

Embedding Social Emotional Learning in Public Early Childhood Programs: Lessons from India's ICDS

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Abstract

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is critical for holistic early childhood development, yet its integration into large-scale public programs remains inconsistent, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. This study examines the incorporation of SEL within India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the world's largest early childhood development program, focusing on children aged 3–6 in Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). While SEL is recognized in India's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) framework, its practical implementation within ICDS remains fragmented. Using Kingdon's Policy Streams Model, this study explores how SEL can be embedded within public early childhood systems. The Delphi method was employed to gather expert insights, identifying key strategies, challenges, and opportunities. Findings highlight the need for a standardized SEL framework to ensure equitable access, while also addressing systemic barriers such as infrastructural constraints, overburdened Anganwadi workers, and regional disparities. This study contributes to global discussions on scaling SEL in public early education, offering insights for policymakers and educators. Key recommendations include integrating SEL into national curricula, strengthening workforce training, and fostering community-driven implementation. By bridging policy and practice, this research provides a roadmap for embedding SEL within early childhood programs globally. By aligning policy and practice, this research offers a roadmap to harness the potential of SEL for reimagining early childhood education under India's evolving educational frameworks.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Public Early Education, Anganwadi Centres (AWCs)

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the significant number of children worldwide who may face challenges related to social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) (O'Farrell et al., 2022). These issues have garnered increased attention due to their potential impact on children's academic performance and overall well-being. Loades and Mastroyannopoulou (2010) emphasize that globally, approximately 20% of school-age children and adolescents experience SEBD. This fact highlights the need for early identification and intervention to support children's socio-emotional needs.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is widely regarded as a cornerstone for holistic child development, particularly within India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme, which addresses the health, nutritional, and educational needs of children under six years of age (Kaul &

Sankar, 2009; Rao & Pearson, 2007). As one of the world's largest public programs for early childhood development, ICDS has made notable strides in improving nutritional and health outcomes (Chopra & Sharma, 2014; NIPCCD, 2016). However, gaps persist in addressing Social Emotional Learning (SEL), an area increasingly recognized as fundamental for fostering emotional regulation, resilience, and social skills thereby contributing directly to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3) and Quality Education (SDG 4) (Britto et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2019). Despite its relevance, SEL has not been systematically embedded within India's ECCE framework, leaving gaps in equitable implementation and scalability (Bose, 2019; Sharma & Gupta, 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2018).

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This research employs Kingdon's Policy Streams Model to analyze the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) within India's ICDS programme, focusing on Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). The framework helps assess how problem identification (e.g., SEL gaps), policy formulation (e.g., proposed SEL frameworks), and political momentum converge—or fail to converge—for systemic reform (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2003). This model is particularly relevant for analyzing India's ECCE policy, as it provides a framework to critically examine whether SEL integration is genuinely positioned as a viable policy solution or remains an aspirational goal.

While there is growing recognition of early childhood development as a priority, it is essential to interrogate who defines this priority, which stakeholders are involved, and whether consensus exists among policymakers, educators, and community leaders. The model further aids in uncovering systemic barriers (such as resource limitations, misaligned priorities, or political inertia) and potential enablers, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing SEL implementation.

2. Background

2.1 Significance of ICDS as a Policy Initiative

The ICDS, launched in 1975, represents one of India's most expansive and impactful early childhood care and development programs. Official data as recent as 30th June, 2022 presents the number of 30.317 million children as beneficiaries for the Pre-School Education (PSE) Program (interchangeably used along with ECCE or ECE) (ASER, 2023). As the world's largest public-sector program, the ICDS has been instrumental in addressing malnutrition, reducing child mortality, and promoting school readiness, particularly for marginalized populations in rural and urban areas (Kaul & Sankar, 2009). While the ICDS emphasizes community-driven approaches through its employment of Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), scholars argue that its effectiveness is often constrained by resource shortages, uneven implementation, and the complexities of local governance (Mohapatra et al., 2021). This dual perspective necessitates a deeper analysis of how ICDS navigates its objectives within broader political and institutional contexts.

