



## A comprehensive approach to student Well-Being: Socio-emotional learning and mindful education

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### Abstract

The necessity for comprehensive approaches that foster not only academic achievement but also emotional intelligence and resilience has been highlighted in recent years by the increased awareness of mental health and emotional well-being in educational settings. The dynamic interaction between socio-emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness practices as crucial elements in fostering student well-being is examined in this study, "A Comprehensive Approach to Student Well-Being: Socio-Emotional Learning and Mindful Education." The study highlights how SEL frameworks combined with mindfulness-based therapies can foster healthy interactions among students as well as self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation. The research emphasises the transformative potential of developing emotionally supportive learning environments that place equal emphasis on cognitive development and mental health and inner balance through this all-encompassing approach. The study explores how teachers might model mindfulness and cultivate socio-emotional skills that support a caring and inclusive classroom atmosphere by drawing on current ideas and empirical research. It also covers the long-term advantages of this kind of integration in terms of lowering anxiety, increasing concentration, and raising students' general level of life satisfaction. In order to foster holistic well-being and enable kids to flourish academically, emotionally, and socially in a world that is becoming more complicated, this study ultimately supports the inclusion of mindfulness and SEL in school curricula.

**Keywords:** Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL), Mindfulness, Student Well-Being, Emotional Intelligence, Holistic Education, Mental Health, Resilience, Emotional Regulation, Empathy, Inclusive Classrooms, Teacher Training

### Introduction

Education systems around the world are increasingly recognising that the goal of schooling is not limited to cognitive and academic development alone. Students today face a variety of complex pressures: heightened academic expectations, technological distractions, shifting social dynamics, mental health challenges, and a rapidly changing global environment. Within this context, student well-being—a broad construct encompassing emotional, social, psychological, and relational dimensions—has become central to the mission of schooling.

While academic performance remains important, mounting evidence suggests that emotional and social competencies, along with self-regulation, mindfulness, and relational skills, significantly influence school engagement, achievement, resilience, and life readiness (Dhanjal & Pandey, 2024). (ijip.in) At the same time, interventions grounded in mindfulness have shown promise in supporting students' attention, stress regulation, emotional awareness, and interpersonal competence. For example, one randomised controlled trial of an SEL programme with mindfulness for 4th and 5th graders found significant improvements in cognitive control, emotional regulation, empathy, peer acceptance, and reductions in depressive symptoms. (PubMed)

Given this backdrop, the present paper develops a conceptual framework that bridges SEL and mindful education in a comprehensive approach to student well-being. It explores how the two fields complement each other, proposes a model for their integration in schools, outlines pedagogical and policy implications, and identifies research gaps and future directions.

### Conceptual Foundations

#### 1. Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL)

At its core, socio-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the processes through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognise and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities. In practice, SEL is often conceptualized along five core competency domains:

- **Self-awareness:** recognizing one's emotions, values, strengths and limitations;
- **Self-management:** regulating emotions, thoughts, behaviours, setting goals, demonstrating persistence.
- **Social awareness:** understanding others' perspectives, empathizing across diverse backgrounds.
- **Relationship skills:** building and sustaining healthy relationships, communicating clearly, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure.
- **Responsible decision-making:** making constructive choices about personal behaviour and social interactions based on ethical standards, realistic evaluation of consequences.

These competencies are strongly associated with better academic outcomes, fewer behavioural problems, improved emotional regulation, and long-term positive life trajectories (Durlak *et al.*, 2011). In the Indian context, recent studies highlight the foundational role of SEL in building life-skills and coping capacities among children and youth (Dhanjal & Pandey, 2024). (ijip.in)

SEL emphasizes intentional instruction and integration within educational settings rather than treating emotional and social development as incidental. It thus aligns with the holistic educational philosophy that students are not simply learners of content, but persons developing socially and emotionally.

## 2. Mindful Education

Mindfulness, broadly defined by Kabat-Zinn (1994) as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally,” has been widely adopted in educational contexts as a means to foster attention regulation, emotional awareness, stress resilience, and socio-emotional competence. Within mindful education, students engage in practices such as mindful breathing, body scans, awareness of emotions and thoughts, self-compassion exercises, and reflective practices embedded in classroom routines. Mindfulness practice does not depend on or interfere with any religion, cultural context or belief system. Mindfulness can be completely secular. Fortune 500 companies provide mindfulness instruction to their employees to reduce on-the-job stress, hundreds of hospitals refer patients to courses in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction to develop skills to cope with physical and emotional pain, and dozens of schools (private and public) across the country are using mindfulness practices to help their students succeed. Mindfulness practices help students focus and pay attention. A few minutes of mindfulness practice can improve the learning environment. Many teachers report that on the days when students practice mindfulness, the students are calmer and the class accomplishes more than on days when mindfulness is not practiced.

