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Mahatma Gandhi Institute of
Education for Peace and
Sustainable Development

Building Kinder Brains






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Kindness releases dopamine, which is the brain chemical for reward and pleasure. Dopamine enables people to seek rewards and to take action to move towards them. Therefore, once you experience the joy' of kindness, you want to keep experiencing it.

Building Kinder Brains

The traditional notion of a compartmentalised emotional and rational / cognitive brain is obsolete. The brain is now understood as a complex yet dynamic and malleable organ, which uses an interplay of emotional and rational neural networks to make decisions.

Education if designed and implemented with this understanding of the brain can have huge implications for learning and human behaviour that offer great promise and potential to address wicked problems such as violence, poverty, inequality, climate change and to facilitate change for the common good.

The messages presented in this brochure are a result of a two-year initiative by the UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP). The initiative began with a workshop at the Sorbonne in Paris, France in 2018 with over 20 experts of global eminence from a range of disciplines and countries, followed by a second workshop at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada in 2019 , and culminating in a 250 page report entitled 'Rethinking Learning' published and released in 2020. This booklet is a playful presentation of some of the key messages from the Rethinking Learning report and is intended to be an introduction to Social and Emotional Learning and its incorporation in the classroom.



Neuroscience research shows that all learning occurs in a context, and involves cognitive-social-emotional interactions.



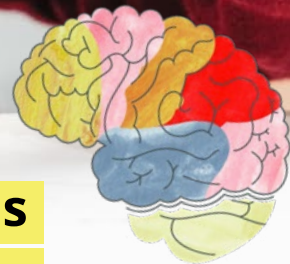


Humans are social emotional beings

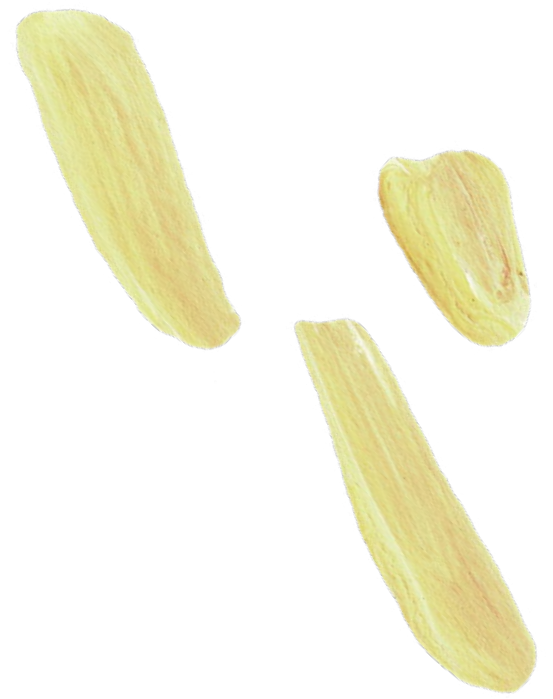
Human well-being depends on humans learning to communicate individual needs to each other and managing emotions in healthy ways. Emotional and social development of an individual is therefore as important as cognitive and biological development. Education systems must be transformed to be able to address and contribute to this aspect of human learning and experience.

Neuroscience research shows that all learning occurs in a context, and involves cognitive-social-emotional interactions. This cognitive-social-emotional brain involves interactions throughout the whole-brain. This whole-brain activation happens when children and adolescents learn to read, count, reason, make decisions and perform acts of kindness.

The introduction of social and emotional learning provides a double dividend to learners and society by improving academic achievements and nurturing empathetic and compassionate individuals dedicated to building a kinder world.



The key messages presented in this toolkit provide teachers, educators, parents, and policy makers with the incredible opportunity and responsibility to build kinder brains for a resilient, peaceful and sustainable planet by training and nurturing the social and emotional development of children.



GENERAL MESSAGES

**Social and
Emotional
Learning is
a necessary
condition for
all Learners**



01

Social and emotional skills build social and emotional intelligence and these are fundamental for success in school and life. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) enables children and adolescents to make friends, calm themselves when angry, resolve conflicts, be kind and make safe and ethical choices.




02

SEL is the process of acquiring competencies to recognise and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle challenging situations effectively.