2.2 The Political and Policy Evolution of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in India

The evolution of ECE in India is rooted in global political advocacy that brought ECE into the problem and policy streams, as described by Kingdon (2011). International frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (EFA), and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framed ECE as a critical tool to addressing poverty, gender inequality, and human development (UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2019). Events like the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and the Moscow Framework for Action (2010) further emphasized ECE's foundational role, pushing nations to prioritize it in their policies (Barrett et al., 2015). Such frameworks were not merely educational initiatives but politically driven efforts that aligned with international funding mechanisms and developmental goals, pr-

ensuring countries like India to adapt their policies to meet global benchmarks (Barrett et al., 2015). In India, this global momentum catalyzed the creation of the National ECCE Policy (2013) and the transformative National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. These policies underscored early learning's significance in achieving foundational literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development by integrating experiential and play-based learning into curriculums (Government of India, 2020). Scholars highlight that these developments reflect both external influences and recognition of ECE's economic and social benefits, such as improved workforce readiness and reduced inequalities (Britto et al., 2011). However, critiques note tensions between international calls for standardized frameworks and India's need for locally relevant approaches, illustrating the complexity of translating global agendas into actionable policies (Yoshikawa et al., 2018).

2.3 Growing Global Recognition of SEL and Its Alignment with SDGs

SEL is increasingly recognized as integral to achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) (UNICEF, 2019). By fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, SEL equips children to navigate developmental and social challenges effectively (CASEL, 2012; Weissberg et al., 2015). Meta-analyses, such as Durlak et al. (2011), demonstrate SEL's potential to enhance academic achievement and emotional resilience, with benefits extending into improved classroom behavior and reduced behavioral problems.

However, critiques reveal challenges in integrating SEL within diverse sociocultural contexts. Scholars such as Megan Boler (1999) argue that SEL frameworks often reflect neoliberal agendas that prioritize individual responsibility over systemic reform, framing emotional competencies as tools for economic productivity rather than holistic well-being. Critics also highlight the risk of cultural homogenization, where standardized SEL frameworks may fail to address the diverse cultural and contextual needs of students in developing countries (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). These critiques underscore the need for culturally responsive and locally relevant SEL approaches that balance global frameworks with grassroots needs.

Thus, while SEL aligns with global educational and developmental goals, its implementation must navigate complex tensions between standardization and cultural specificity, as well as individual and systemic priorities, to truly fulfill its transformative potential.

2.4 Rationale

India's NEP 2020 emphasizes holistic education and integrates SEL into its vision for foundational learning (Government of India, 2020). However, a disconnect persists between policy aspirations and on-ground implementation. While ICDS evaluations primarily focus on nutritional and health outcomes (Chopra & Sharma, 2014; NIPCCD, 2016), there is limited exploration of SEL's integration into its ECE framework. Existing studies highlight operational barriers such as workforce training, resource constraints, and curriculum inconsistencies (Bose, 2019; Sharma & Gupta, 2020), but rarely address culturally relevant SEL strategies or interventions tailored to AWCs.

Additionally, SEL research often relies on Western frameworks like CASEL (2012), which may not align with India's socio-cultural context (Kaul, 2021). Despite the NCFES (NCERT, 2022) defining SEL competencies, empirical evidence on its implementation, effectiveness, and scalability within ICDS is scarce. This research addresses these gaps by examining current SEL practices, challenges, and outcomes in AWCs, using Kingdon's Policy Streams Model to evaluate the alignment of problems, solutions, and political will for systemic reform (Kingdon, 1995). By linking SEL to SDGs 3 and 4, the study contributes to the discourse on quality early childhood education and inclusive development (UNICEF, 2019).

3. Literature Review

3.1 SEL in ECE

Children develop emotional regulation and social competence through early interactions, both at home and in structured early education settings (Blewitt et al., 2020). High-quality ECCE programs are critical for supporting these skills, as demonstrated in studies such as the Carolina Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al., 2012) and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart et al., 2005). These studies highlight that high-quality ECE programs lead to improved long-term outcomes, including higher graduation rates, better employment opportunities, and enhanced social competence. These findings contributed to SEL's rise as a policy focus, emphasizing emotional and behavioral readiness as essential developmental goals. However, critiques by Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) caution that SEL's popularity aligns with neoliberal discourses, prioritizing workforce preparation and self-regulation over transformative learning. Kingdon's Policy Streams Model (1995) helps to determine if this shift is politically motivated rather than purely developmental, highlighting how SEL may have emerged as a desirable solution within global advocacy frameworks like SDGs.