Empirical research indicates that mindfulness training in schools has benefits for attention, working memory, emotional regulation, and social behaviour (e.g., improving empathy and reducing aggression). For instance, a technology-enhanced programme combining mindfulness and small-group discussion for middle school students found decreased bullying behaviour and improved emotion regulation. (PubMed) Moreover, mindfulness has been shown to promote resilience, which in turn mediates academic performance (Soria & Hernández-Ramos, 2022). (MDPI)

Thus mindful education addresses both intrapersonal domains (attention, emotion regulation, self-compassion) and interpersonal/social domains (empathy, connectedness, relational calm). It complements SEL by offering practices and experiences that support the development of SEL competencies from the inside out.

### Why Integrate SEL and Mindful Education?

While SEL and mindful education are often implemented separately, there is strong theoretical and practical rationale for integration:

- **Complementarity:** SEL provides the “what” (competencies) while mindfulness offers the “how” (practices) for developing those competencies. For example, self-awareness (an SEL competency) can be deepened through mindfulness practices of noticing thoughts and emotions without judgement.
- **Synergistic effects:** Mindfulness can enhance emotional regulation (a key factor in SEL outcomes) by strengthening attention, awareness, and self-compassion, thereby laying the foundation for SEL competencies to flourish. Studies show mindfulness influences emotion regulation strategies such as reappraisal and suppression. ( MDPI )
- **Holistic well-being orientation:** Both frameworks emphasise not just academic success but personal growth, relational strength, resilience, and ethical behaviour—dimensions integral to student well-being.
- **Sustainable practice:** Mindfulness practices tend to be experiential and embodied, potentially sustaining SEL outcomes by providing students with internal regulation tools rather than solely external behavioural instruction.
- **Educational relevance:** In turbulent times (e.g., post-COVID educational contexts), the need for both social-emotional resilience and mindful presence is heightened. The empirical literature supports both SEL and mindful interventions as beneficial for student well-being and academic engagement (Mondi *et al.*, 2021; Harris, 2022). ( SpringerOpen )

Thus, an integrated SEL-mindful education framework can yield a more robust, dynamic, and sustainable pathway to student well-being than either approach in isolation.

## Conceptual Model for Student Well-Being

### 1. Defining Student Well-Being in the School Context

For the purposes of this paper, *student well-being* is defined as a multidimensional construct comprising:

- **Emotional well-being:** the ability to recognise, manage, and express emotions in healthy ways;
- **Psychological well-being:** sense of purpose, self-efficacy, growth, resilience;
- **Social well-being:** positive relationships with peers and teachers, social connectedness, empathy and cooperation;
- **Academic/engagement well-being:** feeling motivated, attentive, persistent, and engaged in school life;
- **Ethical/relational well-being:** responsible decision-making, pro-social behaviour, contribution to community.

In the school milieu, these dimensions interact dynamically: for instance, emotional regulation supports engagement; relational connectedness supports psychological resilience; purpose and self-efficacy support academic motivation.

### Integrated Framework: SEL + Mindful Education

The proposed framework places student well-being at the centre and illustrates how SEL competencies and mindfulness practices intersect across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioural-cognitive domains.

### Intrapersonal domain

#### ▪ SEL: Self-awareness & Self-management

Mindful Education: Attention to internal experience, present-moment awareness, non-judgment, self-compassion → Outcome: Students become aware of their emotions, thoughts, habitual reactions; can regulate responses, sustain attention, reduce stress, build self-efficacy.

### Interpersonal domain

#### ▪ SEL: Social awareness & Relationship skills

Mindful Education: Compassion, empathy cultivation, mindful listening, relational presence → Outcome: Students build stronger relationships, understand others' perspectives, communicate effectively, contribute to positive social climate.

### Behavioural-cognitive domain

#### ▪ SEL: Responsible decision-making

Mindful Education: Deliberate reflection, wise attention, ethical awareness → Outcome: Students make considered choices in academic and social contexts, demonstrate integrity, persist in tasks, contribute to community.

Graphically, the model can be represented as three overlapping circles (Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Behavioural-Cognitive) around the core of student well-being, with SEL and Mindfulness feeding into each domain.