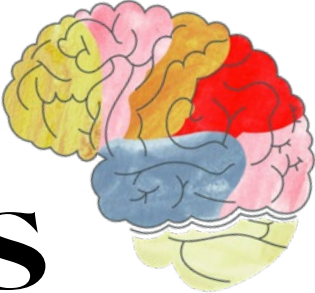
03

SEL addresses real-life skills such as reading faces and voices for emotions (emotional awareness), self-awareness (consciously listening to our body and thoughts,) active listening (listening without judgement), empathy (understanding and feeling for others) and compassion (taking positive action to reduce pain and suffering).





The brain
never stops
learning and the
superpower of
brain plasticity



The development of the human brain is dynamic and the brain is influenced by the social and emotional environments to which it is exposed. It has an extended period of maturation and is strongly influenced by social connections, context, moral norms, emotional support, and language.



The human brain is endowed with a superpower called 'neuroplasticity', which allows it to change both in structure and function, based on training. By regularly performing a series of practices, the brain can form new circuits and learn new skills because of neuroplasticity.

Given the plasticity of the brain and the positive impact of SEL intervention on cognitive, social and emotional development, it is recommended that SEL begin from early childhood and continue into adulthood, so that it can respond to the changing needs of people across ages.





Relational Competencies form the core of SEL

Competency is not just knowledge but also attitude and behaviour. Social and emotional competencies can be trained just like literacy and numeracy. A competency-based approach for cultivating SEL is necessary because it allows continuous tracking and growth of the individual self and ensures that continuously changing needs are met. Competencies that promote the cultivation of healthy relationships with self, with others and with nature are necessary conditions for a peaceful and sustainable societies.



Kindness increases endorphins in the body; these are natural pain relievers which reduce pain and increase energy.



01

SELF

SEL competencies for a healthy relationship with self include - self awareness, emotional literacy, emotional regulation, mindfulness, impulse control, self-compassion, critical inquiry, resilience.

02

OTHERS

SEL competencies to build healthy relationships with others include empathy, perspective taking, compassion, kindness, communication, and collaboration.

03

NATURE

SEL competencies to build healthy relationships with nature include empathy, environmental literacy, sustainability, and purpose.





SPECIFIC MESSAGES

Building the SEL ecosystem

A whole-school approach is a necessary condition for SEL to be successful – an approach which includes the student, educator, caregiver, parent and policy maker

01

CHILDREN

Babies are naturally empathetic and kind. For example, toddlers have been shown to help adults, without being asked, whether their parents are in the room or not, and even without being thanked. Studies suggest that empathy and altruism have an evolutionary basis and that these skills are not just guided by social advantage or obligation. Classrooms and living spaces offer great opportunities to encourage and support these inherent traits.



02

TEACHERS

Teachers must embody SEL. Children tend to emulate the behaviour of those around them so teachers should ideally practice SEL in their classrooms and in other learning spaces. Research shows that classrooms with an even distribution of popularity (i.e., no favourite children and no marginalized children) have better average mental health than stratified classrooms, suggesting that entire classrooms practising prosocial behaviour may reap benefits.





03

LEADERSHIP

School leaders, principals and administrators, must embody SEL since their actions and behaviours impact school climate. Regular check-ins with students, visibility in school corridors, and positive relationships with teachers and parents motivate school environments to practice SEL. Research suggests that kind leaders are willing listeners, take responsibility and lead with compassion, not aggression. School leadership must mainstream SEL into teacher professional development so that teachers may model appropriate social behaviour by their words and their actions inside and outside the classroom.

04

PARENTS

The ethical system that parents build at home creates foundational social and emotional skills. A research study that asked sixth-graders to rank the emphasis their parents placed on six values - three related to achievement (attend a good college, excel academically and have a successful career in the future) and three related to kindness (be respectful to others, try to help others in need and be kind to others) - found that children who perceived that their parents valued kindness over achievement did better than other children both in academic and psychological skills.





SEL in the classroom

SEL is experiential and is best learnt when it is embodied in pedagogy and curriculum.