While studies highlight the long-term benefits of high-quality ECCE programs, critics like Bailey et al. (2017) also argue that these effects may fade over time, raising concerns about sustainability. Barnett (2011) also emphasizes that success often depends on program implementation quality and localizing context, particularly in low-resource settings. These critiques suggest the need for careful evaluation of scalability and cultural relevance before applying such models in contexts like India, where systemic challenges may hinder similar outcomes.

Edward Zigler's (1960) concept of '*social competence*' emphasized SEL as a foundation for academic and emotional growth, arguing that developing these skills early is critical for long-term success. Raver and Zigler (1997) extended this idea, stating that SEL supports resilience, adaptability, and positive behavioral outcomes. However, critiques of SEL highlight several conceptual and practical challenges that warrant careful consideration. Zembylas (2007) critiques SEL for depoliticizing emotions, shifting the burden of emotional regulation onto individuals while ignoring structural inequalities and socio-economic contexts. While Jones and Bouffard (2012) stress the importance of adapting SEL frameworks to cultural contexts, Oberle et al. (2016) critique the absence of structured teacher training programs, leaving educators unprepared to integrate SEL effectively and in a culturally appropriate way into classrooms. These critiques are particularly relevant in contexts like India, where structural inequities shape the lived experiences of children and educators.

3.2 Global and Cultural Contexts in SEL Implementation

Globally, frameworks such as Australia's Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and Singapore's Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) emphasize culturally embedded SEL practices. These models integrate emotional resilience and social engagement into national curricula, supported by structured teacher training and assessment mechanisms (Ng, 2014). Finland's focus on embedding emotional intelligence programs into primary education further illustrates the potential for holistic approaches to SEL (OECD, 2015). However, transplanting these frameworks to the Indian context without cultural adaptation risks undermining their effectiveness (Kaul, 2021).

Critics caution against uncritical adoption of Western SEL frameworks, such as those developed by CASEL, which may conflict with local socio-cultural norms (Kaul, 2021). For instance, the emphasis on individual achievement and emotional self-regulation in Western frameworks may overlook the collective and relational values central to many Indian communities. This underscores the need for SEL models that

are both evidence-based and culturally responsive, ensuring alignment with India's unique social fabric.

3.3 Policy Context in India: Bridging Intent and Practice

India's National ECCE Policy (2013) and NEP 2020 articulate a vision for holistic child development, including SEL. The NCFES (NCERT, 2022) further identifies SEL competencies as essential components of early childhood education. However, these policies lack operational clarity, particularly in resource-constrained settings like AWCs. Sharma and Gupta (2020) argue that NEP 2020's prioritization of foundational literacy and numeracy often sidelines SEL, perpetuating a fragmented approach to child development.

From a governmentality perspective, Akhil Gupta's (2012) critique of ICDS highlights how state-led welfare programs often prioritize measurable outcomes, such as nutrition and health, over less tangible aspects like socio-emotional development. This reflects a broader tension between standardization and the nuanced, localized needs of children. Furthermore, the absence of culturally relevant tools and structured teacher training undermines the policy's potential to deliver on its holistic vision (Singh & Mukherjee, 2020).

3.4 Challenges in SEL Implementation in ICDS

SEL implementation in India's ICDS faces multiple structural and systemic challenges. Despite its emphasis on holistic development, ICDS remains primarily focused on nutrition and health outcomes, leaving SEL underexplored and under-implemented (Chopra & Sharma, 2014). While the ECCE policy recognizes the need for socio-emotional development, limited targeted interventions within ICDS result in fragmented delivery (Pal, 2020).

Structural barriers such as untrained staff, fragmented curricula, and a lack of culturally responsive tools impede SEL integration (Kaul, 2021). AWWs, who form the backbone of ICDS, are often overburdened with multiple responsibilities, leaving little time for SEL practices (Bose, 2019). These gaps highlight broader systemic limitations, including insufficient workforce training, absence of monitoring systems, and inequities between urban and rural settings (Singh & Mukherjee, 2020).

