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Cultivating Socio-Emotional Competencies in Teachers: A Prerequisite for Student Wellbeing and 21st Century Readiness in West Bengal

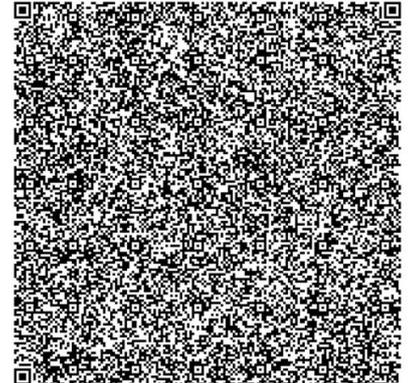
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Abstract

The rapidly evolving landscape of the 21st century demands an education system that prioritizes not only academic rigor but also holistic student development, encompassing wellbeing and essential life skills. This article posits that cultivating robust Socio-Emotional Competencies (SECs) in teachers is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving these goals within West Bengal's educational framework. Recognizing the profound influence teachers exert on classroom climate and student development, the article examines the critical link between teacher SECs—such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—and enhanced student wellbeing, including improved mental health, resilience, and prosocial behaviour. Furthermore, it argues that teachers equipped with strong SECs are uniquely positioned to model and explicitly teach the very competencies students need for 21st-century readiness: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and empathy. Analysing the current state of teacher education and professional development in West Bengal, the article identifies significant gaps in systematically integrating SEC training into pre-service and in-service programs. Challenges such as curriculum overload, limited resources, traditional pedagogical focus, and assessment difficulties are explored. Drawing upon global best practices and contextual realities, the article proposes concrete, actionable strategies for West Bengal. These include revising teacher education curricula to embed SEC modules, implementing sustained, experiential professional development, fostering supportive school environments, developing contextually relevant resources, and establishing supportive policy frameworks. The conclusion underscores that investing in teachers' socio-emotional growth is not merely an add-on but a strategic imperative, directly contributing to nurturing well-adjusted, resilient, and future-ready citizens of West Bengal, ultimately strengthening the state's human capital and social fabric.

Keywords:

Teacher Socio-Emotional Competencies, Student Wellbeing, 21st Century Skills, Teacher Education Reform, West Bengal Education, Classroom Climate



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Introduction

The educational paradigm in the 21st century has undergone a seismic shift, moving beyond the exclusive transmission of academic knowledge towards fostering holistic development. In West Bengal, a state with a rich educational heritage yet facing contemporary challenges of resource constraints, diverse learner needs,

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and the pressure to prepare youth for a complex globalized world, this shift is particularly crucial. Central to this transformation is the recognition that student wellbeing—encompassing mental, emotional, and social health—is intrinsically linked to learning outcomes and future success (OECD, 2015). Simultaneously, the demands of the modern era necessitate equipping students with 21st-century competencies like collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and adaptability (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). This article argues that the linchpin for achieving both enhanced student wellbeing and 21st-century readiness in West Bengal lies in the deliberate cultivation of Socio-Emotional Competencies (SECs) within its teaching force. Teachers are not merely instructors; they are primary architects of the classroom environment, role models, and key influencers of students' social and emotional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Therefore, empowering West Bengal's teachers with advanced SECs is not a luxury but a fundamental prerequisite for educational excellence and societal progress in the state.

The Current Landscape of Teacher Education in West Bengal

Teacher preparation and ongoing professional development in West Bengal are primarily governed by institutions like the West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE), the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education (WBCHSE), and various Teacher Education Institutes (TEIs) and Colleges of Teacher Education (CTEs), often affiliated with the West Bengal University of Teachers' Training, Education Planning and Administration (WBUTTEPA). While recent initiatives like the "Samagra Shiksha" program emphasize holistic education, the core focus of most pre-service and in-service training remains heavily skewed towards subject-specific pedagogy, curriculum delivery, administrative procedures, and exam preparation (Samagra Shiksha, West Bengal, Annual Report 2022-23). The integration of explicit, structured training on core socio-emotional competencies—such as developing self-awareness to manage teacher stress, building empathy to understand diverse student backgrounds, mastering conflict resolution skills for classroom management, and fostering collaborative relationships—is sporadic and often relegated to superficial workshops rather than being embedded as foundational pillars (NCTE, 2014 Curriculum Framework highlights the need but implementation lags). Consequently, many teachers enter and remain in the profession without adequate tools to navigate the intense emotional labour of teaching or to proactively cultivate a socio-emotionally supportive learning environment, creating a significant gap between policy aspirations and classroom reality.

