacting girls\textsuperscript{21}.

The Right to Education Forum estimates that 37% of girls from disadvantaged Indian households are unlikely to ever return to school. Because of these socio-economic pressures, activists are witnessing a dramatic increase in child marriage and trafficking\textsuperscript{22}. According to Save The Children’s Global Girlhood Report\textsuperscript{23}, 2020 saw approximately 2.5 million more child marriages, taking the overall number to 12.5 million. Moreover, one million more girls were expected to become pregnant during 2020. Childbirth is the leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19 years\textsuperscript{24}. UNICEF has further stated that any progress made in the preceding decades is now under serious threat warning that an additional 10 million child marriages may occur by the end of 2029.

A study conducted by Magson et. al (2020) on adolescent mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that adolescents experienced significant increases in
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depressive symptoms and anxiety and a decrease in life satisfaction, adversely affecting girls more than boys. In addition, COVID-19 related worries, online learning difficulties and increased conflict with parents predicted increases in mental health challenges. On the positive side, adherence to stay-at-home orders and feeling socially connected during the COVID-19 lockdown protected against poor mental health. In a qualitative analysis of nearly 2,000 TikTok videos using the hashtag “#onlineschool”, aiming to capture themes being expressed by youth voices on their own terms about the experience of online learning, Literat found key themes to include “a perceived increase in workload”, “lack of motivation”, “mental health challenges”, “seeking support from teachers”, “peer-to-peer support”, “making family life visible”, and “making socioeconomic contexts visible.” Research like this seeking to understand youth perspectives through their own modes of expression can help inform more effective strategies for supporting youth learning and well-being.

Strategies for Supporting Teacher and Student Well-being

Social Emotional Learning for Teachers and Students

The National Education Association in the United States has put out a statement that Social Emotional Learning should be the priority during and post-COVID-19 crisis. Many teachers and experts are calling to include SEL in all aspects of existing curricula. World Bank education experts agree that the SEL component has been neglected and given that millions of children are out-of-school and families continue to suffer financial, mental, emotional and health risks, SEL must be prioritized.

Research shows that SEL is most effective when integrated into routine education practices, with explicit learning goals pursued through sequenced, active approaches, and that these approaches can improve academic performance. During early childhood, social and emotional skills are evidenced by the tasks that children are able to complete in their interactions with adults. Harvard’s EASEL Lab conducted their SEL Taxonomy project to review dozens of existing SEL programs and frameworks in order to identify common focus areas. The project identified six main domains, including Cognitive, Emotion, Social, Values, Perspectives, and Identity. In school settings, key SEL competencies that educators teaching SEL aim to cultivate across these domains include emotional expression and regulation, perspective-taking, empathy, social problem-solving, goal-setting, responsible decision-making, and self-awareness, as well as the ability to listen, take turns, and cooperate. Play is an important factor in determining the social and emotional well-being of children where they are able to learn and practice key SEL competencies, including cognitive skills, social interaction, social cohesion and bonding among peers.

Physical Spaces to Play

Research shows that children who spend time playing outside experience better motor development and focus, lower rates of obesity, reduced attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and lower levels of anger, aggression, stress, and depression. Research also shows links between time spent outdoors in childhood and concern for protecting the environment later in life. Yet with the closure of parks and playgrounds, young children
have been restricted to homes and focusing on e-learning and their cognitive abilities alone\textsuperscript{36}. Goagoses, Winschers-Theophilus, Chamunorwa\textsuperscript{37} bring our attention to children's “bioecological development” which emphasizes reciprocal social interactions (e.g. with family members and peers) and their immediate environment (e.g. home, kindergarten, playgrounds, etc.). Therefore, limiting the social interaction to online may have serious detrimental impacts on young growing minds. Drane and O’Shea (2020) narrate that, during the pandemic, children have been denied access to the one place they feel safe and nurtured, school. The reduced time children spend engaging in free, play-based peer interaction can have a hindering effect on their social and cognitive development.