## 3. Pathways to Well-Being

The model proposes several key pathways:

- **Attention → Self-Awareness → Emotional Regulation:** Mindfulness practice strengthens attention control, which when coupled with SEL self-awareness leads to better emotional regulation → greater emotional well-being.
- **Self-Regulation → Engagement → Academic Well-being:** Self-management (SEL) supported by mindful regulatory practices enhances engagement and persistence → improved academic/engagement well-being.
- **Empathy/Compassion → Positive Relationships → Social Well-being:** Mindful relational practices cultivate empathy; when paired with SEL social awareness and relationship skills this leads to deeper peer and teacher connections → social well-being.
- **Reflective Decision-Making → Ethical Behaviour → Relational/Community Well-being:** Mindful reflection enables thoughtful choices; when aligned with SEL decision-making competencies leads to pro-social, responsible behaviour → relational/community well-being.
- **Resilience Pathway:** Mindfulness strengthens resilience (by reducing reactivity, enhancing self-compassion) and SEL builds coping skills → students are better able to bounce back from setbacks → psychological well-being.

## 3.4 Mediators and Moderators

- **Mediators:** Emotion regulation strategies (reappraisal, suppression), attention control, metacognitive awareness. For instance, socio-cognitive mindfulness positively influences reappraisal and negatively suppression, thereby improving emotional experiences. ( MDPI )
- **Moderators:** Age/grade level, cultural context, teacher competence in SEL/mindfulness delivery, school environment/climate, socio-economic background. For example, early childhood interventions show different dynamics of SEL development than adolescent programmes. ( SpringerOpen )
- **Feedback loops:** Well-being outcomes feed back into greater readiness for learning, which further supports SEL and mindfulness practices (a virtuous cycle).

## Pedagogical and Curricular Implications

### 1. Curriculum Integration

To operationalize this integrated model, schools need to embed SEL and mindfulness into both the formal curriculum and the broader school culture.

- **Stand-alone modules:** Dedicated weekly sessions on mindfulness (breathing, body scan, reflection) and SEL skill-building (e.g., self-awareness exercises, role-plays for social awareness, decision-making scenarios).
- **Infusion across subjects:** For example, language arts classes can include reflective journaling (mindful awareness) and discussions about emotions in literature (SEL); social studies can address decision-making within social systems; physical education can incorporate mindful movement and attention to body.
- **Morning meetings and rituals:** Brief mindful check-ins, gratitude practices, community circles to build relational skills and emotional literacy.
- **Teacher-led modelling:** Teachers practicing mindfulness and showing emotional awareness help embed implicit culture of well-being.
- **Co-curricular and extracurricular linkages:** Clubs, peer mentoring, service activities guided by SEL and mindfulness principles.

### 2. Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Teachers are pivotal: for the integrated approach to succeed they must themselves be emotionally and mindfully competent.

- **Professional development:** Training in mindfulness practices (personal and classroom integration), SEL pedagogy (explicit instruction of competencies), and relational classroom practices (building class climate).
- **Teacher self-care and well-being:** Mindfulness and SEL support teachers' own stress regulation, which enhances their capacity to foster student well-being.
- **Reflective teaching communities:** Teachers engage in peer-reflection, mindfulness circles, and collaborative planning to sustain the approach.

### 3. School Culture and Policy

- **Well-being as school value:** Institutional mission and policies explicitly include student emotional, social and relational development, not just academic achievement.
- **Positive relational climate:** Policies that promote respect, safety, peer connectedness, anti-bullying, collaborative learning.
- **Time allocation and resources:** Ensure time in the schedule for mindfulness/SEL, allocate staff roles (e.g., well-being coordinator), offer resources for implementation.
- **Assessment and monitoring:** Beyond exam scores, schools can track well-being indicators: student emotional self-reports, peer/teacher relational climate surveys, attention regulation, incidence of behavioural issues.
- **Community and parental involvement:** Work with families to build congruent practices of emotion regulation, mindfulness at home, relational awareness.

### Anticipated Benefits and Outcomes

Implementing an integrated SEL-mindful education framework is expected to yield multiple layered benefits across domains:

- **Emotional & psychological well-being:** Increased self-awareness, self-efficacy, reduced anxiety/stress, greater resilience, improved mood. For example, technology-enhanced mindfulness-SEL intervention reported lower externalizing behaviours and bullying. ( PubMed )
- **Social well-being:** Improved relationships with peers and teachers, greater empathy, cooperation, reduced relational conflict. The RCT with elementary students reported greater peer acceptance and prosociality in the mindfulness-SEL group. ( PubMed )
- **Academic and engagement benefits:** Greater focus, attention control, persistence, motivation, leading to improved grades and reduced behavioural disruptions. Studies show that SEL programmes positively impact academic outcomes.
- **Behavioural regulation and decision-making:** Students become more reflective, make healthier choices, take responsibility for behaviour, reducing disciplinary incidents.
- **Long-term life skills:** The competencies fostered (empathy, self-regulation, resilience) are transferable into adulthood—workforce readiness, civic engagement, personal fulfilment. The Indian longitudinal study showed life-skills interventions improved resilience, self-efficacy and school attendance. ( BioMed Central )
- **School climate improvement:** A positive relational environment emerges, enhancing sense of belonging, safety, and collective well-being, which in turn supports learning.