From a political and policy perspective, Aradhana Sharma's (2008) work on neoliberal governance critiques ICDS as operating not just as a welfare program but also as a regulatory tool that perpetuates inequalities through decentralized governance and accountability frameworks. Sharma argues that ICDS embodies the contradictions of empowerment and regulation, where the responsibility for addressing developmental challenges is shifted to local actors like AWWs without sufficient structural support. This mirrors critiques by Ecclestone and Hayes (2009), who caution that SEL frameworks prioritize compliance and workforce readiness over transformative learning and equity.

Kingdon's Policy Streams Model (1995) provides a useful lens to analyze these systemic issues. SEL implementation within ICDS exists as a recognized need in the problem stream but struggles to enter the policy and political streams due to competing priorities. The dominance of health and nutrition metrics as measurable outcomes, coupled with fragmented accountability mechanisms, creates inertia in advancing SEL as a central priority. Political trade-offs further hinder SEL integration, as policymakers may resist reforms requiring significant resource redistribution or structural changes.

Moreover, the reliance on global frameworks such as SDGs has created a push for measurable, standardized indicators, which often conflict with the localized, culturally responsive approaches required for SEL implementation (Hoffman, 2009). This tension between standardization and adaptability exacerbates implementation gaps, limiting the scalability and effectiveness of SEL practices within ICDS. This study positions SEL implementation within ICDS as a complex policy challenge shaped by structural

constraints, political agendas, and neoliberal governance practices. It investigates how systemic challenges persist in the problem stream, and evaluates whether SEL can transition into actionable reforms within the policy and political streams.

4. Method

4.1 Research Design. This study employed a modified Delphi method to gather expert consensus on integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) within the ICDS Programme. The Delphi method was selected for its iterative process of refining expert opinions and its ability to address complex, emerging topics requiring structured frameworks (Zhong et al., 2014). Its flexibility supported multiple rounds of data collection and refinement, ensuring nuanced perspectives were incorporated.

4.2 Research Questions. To guide the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the current challenges or concerns regarding the integration of SEL into the ICDS Programme?
2. What are the emerging best practices and policy solutions which may support the integration of SEL into the ICDS Programme?
3. What role does political will, stakeholder engagement, and cross-sector collaborations play in shaping opportunities for SEL integration within the ICDS Programme?

4.3 Participants. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit six experts with extensive experience in ECE, SEL, or ICDS. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least three years of relevant experience, possess academic or professional qualifications, and actively work in roles related to these domains. This approach prioritized expertise over quantity, aligning with Delphi study guidelines emphasizing depth over breadth (Hsu & Sandford, 2007).

4.4 Data Collection. Data collection occurred in three iterative rounds:

- Round 1: Open-ended interviews gathered initial insights into SEL components, implementation strategies, and challenges. Responses were analyzed thematically (Hasson, Keeney, & McKenna, 2000).
- Round 2: Summarized findings were shared with participants for review, refinement, and validation. Responses were collected through documents rather than interviews, reflecting a modified Delphi approach (Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007).
- Round 3: Participants provided feedback on refined findings and indicated consensus through ranking and prioritization exercises, ensuring alignment across responses.

4.5 Data Analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and insights across rounds (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial responses were coded into themes, and subsequent rounds allowed for refinement and consensus-building. Member checking validated findings, while triangulation ensured reliability by comparing themes across rounds (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This iterative approach ensured the integrity and rigor of the analysis.

4.6 Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Conduct and Ethics Committee (RCEC) at Christ (Deemed to be) University, and informed consent was collected from all participants. Measures ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Cultural sensitivity and fairness were prioritized, with debriefing sessions which allowed participants to refine contributions and address biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

This structured and iterative process facilitated the development of insights and recommendations grounded in expert consensus, supporting the integration of SEL into ICDS through a culturally relevant and policy-responsive framework.

5. Results

The findings from the Delphi study are organized around three themes aligned with Kingdon's Policy Streams Model: challenges in the problem stream, policy solutions and best practices, and stakeholder engagement in the political stream. These themes highlight the key barriers, strategies, and frameworks essential for integrating SEL into the ICDS Programme, emphasizing the importance of aligning problems, policies, and political will for sustainable implementation.