**Equipping teachers with skills to support their own and their students’ well-being**

In their landscape review on teacher well-being in low-resource, crisis, and conflict-affected settings, Falk, Varni, Finder and Frisoli (2019) discuss how, despite evidence of the key role teachers play in student learning and of the stressful nature of the profession, little attention goes to directly support teacher well-being. Teachers’ own psychological needs must be addressed before they can support the psychosocial needs of learners\textsuperscript{38}, yet the COVID-19 pandemic has placed many teachers in the unprecedented situation of having to adapt to new ways of teaching and support urgent social-emotional needs of their learners while at the same time balancing heightened challenges and concerns in their own lives. Survey findings by the Collaborative for Social Emotional and Academic Learning (CASEL) and Yale’s Center for Emotional Intelligence showed that US teachers’ most commonly cited emotions during this crisis are feeling anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed and sad. Teachers cited worry over themselves or loved ones contracting COVID-19, but also the anxiety they feel over trying to juggle caring for their own families at home while also trying to work full time from home and figuring out how to transfer their teaching practice to online platforms, which many have very little if any experience using\textsuperscript{59}. As more districts open and offer both all-remote and hybrid or in-person models, additional stressors for teachers include concerns for their safety and learning to navigate new safety regulations, as well as trying to juggle between students who are choosing to continue online and others who have started attending in-person.

In an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, Hadar et al (2020) argue that COVID-19 presents a kind of “Black Swan” outlier event that exemplifies the extremes of these VUCA conditions, and demonstrates the need for teacher education programs to prepare teachers with SEL skills that not only support day-to-day well-being, but also prepare them to face future “Black Swans”. In a survey of student teachers and teacher educators from a higher education institution in Israel on how they coped with the COVID-19 pandemic, Hadar et al (2020) found that student teachers struggled to cope with all four VUCA conditions. Teacher educators described these struggles in similar ways, with the added layer of how they attempted to adapt their teaching to focus less on their curriculum and more on students' immediate social and emotional needs. Examples of how teacher educators did this included focusing on the students’ well-being by giving personal attention, reducing workload, attending to feelings by making time for discussion during Zoom calls, and intentionally slowing things down. In addition, they listened more, tried to provide a calming virtual environment, and established relationships with the students to provide the support that their students
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needed. The Hadar, et. al. study recommends a revision of the teacher education curriculum to include more of a balance between building student teachers’ content and pedagogical skills and their social emotional competencies and coping mechanisms. Such skills are important to enable student teachers to moderate future “Black Swan” VUCA events and day-to-day stresses of their students, as well as to help model and teach SEL competencies to their students. Examples of how such skills can be taught include through mindfulness and stress management techniques, case studies, teamwork to tackle issues, and familiarity with research on crisis management. Please see Figure 1 in the Appendix that shows the external conditions imposed by COVID-19.

It must be noted that promoting teacher well-being while at the time advocating for increased workload for teachers in the way of professional development for facilitating SEL in classrooms creates a bit of a paradox. Such trade-offs must be weighed carefully, with professional development for teachers designed in ways that are mindful of their workload and integrated in ways that are as minimally disruptive to their teaching and work-life balance as possible.

**Technology limitations and successes**

Early in the pandemic, as governments the world over put in place “social distancing” guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19, the World Health Organization announced the term “physical distancing” as a better term that emphasized the need for distancing without implying that social connections couldn’t continue in other ways. Education technology has helped mitigate many challenges of COVID-19 by enabling some form of learning and social connection to continue, but has at the same time created new challenges to well-being with so many people spending more time in front of screens than ever.

Starting even before the pandemic, technology has replaced many face-to-face interactions between teachers and students from PreK to higher education. Blended-learning models have found a way into universities, and K-12 students are learning more and more through online platforms like YouTube, public TV shows, WhatsApp, and through Zoom meetings. A longitudinal study reveals that, compared to prior academic terms, college students in the Winter 2020 term were more sedentary, anxious, and depressed. In a university-based survey of 5200 students, Lischer, Safi and Dickson show that university students are better off if the teachers give distance-learning work assignments at an early stage with clear directions. Therefore, teacher preparation to facilitate online and technology-based classes has a direct link to students’ academic and mental well-being. The survey results also revealed that zoom meeting fatigue impacts student well-being. Students now have to learn various platforms for classes as well as handle the flood of emails and instructions from the universities and schools. As a result, the survey revealed that 85.8% of the students reported symptoms of anxiety with a majority being women facing a higher risk of developing mental health problems. The survey revealed that the sudden transition to online learning has been stressful for both teachers and students. Students and teachers now not only have to master the content but also become digitally literate.