Socio-Emotional Competencies: Definition and Core Importance for Teachers

Socio-Emotional Competencies (SECs) refer to the integrated set of skills, attitudes, and behaviours that enable individuals to understand and manage their own emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, feel and show empathy for others, make responsible decisions, and effectively handle challenging social situations (CASEL, 2020). For teachers, this translates into five core domains: *Self-Awareness* (recognizing one's emotions, strengths, biases, and their impact on students); *Self-Management* (regulating emotions, stress, and behaviours, maintaining motivation and adaptability); *Social Awareness* (understanding diverse perspectives, demonstrating empathy, appreciating cultural contexts); *Relationship Skills* (building trust, communicating effectively, resolving conflicts constructively, collaborating with students, parents, and colleagues); and *Responsible Decision-Making* (making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social interactions within the school context). These competencies are not merely "soft skills"; they are fundamental professional requirements. Teachers with high SECs create psychologically safer classrooms, manage disruptive behaviours more effectively through relationship-building rather than solely punitive measures, and demonstrate greater resilience against burnout, a critical issue in demanding educational environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Their ability to model these competencies provides students with implicit, powerful lessons in emotional regulation and social interaction daily.



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The Critical Link: Teacher SECs and Student Wellbeing

The wellbeing of students—their sense of safety, belonging, self-worth, and emotional equilibrium—is profoundly influenced by the socio-emotional capabilities of their teachers. A teacher skilled in self-regulation can maintain calm and patience during challenging classroom moments, preventing escalation and creating a stable environment where students feel secure (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teachers with high social awareness and empathy can better recognize signs of student distress, anxiety, or social isolation, enabling timely and sensitive intervention or referral. Strong relationship skills allow teachers to build authentic connections with students, fostering trust and a sense of being valued; this connection is a key protective factor for student mental health, particularly for vulnerable children (Roeser et al., 2012). Conversely, teachers struggling with low SECs may inadvertently contribute to a stressful classroom climate through inconsistent reactions, perceived unfairness, or an inability to manage conflict constructively, negatively impacting student anxiety and engagement. In West Bengal, where many students face socio-economic pressures, the teacher's role as an emotionally responsive and supportive figure becomes even more critical for mitigating adversity and promoting resilience. A teacher's own socio-emotional health directly acts as a buffer or a stressor for the students in their care.

Teacher SECs as Catalysts for 21st Century Student Readiness

The skills imperative for success in the 21st century—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability—are deeply rooted in socio-emotional learning. Teachers equipped with strong SECs are not only better instructors of these skills but also essential *models* and facilitators. A teacher proficient in relationship skills naturally structures collaborative group work effectively, mediates conflicts constructively, and teaches explicit communication strategies through their own interactions. Their self-management and adaptability model how to handle setbacks and uncertainty, crucial components of resilience and innovation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Furthermore, teachers with high social awareness and empathy create inclusive classrooms where diverse perspectives are valued, directly fostering critical thinking and cultural competence in students. They are adept at designing learning experiences that go beyond rote memorization to engage students in problem-solving, ethical reasoning, and creative expression—core facets of 21st-century learning. By embedding SECs into their teaching practice and classroom culture, these teachers create the authentic context in which students can practice and internalize the complex interpersonal and cognitive skills needed for higher education, future careers, and active citizenship in a globally connected world. Teachers lacking these competencies struggle to move beyond traditional, teacher-centered methods that often fail to develop these essential capacities.

Challenges in Integrating SECs into Teacher Training in West Bengal

Successfully embedding SEC development into West Bengal's teacher education ecosystem faces significant hurdles. Firstly, the pre-service curriculum is already densely packed with subject knowledge and pedagogical theory, leaving little perceived space or time for dedicated, sustained SEC modules (NCFTE, 2014 acknowledges this tension). Secondly, there is a critical shortage of qualified teacher educators who possess both deep understanding of SEC frameworks and the practical facilitation skills to model and teach these competencies effectively to adults. Thirdly, traditional views of teacher effectiveness in West Bengal, often reinforced by parental expectations and administrative priorities, still heavily emphasize academic results and discipline, potentially undervaluing the role of SECs (ASER Reports often reflect this focus). Fourthly, resource constraints—financial, infrastructural, and temporal—pose practical barriers to implementing high-quality, ongoing, experiential professional development programs focused on SECs, especially reaching teachers in remote areas. Fifthly, assessing the development of SECs in teachers is inherently complex and requires moving beyond written exams to observations, reflective portfolios, and 360-degree feedback, methods that are resource-intensive and not yet systematically integrated into teacher



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evaluation frameworks in the state. Overcoming these challenges requires a multi-pronged, systemic approach rather than piecemeal interventions.