### Challenges and Considerations

While promising, several challenges must be addressed to realise the integrated model in practice.

#### 1. Implementation fidelity and sustainability

Many SEL or mindfulness programmes fail to maintain fidelity over time, or lose momentum after pilot phases. Ensuring ongoing teacher training, institutional support and monitoring is critical. Embedding mindfulness and SEL into daily practice—not as add-ons but as integral—requires structural changes in scheduling, resource allocation, teacher planning time. Maintaining implementation fidelity and ensuring the long-term sustainability of integrated SEL and mindfulness programs remain among the most significant challenges in educational practice. Many interventions demonstrate initial success during pilot phases but gradually lose momentum once external support, funding, or novelty fades. Without systemic reinforcement, initiatives risk becoming isolated activities rather than embedded components of school culture.

Sustaining fidelity requires continuous professional development and institutional commitment. Teachers and administrators must receive regular refresher training, mentoring, and opportunities for reflective dialogue to internalize the principles of SEL and mindfulness. A “train-the-trainer” model—where experienced educators mentor peers—can promote continuity and shared ownership within the school community. Leadership engagement is also vital: when principals and senior staff actively model mindfulness and emphasize socio-emotional competencies, the approach becomes part of the school’s ethos rather than a temporary program.

Furthermore, integrating mindfulness and SEL into the daily rhythm of schooling—not as add-ons but as essential practices—demands thoughtful structural adjustments. This includes allocating time within the timetable for mindfulness sessions or socio-emotional check-ins, aligning these with existing subjects, and embedding reflective or relational activities across the curriculum. Sustainability also depends on resource allocation, including access to trained facilitators, teaching materials, and technological supports such as mindfulness apps or digital well-being tools that can reinforce classroom practices.

#### 2. Cultural and contextual adaptation

- SEL and mindfulness interventions developed in Western contexts may need adaptation for different cultural, socio-economic, and educational settings (e.g., in India, rural schools, multilingual environments). Local values, norms, teacher beliefs, and institutional constraints must be considered. The study in India emphasizes adaptation to local contexts.
- Mindfulness practices may be perceived differently depending on cultural or religious backgrounds—care must be taken to present them in secular, inclusive forms.
- For any educational innovation to succeed, it must connect meaningfully with the cultural and social context in which it is applied. This is especially true for socio-emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness programs, which directly engage with values, emotions, and interpersonal dynamics. Most existing SEL and mindfulness models have been developed in Western countries, where the educational environment,

classroom culture, and societal norms may differ greatly from those in other parts of the world. When such models are adopted without adaptation, they can feel disconnected from local realities and fail to create genuine engagement among students and teachers.

- In a diverse country like India, for example, schools vary widely in terms of language, socio-economic background, and access to resources. Many students grow up in environments where emotional expression is shaped by cultural expectations, and where community values often take precedence over individual goals. Therefore, SEL and mindfulness programs need to be culturally grounded designed to reflect local beliefs, traditions, and social norms while maintaining their universal principles of empathy, awareness, and self-regulation.
- Mindfulness practices can easily be linked to familiar Indian traditions such as yoga, meditation, or reflective prayer, which emphasize calmness, compassion, and balance. Presenting mindfulness in this inclusive, secular manner helps dispel misconceptions that it is tied to a specific religion or ideology. Similarly, examples and activities used in SEL lessons can draw on local stories, festivals, and everyday experiences, helping students relate these skills to their own lives.
- Teachers also play a crucial role in this adaptation process. Their beliefs and comfort levels with emotional learning can strongly influence how these programs are received. In some contexts, teachers may see mindfulness as unproductive or may feel that discussing emotions distracts from academics. Providing culturally sensitive professional development and highlighting real-life benefits—such as improved classroom climate and reduced student stress—can help overcome these barriers.

### 3. Measurement and evaluation

- Assessing well-being, mindfulness, SEL competencies and their interplay is complex. Standardized metrics may not capture relational or qualitative changes in school climate.
- Longitudinal research is needed to track sustained effects and verify causal pathways in the integrated framework.

### 4. Teacher readiness and buy-in

- Teachers may feel over-burdened and lack time or training for mindfulness/SEL work. Additionally, some may view SEL/mindfulness as peripheral to academic goals. Building teacher buy-in through professional development and demonstrating benefits is essential.