As systems of education have moved online, education systems from local to national and international levels began providing SEL resources and teacher professional development in attempts to quickly catch up to the immediate needs of their learning
communities. What have these efforts revealed about the potential for supporting the SEL needs of teachers and students through technology? In CASEL’s survey of states on their SEL practices during the pandemic, they found many examples of states leveraging previously developed SEL professional development content, and developing new training programs and resources to support teacher and staff well-being, as well as to build skills for teaching SEL. One notable example comes from New Mexico, where their Remote Learning guidance encourages teachers to reflect on the cultures and values from the families of the students they serve as part of their support for students’ social and emotional needs.

Even with supportive tools and resources disseminated to districts and schools, teachers’ abilities to implement SEL approaches that may be new to them amidst learning to teach online and dealing with their own heightened personal challenges may be limited, and can be supplemented with online resources for students’ self-led learning. A review of Google Play Store by Goagoses, Winschiers-Theophilus, Chamunorwa revealed that there are many applications that help with students’ cognitive ability, however limited results came up to support students’ social and emotional needs. They also found that applications that were originally developed for older children are now being adapted and used by a younger age group to fill the educational gap during COVID-19. Children interact actively with technology rather than being passive users, shaping their digital play as interactive experiences.

With the increased use of technology during the pandemic, there is greater risk of cyber bullying and inappropriate materials. Drane, Vernon, and O’Shea note that 471,600 families in the lower quintile of households in New Zealand reported that their children were exposed to inappropriate materials when online (the survey was conducted in 2018, and this number is likely to increase during the pandemic).

A positive outcome of the pandemic is that parents and their children seem to be “co-viewing” media together more. This may have a positive effect on learning through conversations by developing vocabulary and the understanding of complex issues.

**Inclusivity for marginalized children**

The pandemic has further exacerbated the already wide gap in learning between those with privilege and digital access and those without. This is a massive problem which could set back an entire generation. Disadvantaged and disconnected communities deserve the same opportunities for their children. As we have seen during the pandemic, even within a small radius, children of different races, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds or geographic locations with access to the same internet connectivity face a divide. Some children have access to full online learning, whilst others do not. Digital inclusion is not just about devices, technology and connectivity. That is simply an access problem. True inclusion is about creating an equal footing for children from marginalized communities by providing them with tools that are also available to children who are in a more advantageous position, such as access to remedial education opportunities to address gaps in fundamental skills like literacy and numeracy, along with social-emotional skills such as empathy to understand differences and recognize injustice.

Drane, Vernon, and O’Shea cite UNESCO’s recommendations to ensure that all students are included in plans for distance learning by examining the availability of technology at
homes and at school and providing technology tools to families in need. According to reports only 8% of homes with young children in India have a computer system with internet connectivity\textsuperscript{58}. UNESCO also prescribes to address psychosocial challenges before any teaching takes place. Another vital recommendation is to create communities that enhance connection so that social isolation could be avoided. In several states in India, a multi-stakeholder approach including local officials and community members was activated to stop child marriages, which were observed as being on the rise as a result of the economic pressures of the pandemic\textsuperscript{59}. A large network of allies, including school principals, women’s and men’s groups, and even caterers and sweet sellers, created barriers to detect and avert marriages. The authors discuss this idea of connectedness as vital especially for vulnerable student populations who are already at risk of low academic outcomes and poorer social outcomes such as disruptive behavior and disengagement\textsuperscript{60}. Such connectedness must be fostered between teachers and students, as well as between schools and families, with schools helping to disseminate resources for various types of support services to families, including for social and emotional well-being.