The participants demonstrated an understanding of SEL from a developmental perspective, emphasizing its critical role during the neuroplastic phase of ages 3-6. Expert 1 noted that "*during this period, SEL builds a 'brain library' of emotional vocabulary, enhancing emotional regulation and social skills.*" Expert 4 added that "*SEL can support smoother transitions from AWCs to formal schooling, reducing learning loss and fostering academic success.*" Expert 3 also highlighted SEL's role in reducing behavioral issues and nurturing overall well-being, reinforcing its developmental importance within the ICDS Programme.

5.1 Challenges in Integrating SEL: Identifying the Problem Stream

5.1.1 Fragmented SEL Implementation and Lack of Standardization

Although SEL is recognized in Indian educational policies, its practical application within AWCs remains inconsistent. Expert 1 noted, "*The definition of SEL by policymakers versus those implementing it shows a mismatch,*" illustrating the disconnect between top-down advocacy and on-ground realities. The absence of a standardized framework, as highlighted by Expert 1 ("*People are using various frameworks like CASEL, UNICEF, OECD, leading to misconceptions*"), resulting in varied application, often equating SEL with concepts like EQ or life skills. This lack of clarity hinders uniform implementation and creates disparities in outcomes.

5.1.2 Overburdened Anganwadi Workers and Inadequate Resources

Limited infrastructure and overburdened AWWs further impede SEL integration. "*Many AWCs operate in single-room setups without basic amenities.*" Expert 4 explained, "*AWWs manage nutrition, health, and administrative tasks, leaving little time for additional responsibilities like SEL.*" These systemic gaps highlight the critical need for strategic resource allocation and infrastructure improvements to support SEL initiatives within the ICDS Programme.

5.1.3 Cultural and Contextual Adaptations for Equitable SEL Access

The lack of culturally relevant SEL content emerged as a significant challenge. Expert 2 stressed, "*For a country as diverse as India, culturally appropriate SEL practices and materials are imperative.*" Experts underscored the importance of addressing factors like gender norms, caste hierarchies, and family dynamics to ensure SEL programs resonate with diverse communities. Expert 6 warned that failing to do so could risk "*alienating the very communities SEL aims to serve.*" These insights reinforce the need for tailored SEL interventions that align with the lived experiences of Indian children and families to foster greater program effectiveness and acceptance.

5.2 Policy Solutions and Best Practices for SEL Integration

This theme explores policy strategies and recommended practices for implementing SEL within the ICDS

Programme. Findings emphasize the need for a universal SEL framework, integration into daily curricula, culturally relevant approaches, capacity-building initiatives, and adequate resource allocation. Insights from experts highlight these as critical components for sustainable SEL implementation.

5.2.1 Universal SEL Framework for Standardization

Experts emphasized adopting a universal SEL framework to standardize practices and bridge knowledge gaps. Core competencies such as empathy, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation were identified as essential. Expert 6 stated, “A universal SEL framework would mean that no matter where a child is, they have access to the same quality of SEL, ensuring equal opportunities for all.” Incorporating SEL into national policies with structured guidelines tailored to India’s diverse context was seen as pivotal. Expert 3 noted gaps in translating existing frameworks like “Adarshila” into practice, underscoring the need for implementation-focused policies. Such standardization would ensure equitable access to SEL resources and consistent learning outcomes across socio-economic strata.

5.2.2 Embedding SEL into Daily Curriculum

Four out of six experts highlighted the importance of integrating SEL into daily routines rather than treating it as a separate subject. Embedding SEL into “play-based learning, such as storytelling, flipbooks and collaborative activities (serve and return)”, was recommended to make it a natural part of children’s environments. Expert 4 remarked, “If we introduce concepts in playful and familiar ways, children will see SEL as life skills, not just classroom lessons.” Leveraging existing frameworks like “Building as Learning Aid” (BaLA) and using physical spaces creatively were proposed to facilitate SEL activities without additional resource burdens.

5.2.3 Cultural, Contextual, and Localized SEL Programs

India’s diversity necessitates SEL programs that reflect local cultures and socio-economic realities. Expert 3 suggested integrating “local poetry, festivals, and crafts into curricula to make SEL relatable and inclusive.” Practical approaches like using household items for sensory activities were highlighted by Expert 2, who stated, “Simple tools like rice or clay can overcome material shortages while fostering engagement.” Experts also advocated for movement-based and somatic activities over worksheet-based methods, making SEL developmentally appropriate for children in AWCs.