### 5. Equity and access

- Schools in under-resourced contexts may struggle to implement these approaches due to lack of staff, resources, or institutional support. Ensuring equity in implementing SEL/mindfulness is crucial.

### Future Research Agenda

To refine the conceptual model and enhance practice, future research could address the following:

- **Longitudinal studies:** That track cohorts across years, assessing how integrated SEL and mindfulness

contribute to student well-being and later life outcomes (college success, employment, mental health).

- **Experimental designs:** Comparing standalone SEL, standalone mindfulness, and integrated SEL-mindfulness interventions to assess additive or synergistic effects.
- **Cultural-contextual research:** Exploring how the integrated model works in diverse settings (Indian schools, rural vs urban, different socio-economic strata), and what adaptations enhance effectiveness.
- **Mechanism studies:** Examining mediators (e.g., attention control, emotion regulation strategies) and moderators (age, gender, culture, school climate) of the pathways from SEL/mindfulness to well-being.
- **Implementation research:** Focusing on scalability, teacher professional development models, sustainability of programmes, cost-effectiveness, and institutional influences.
- **Measurement innovation:** Developing valid, reliable instruments for student well-being, mindful awareness in school contexts, SEL competence progression, and school climate indices.
- **Integration with digital technology:** For example, apps or wearables supporting mindfulness and SEL practice, and understanding their role in blended interventions.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the imperative to nurture student well-being demands that education embrace more than content-delivery and standardized testing. The integration of socio-emotional learning and mindful education offers a powerful and coherent framework for holistic student development. By equipping students with emotional awareness, social competence, self-regulation, compassion, resilience and reflective decision-making, schools contribute to building learners who are academically capable, emotionally grounded, socially connected and life-ready.

The conceptual model presented here articulates the intrapersonal, interpersonal and behavioural-cognitive pathways through which SEL and mindfulness interact to foster well-being. Pedagogical, curricular and policy implications highlight the need for purposeful integration, capacity building among teachers, and institutional support for sustained practice. While challenges exist—especially in terms of implementation fidelity, cultural adaptation, measurement and equity—the potential benefits are substantial.

As research continues to accumulate evidence, schools and educational systems are encouraged to adopt a comprehensive approach to student well-being that positions SEL and mindful education not as optional extras but as foundational to their mission. In doing so, education can move toward fulfilling its deeper purpose: enabling each student to thrive not merely academically, but as a human being in all dimensions of life. The integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) and mindful education offers a powerful and coherent framework for holistic student

development. By equipping students with emotional awareness, social competence, self-regulation, compassion, resilience, and reflective decision-making, schools contribute to building learners who are academically capable, emotionally grounded, socially connected, and life-ready.

The conceptual model presented in this paper illustrates how SEL and mindfulness intersect across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioural-cognitive domains to foster multidimensional well-being. Such an approach redefines the role of education from mere knowledge transmission to the cultivation of balanced, empathetic, and resilient human beings who can navigate complexity with wisdom and care. Moreover, embedding SEL and mindfulness in education is not only beneficial for individual learners but also for the collective culture of schools. Classrooms grounded in empathy, awareness, and relational respect become microcosms of compassionate societies. As students learn to manage their emotions, communicate mindfully, and act ethically, they also become contributors to a more peaceful, inclusive, and emotionally intelligent world. Thus, the integrated framework holds transformative potential for both personal growth and social change.

For successful implementation, it is crucial that policymakers, educators, and institutions view well-being as a foundational educational priority rather than a supplementary goal. Sustained teacher training, adequate time allocation, curriculum redesign, and culturally responsive adaptations are necessary to ensure the approach's authenticity and longevity. In particular, empowering teachers with their own mindfulness and SEL competencies enables them to model emotional intelligence, creating ripple effects throughout the learning environment. Looking forward, research and practice must continue to explore the long-term effects of integrated SEL and mindfulness approaches, including their influence on academic persistence, mental health, and civic engagement. Technological innovations such as digital mindfulness platforms and social-emotional learning tools offer promising avenues for accessibility and scalability, especially in resource-limited contexts.

Ultimately, the comprehensive integration of SEL and mindful education signifies a paradigm shift: from education as information acquisition to education as human development. In doing so, schools not only enhance academic outcomes but also contribute to the flourishing of compassionate, self-aware, and resilient individuals who are equipped to lead fulfilling lives and contribute positively to society. This holistic vision of education—one that harmonizes mind, heart, and spirit—represents the true essence of 21st-century learning and the path toward sustainable well-being for all learners.

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