In the US, there are over seven million children with disabilities (mental, emotional-behavioral, physical, and more) that require special services in school\textsuperscript{61}. Schools are required by law to fulfill the special education needs of children. Schools have continued to provide therapeutic services online\textsuperscript{62}, however many children have needs that are more difficult to support virtually. In a survey of youth up to age 25 with a mental illness history in the UK, 83% said the pandemic had made their conditions worse, and 26% said school and other closures made them unable to access mental health support\textsuperscript{63}.

**Addressing home-based, community-based, and systemic violence**

When stay-at-home orders were first put in place, domestic violence services organizations expected a wave of demand for services, but many experienced the opposite, which experts attribute to victims being unable to safely connect with services, as well as teachers having a harder time recognizing signs due to not seeing their students everyday, leading to what may likely be higher rates of domestic violence that are going unreported\textsuperscript{64}.

At local and national, and international levels, communities are reckoning with systemic forms of racist violence. In the United States, the Stop Asian Hate movement has grown in response to heightened violence directed toward Asian Americans and Asian immigrants, largely attributed to anti-Asian rhetoric promoted by certain people in power and promulgated through the media in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Black Lives Matter movement gathered momentum in the wake of the murders by police of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others, with parallels to the End SARS movement in Nigeria. In Myanmar, Rohingya Muslims have been pushed out by military and police into cramped refugee camps in Bangladesh, while Muslims in India have been the target of growing Hindu nationalism. China has been accused of committing genocide and crimes against humanity toward the Uighur Muslim population. In Ethiopia, ethnic violence along the Amhara and Oromia border has soared over land and power leading up to their June 2021 election.

The rise of these movements highlights the links between unexamined biases that contribute to upholding racist systems and SEL competencies like self-awareness and
empathy that can help contribute to examining and breaking down harmful biases. A case study looking at how a set of SEL activity groups navigated switching from in-person, to virtual, to physically-distanced in-person models, highlighted how, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the SEL sessions created space for students to discuss their emotions, with facilitators validating their experiences, and noting that mindfulness activities in particular helped students manage the difficult emotions and stresses they were facing.55

In their report “Rethinking Learning”, Duraiappah, Mercier, and Singh 66 discuss how research in social cognition and neuroscience has deepened our understanding of the origins of violence and hatred, as well as how conceptions promoting peace can be facilitated. Thanks to neuroplasticity, we know the brain can rewire itself through training and practice. The authors note that programs in mindfulness, which is taught in some SEL programs, and emotional regulation can help reduce aggression and violence and promote more peaceful, prosocial behavior.67 As Simmons 68 notes, many popular SEL frameworks do not explicitly confront forms of racist violence and various societal inequities, and SEL is often taught in ways that are divorced from the larger sociopolitical context. Teachers have valid concerns about being accused of politicization, or of being ill-equipped to discuss complex issues.69 Camangian and Cariaga 70 call for education for humanization, arguing that existing SEL frameworks fail to offer adequate analysis of intersecting oppressions and their impact on well-being of oppressed people and communities, serving to propagate existing power relations. SEL curriculum and programming, if implemented through an anti-racist, restorative justice lens, can offer opportunities to build skills for self-awareness that can help learners explore their biases, as well as skills for empathy that can help learners understand the struggles of others. It can also build skills for resilience and perseverance that can help equip learners to take action to address these different layers of violence and push through challenges. Duraiappah, Mercier, and Singh 71 discuss how educators must incorporate such opportunities for student reflection, classroom discussion, and other projects to deepen learning. SEL approaches should aim to build understanding that some students from marginalized backgrounds can master all these SEL skills and still struggle with their unique experiences of oppression. As Shirley 72 argues in his article “Beyond Well-being: The Quest for Wholeness and Purpose in Education”, we must question how well-being is defined and push for conceptions that go beyond individual “positive feelings” to consider the well-being of society, and understand that it can be healthy to temporarily sacrifice a degree of individual happy feelings in pursuit of purposeful goals that benefit other people, the environment, or society as a whole.