5.2.4 Capacity Building for Anganwadi Workers (AWWs)

Regular training for AWWs was deemed critical for effective SEL integration. Expert 2 shared, “Most AWWs have only received induction training in the past 15-20 years,” stressing the need for ongoing capacity building. Structured training, mentorship from experienced professionals, and the creation of “SEL champions” among AWWs were proposed. Expert 4 emphasized that these champions could “serve as role models and mentors to sustain SEL practices.” Embedding SEL into initial training programs and incorporating interactive learning techniques were seen as essential to empower AWWs.

5.2.5 Resource Allocation

Targeted funding emerged as a key recommendation to support SEL integration. Experts stressed the need for resources like training materials, activity kits, and improved infrastructure. Expert 1 advocated for “more agency and rebranding of AWCs and AWWs,” highlighting how adequate funding can enhance their roles. Practical suggestions included using locally available materials for cost-effective activities and mobile-based tools for tracking progress, ensuring that SEL remains accessible even in resource-limited settings.

5.3 Political Stream: Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration

This theme explores the vital role of stakeholder partnerships—government, NGOs, private organizations, and community leaders—in integrating SEL within the ICDS framework. Advocacy campaigns, public awareness efforts, and continuous feedback mechanisms were stated to be essential strategies to foster collaboration, pool expertise, and ensure inclusivity. These multi-sectoral efforts could aim to enhance the quality and sustainability of SEL initiatives in early childhood education.

5.3.1 Engaging Independent Organizations and Community Stakeholders

Experts emphasized the critical role of partnerships between the government, NGOs, and private entities to enhance SEL within the ICDS programme. The momentum empowered by global frameworks (EFA, SDGs, etc.) has enabled international development funding organizations to emerge, facilitating public-private partnerships. Expert 2 noted, “*Collaborating with independent organizations ensures that Anganwadi workers receive the tools and training necessary for effective SEL implementation.*” These partnerships, influenced by international agendas, reduce AWW workloads and bring specialized expertise to SEL delivery, as Expert 6 stated, “*Allowing independent organizations to lead SEL initiatives would not only provide specialization but also ensure that AWWs are not overexploited.*” Such collaborations not only enhance SEL quality but also create targeted job opportunities, demonstrating the ripple effects of global funding priorities on local implementation.

5.3.2 Advocacy and Public Awareness

Public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts emerged as crucial for fostering community and stakeholder buy-in. Expert 2 recommended, “*Campaigns on SEL, focusing on home practices, are needed to inform parents and communities.*” Experts advocated for central government documents promoting SEL to ensure consistency and sustainability. While short-term campaigns raise awareness, embedding SEL promotion in policy could solidify its importance at all levels.

5.3.3 Feedback and Continuous Engagement

Sustained engagement through workshops and feedback mechanisms was identified as a way to build trust and ensure inclusivity in SEL integration. Expert 3 highlighted the value of “feedback mechanisms” to capture stakeholder concerns and suggestions, fostering collaboration. Additionally, participatory research methods and longitudinal studies were proposed by experts as tools to continuously refine SEL strategies and provide data-driven advocacy for sustained policy support.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complexities surrounding the integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) within India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) framework. By employing Kingdon's Policy Streams Model, the discussion examines how the problem, policy, and political streams intersect and diverge, influencing the likelihood of SEL's systemic adoption. This section synthesizes these insights, explores functionalist policy solutions, and evaluates the role of international development organizations in driving political momentum.

In the hierarchy of issues that garner political attention, scientific framing often takes precedence. The alignment of SEL with neuroscience—particularly the emphasis on the neuroplasticity of children aged 3-6—has strengthened its developmental importance. Expert 1 noted that SEL builds a “brain library” of emotional vocabulary during this critical period, enhancing emotional regulation and social competencies. This framing allows SEL to gain political traction by presenting it as a scientific necessity for long-term cognitive and social development.