Strategies for Cultivating Teacher SECs: Global Lessons and Local Adaptation

Drawing from global best practices and adapting them to West Bengal's context offers a roadmap for cultivating teacher SECs.

Curriculum Integration: Revise pre-service curricula at TEIs and CTEs under WBUTTEPA to embed SECs as a core strand, not an elective. This involves dedicated courses on SEL theory, child development, and inclusive practices, alongside integrating SEC application into subject methodology courses (e.g., how to manage emotions while teaching math, build relationships in language class).

Transformative Professional Development (PD): Move beyond one-off lectures to sustained, cohort-based, experiential PD. Utilize methodologies like collaborative inquiry groups, case study analysis, role-playing scenarios, mindfulness practices, and structured peer observation with feedback focused on SECs (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Programs like "Sanjog" resource centers could be leveraged for this.

Supportive School Environments: School leadership is crucial. Principals need training to create emotionally supportive climates for staff (reducing burnout), model SECs themselves, allocate time for teacher collaboration focused on student wellbeing, and integrate SEC goals into school development plans (Jones et al., 2013).

Contextualized Resources: Develop resource kits in Bengali and relevant local languages, featuring age-appropriate classroom activities, self-reflection tools for teachers, and guidance for addressing common socio-emotional challenges specific to West Bengal's diverse classrooms (e.g., urban crowding, rural migration impacts).

Peer Coaching & Mentoring: Establish structured mentoring programs where teachers skilled in SECs support colleagues, fostering collaborative learning communities within and across schools.

Policy Recommendations for West Bengal

Systemic change requires robust policy support.

Revise Teacher Standards: The West Bengal Board of Primary Education (WBBPE) and WBCHSE should explicitly incorporate SECs into teacher competency frameworks and codes of professional conduct, outlining expected skills in self-management, relationship building, and fostering inclusive environments.

Mandate SEC in Certification: Integrate mandatory SEC modules and assessment components (using diverse methods like reflective journals, observed practice) into both pre-service certification (D.El.Ed, B.Ed) and renewal requirements for in-service teachers.

Resource Allocation: Dedicate specific funding streams within state education budgets (e.g., Samagra Shiksha) for developing high-quality SEC resources, training master trainers, and implementing sustained PD programs across all districts, prioritizing underserved areas.

Strengthen TEI Capacity: Invest in capacity building for Teacher Educators at state TEIs and CTEs, including specialized training in SEL facilitation and adult learning principles for SEC development. Encourage research on effective SEC integration within West Bengal's context.

Promote Supportive Leadership: Develop and mandate leadership training programs for school principals and administrators focused on creating SEC-supportive school cultures, managing teacher wellbeing, and implementing whole-school SEL approaches.



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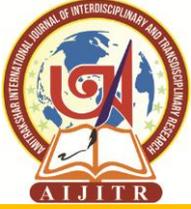
Systemic Monitoring: Incorporate indicators related to teacher SEC development, classroom climate, and student wellbeing into school inspection frameworks and state-level educational monitoring systems to track progress and inform policy adjustments.

Conclusion

Cultivating robust Socio-Emotional Competencies in West Bengal's teachers transcends being merely a beneficial professional development goal; it stands as a fundamental prerequisite for achieving the dual imperatives of student wellbeing and 21st-century readiness. Teachers are the central nervous system of the educational experience. Their ability to manage their own emotions, build authentic connections, demonstrate empathy, navigate conflict constructively, and create nurturing, inclusive classrooms directly determine the psychological safety and social fabric within which students learn. This environment is essential for fostering the resilience, self-esteem, and mental health that underpin academic engagement and lifelong success. Moreover, in a world demanding collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability, teachers rich in SECs are the most effective conduits and role models for these vital skills. Addressing the current gaps in teacher education and professional development in West Bengal through strategic curriculum reform, transformative PD, supportive leadership, contextualized resources, and enabling policies is not an optional enhancement—it is an urgent investment in the state's most valuable resource: its children. By empowering teachers' socio-emotionally, West Bengal can build an education system that truly nurtures well-adjusted, competent, and compassionate citizens, equipped to thrive in the complexities of the modern world and contribute meaningfully to society. The time for prioritizing teacher SECs is now.

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