Recommendations

Necessary Remediation During the Pandemic

While progress is being made in many parts of the world, particularly in the global north, getting populations vaccinated and continuing to reduce rates of transmission, new pandemic hotspots have more recently emerged in places like India, with new variants continuing to spread. To enable communities to continue physical distancing and taking safety measures as needed, education systems must continue building upon lessons learned to date on best practices for facilitating SEL and interventions aimed at supporting teacher, student, and family well-being through remote and blended models.
Some recommended interventions for supporting family, educator, and student well-being along with student academic, social, and emotional learning include:

**Well-being of families**

- Goldschmidt recommends that caregivers create daily routines and talk to children openly about COVID-19, using age-appropriate language. The CDC also recommends limiting children's time on television and social media.\(^7\)

- Schools need to be supported to provide lunch programs for marginalized families to avoid food insecurity related stress.\(^7\)

- For children with special needs, Lee\(^7\) cites a psychiatrist who recommends parents create a schedule for their children to reduce anxiety. Children respond well to routines and this reduces anxiety levels. Lee\(^7\) also recommends finding online speech and social skills training for children on the autism spectrum.


- Spiritual needs of the children have been neglected with places of worship and religious classes cancelled. Churches have resumed online and children’s liturgy is added on the online platform\(^7\). Regardless of religious beliefs, students can be encouraged to develop inner resources to cultivate a sense of inner peace & connectivity to the self. The cultivation of inner peace is being considered a kernel for collective peace and can contribute towards the well-being of individuals and communities\(^7\).

**Well-being of educators**

- Teachers, school staff, and student teachers must be provided with resources to support their own well-being.\(^8\)

- Broader policy shifts that promote increased teacher pay, access to affordable healthcare and childcare must also be considered to enable greater teacher well-being.
Well-being of students

- Cancelling or postponing university entrance examinations will ease the stress among youth, understanding that this also comes with trade-offs of delaying life goals of learners. Lee (2020) notes that students suffered from loss of appetite and loss of sleep due to exam worry. School counselors could come-up with ways to manage this uncertainty in relation to delayed career goals or class progression.

- College and university students are stressed about college dormitory evacuations and cancellation of anticipated events such as internships, graduation ceremonies. Managing their expectations will be key and conducting many of these events online will ease the stress. Finding safe online research or other part-time opportunities will help students to engage in meaningful work.

- A general review by Goagoses, Winschiers-Theophilus, and Chamunorwa of the impact of technology on SEL showed that the impact was positive on children with autism. The authors suggested a systematic review of these applications. They cite research that suggests that children like stories, they like developing a relationship with the characters, they like to be creators, collaborators and want to be in control. It will be critical to see children as co-designers of technology-based content. Involving the children in the technology design will be critical. Technology should consider the home context of the students where they will be deployed.

Student Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

- Schools should ensure that upon-reopening, SEL should be prioritized. Play-based methods for younger children will improve well-being and their sense of belonging and in turn their academic outcomes.

- Reimers, Schleicher, Saavendra, and Tuominen provide a compendium of educational resources that are useful for cognitive, and SEL related abilities.

- Assessing where the students are in their learning and forming one-to-one instructions will be the most effective academic intervention post lockdown.

Forward Looking Agenda

Few events in recent history have had as great an impact on as many people as has the COVID-19 pandemic. The tremendous loss of life and blows to the health and well-being of families across the world must push us to re-imagine our systems of education and all sectors to be more nurturing of our individual and collective well-being. Connections between emergence of infectious diseases like COVID-19 and environmental crises like climate change and biodiversity loss cannot be ignored. At this juncture we not only need an integration of SEL frameworks and activities to be integrated in all school activities, but we need transformative thinking to make big bold moves throughout the education system. Some of these ideas are listed below. As we look ahead to a future beyond COVID-19, what lessons from the pandemic must we bring with us to make our
education systems more equitable, resilient, and centered around well-being and healthy relationships among people, and between people and our natural environment?

Happy teachers, happy students

- Teacher training programs must foster a culture from the beginning of teachers’ careers that creates space for self-reflection, and peer-to-peer and institutional support for teacher well-being. Integration of SEL for adult student teachers, including SEL skills to support their own well-being, and to support their students’ well-being and SEL competencies, should be integrated as part of teacher training colleges and curriculum.88

- School systems must continue to build on progress made to date putting in place supports for teacher and staff well-being and ongoing adult SEL as part of their professional development.