However, the fragmented definitions of SEL pose both challenges and opportunities. While this fragmentation reflects the diverse contexts in which SEL is implemented, it also creates inconsistencies in its understanding and application. Brush et al. (2021) explore that this diversity may not necessarily be problematic; instead, it illustrates the adaptability of SEL to varying socio-cultural contexts. Expert 1's observation that "people are using various frameworks—CASEL, OECD, UNICEF—leading to misconceptions" highlights the need for contextual alignment rather than rigid standardization.

Policy solutions to integrate SEL within ICDS often adopt a functionalist perspective, focusing on efficiency and adaptability. The findings emphasize embedding SEL into daily curricula through play-based activities and leveraging existing frameworks like "Building as Learning Aid" (BaLA) to address resource constraints. Expert 4 remarked, "If we introduce concepts in playful and familiar ways, children will see SEL as life skills, not just classroom lessons." These approaches align with the functionalist emphasis on maximizing impact within limited resources.

A critical challenge in the implementation of SEL lies in the reliance on established frameworks such as those developed by CASEL and the OECD. These frameworks have gained prominence not only due to their comprehensive structures but also because of substantial funding and advocacy efforts that amplify their global influence. Scholars like Sriprakash et al. (2016) and Robertson (2007) highlight how such dominance exemplifies the power dynamics inherent in international development. These well-funded frameworks often dictate the global discourse on SEL, shaping what is considered "best practice" while marginalizing contextually adaptive and locally relevant alternatives. As Tikly (2004) observes, the privileging of global initiatives often reinforces structural inequities by sidelining approaches that better address the socio-cultural diversity and specific needs of local contexts. This global-local tension underscores the importance of critically evaluating the implications of adopting universal frameworks in diverse settings.

The absence of political will emerges as a critical barrier to SEL integration. Neoliberal governance frameworks prioritize measurable outcomes and citizen responsibility over state accountability, resulting in fragmented funding and reliance on non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Expert 6 noted, "*Allowing independent organizations to lead SEL initiatives would not only provide specialization but also ensure that AWWs are not overexploited.*" However, this approach often leads to fragmented implementation, as funding priorities shift across multiple stakeholders without cohesive state intervention.

India's education sector already faces resource constraints, with minimal allocation toward foundational literacy and numeracy. SEL, positioned as a supplementary priority, struggles to gain traction. The government's role is often limited to providing guidelines rather than substantive funding or accountability mechanisms. This reflects a broader political reluctance to invest in holistic child development, as evidenced by Expert 5's observation: "*Education itself lacks political will, so where will SEL find its place?*"

6.1 Limitations

This study's findings are limited by the small sample size inherent in the Delphi method, which, while rich in qualitative insights, may not represent all perspectives within India's diverse socio-cultural contexts. Additionally, the focus on ICDS limits the generalizability of findings to other ECE frameworks. Further research is needed to explore longitudinal outcomes and context-sensitive strategies for SEL integration.

6.2 Implications

6.2.1 Policy Implications. Advocacy for increased state accountability and funding is essential to align SEL integration with national and global education goals. Policies must prioritize capacity-building for AWWs, resource allocation, and culturally responsive SEL frameworks.

6.2.2 Practice Implications. Culturally relevant, play-based SEL activities should be embedded into daily routines. Structured training and mentorship programs for AWWs can enhance implementation quality and sustainability.

6.2.3 Research Implications. Longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate SEL's long-term impact and scalability. Participatory research methods involving AWWs and local communities can provide nuanced insights into culturally responsive strategies and implementation challenges.

7. Conclusion

While the Delphi study provided clear recommendations for SEL integration, Kingdon's Policy Streams Model examines the systemic barriers that hinder its realization. The developmental framing of SEL through neuroscience has facilitated its recognition, but fragmented definitions and funding continue to impede its scalability. Established frameworks like CASEL dominate due to their financial and institutional backing, limiting the emergence of locally relevant alternatives.

In a neoliberal governance context, where governments focus on guidelines rather than direct funding, SEL's integration requires sustained advocacy, lobbying, and multi-sectoral collaboration. International development organizations have a critical role to play but must address their fragmented funding structures to drive cohesive political momentum. Ultimately, the path forward involves balancing global frameworks with localized approaches, ensuring that SEL initiatives are both contextually relevant and politically viable.

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