Contextualized SEL implemented across education policy, curricula, and practice

- SEL must be contextualized for various cultures and communities for integration into all subjects and into the education system policies and practices.

- Children have a right to play, and play-based learning methodologies can address multiple intelligences and ensure a “breadth of skills” approach so that no child is left behind in developing their social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

- Develop simple, contextually aligned, school-based diagnostic assessments on SEL competencies to support the continued improvement of SEL programming and support for learner well-being.

Blended learning models enabling more holistic, connected ways of learning

- Blended learning models can offer non-linear ways of learning that crosscut homes, schools, online learning spaces, tutors, peer learning, and collaboration between learners from across the world to facilitate youth leadership in global problem solving. There is evidence from the Bharat Padhe initiative started by the Government of India during COVID-19 that could be enhanced to include more comprehensive.89 While return to in-person learning will be important for fostering social, emotional, and cognitive development in learners, certain unique benefits of online education that have been honed during the pandemic can continue to enhance learning.

- Trans-disciplinary work is needed with governments as the central coordinating agency. 90 Gaagoses, Winschiers-Theophilus, and Chamunorwa (2020) state that with the pandemic situation, governments are using technology for educational purposes more than ever before. Therefore, this opens a window of opportunity for the government to drive the creation of educational digital platforms that enables networking to create transdisciplinary work among all the stakeholders involved.

Schools as hubs for community well-being

- Schools can play key roles helping to disseminate information about resources and services available to families, and fostering community connection through
 partnerships and programming. Schools can facilitate peer learning and peer facilitation among teachers and other community-members of adult SEL and to address other community priorities.

- Vygotsky’s thoughts on the social nature of learning focuses on the 3 C approach which centers on creativity, connection with the social and physical surroundings as well as communication with adults and peers. This partially aligns with the guiding principles for use of technology by early learners, provided in a U.S. educational policy brief, suggesting strengthening involvement and relationships among parents, educators, and the children.

**Empathy for each other and for planet**

- As communities across the world are reckoning with long histories of racism and various forms of discrimination, SEL policy, curriculum, learning materials, and classroom practice should take an anti-racist, courageous approach, and create opportunities for learners to grapple with how injustice and inequity impact people’s lives in different ways.

- This is also a great time to teach about empathy and global citizenship to children: The UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 promotes skills for sustainable development and global citizenship, offering a powerful tool to promote education that can make the world more equitable and just. COVID-193 gives us another opportunity to teach children about equity and social justice. Peace Educators are developing curricula and lesson plans to talk about the race and justice issues that became even more pronounced during the pandemic. As culturally appropriate, curricula and lesson plans might consider secular interpretations of spiritual lessons from religious leaders such as Pope Francis who in his latest encyclical, Fratelli Tutti talks about respecting human rights and considers this key to any country’s social and economic development. Education could be a conduit of humanistic values and philosophies such as the African philosophy of Ubuntu and Karma that of India that are regionally and culturally relevant.

Investing in professional development and resources on SEL and well-being for teachers is the need of the hour. Both pre- and in-service teacher training needs to be re-imagined not just to include SEL as another set of pedagogical tools and content to teach learners, but to prioritize teacher and learner well-being as foundations for effective teaching and learning. Transformation is needed in learning standards, curriculums, examinations, and teaching practices to have SEL and well-being at the center, with conceptions of well-being including well-being of the community and society at large, and SEL approaches that recognize tensions and inequalities and which are contextualized in communities’ sociopolitical realities. SEL should be viewed as a tool that brings transformative changes in education that provides the space to question the power dynamics in the society and drives the school curriculum to be justice driven. Content delivery needs to drastically change to blended learning models with innovative uses of technology that reach the students’ homes as well. Education should reach the families and make them co-facilitators in the learning process. SEL should not be seen as an add-on but should form part of the core with frameworks connecting to the learners’ lives, their cultures, values, experiences, and practices. This cannot be tackled in one subject or as an extra-
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curricular activity, and should be embedded in the “way of life” at school, extending to homes using trans-disciplinary approaches.
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Figure 1:

Appendix

Source: Hadar et al (2020)

Note: ST are student teachers (students) and TE are the Teacher Educators

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