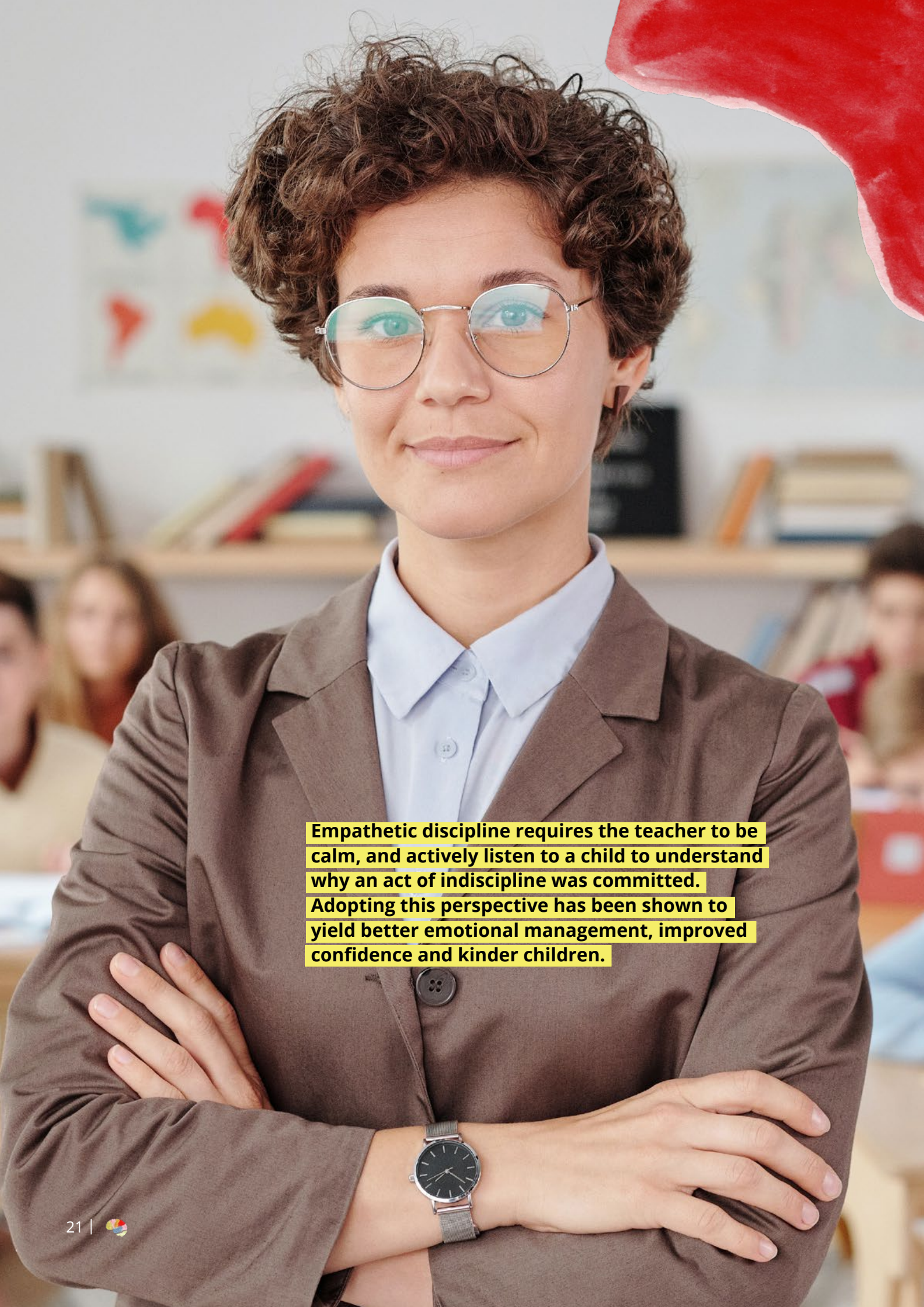
PEDAGOGY

Cognitive science and brain research suggests that the brain learns and benefits from using an umbrella of practise based pedagogical tools and approaches that build both rational and emotional intelligence. Good pedagogical practices include critical inquiry, empathy, reflection, dialogue, gameplay, rewarding in an interactive environment support the building of core competencies of empathy, kindness and mindfulness along with inquiry and logic and meta skills such as collaboration, co-operation, flexibility, compassion, perspective-taking and rational thinking.

For instance, teachers can use empathic behaviour to correct the behaviour of the child.

Kindness is contagious. Witnessing acts of kindness produces oxytocin, also called the love hormone'. When others witness acts of kindness, they often pass them on.





Empathetic discipline requires the teacher to be calm, and actively listen to a child to understand why an act of indiscipline was committed. Adopting this perspective has been shown to yield better emotional management, improved confidence and kinder children.



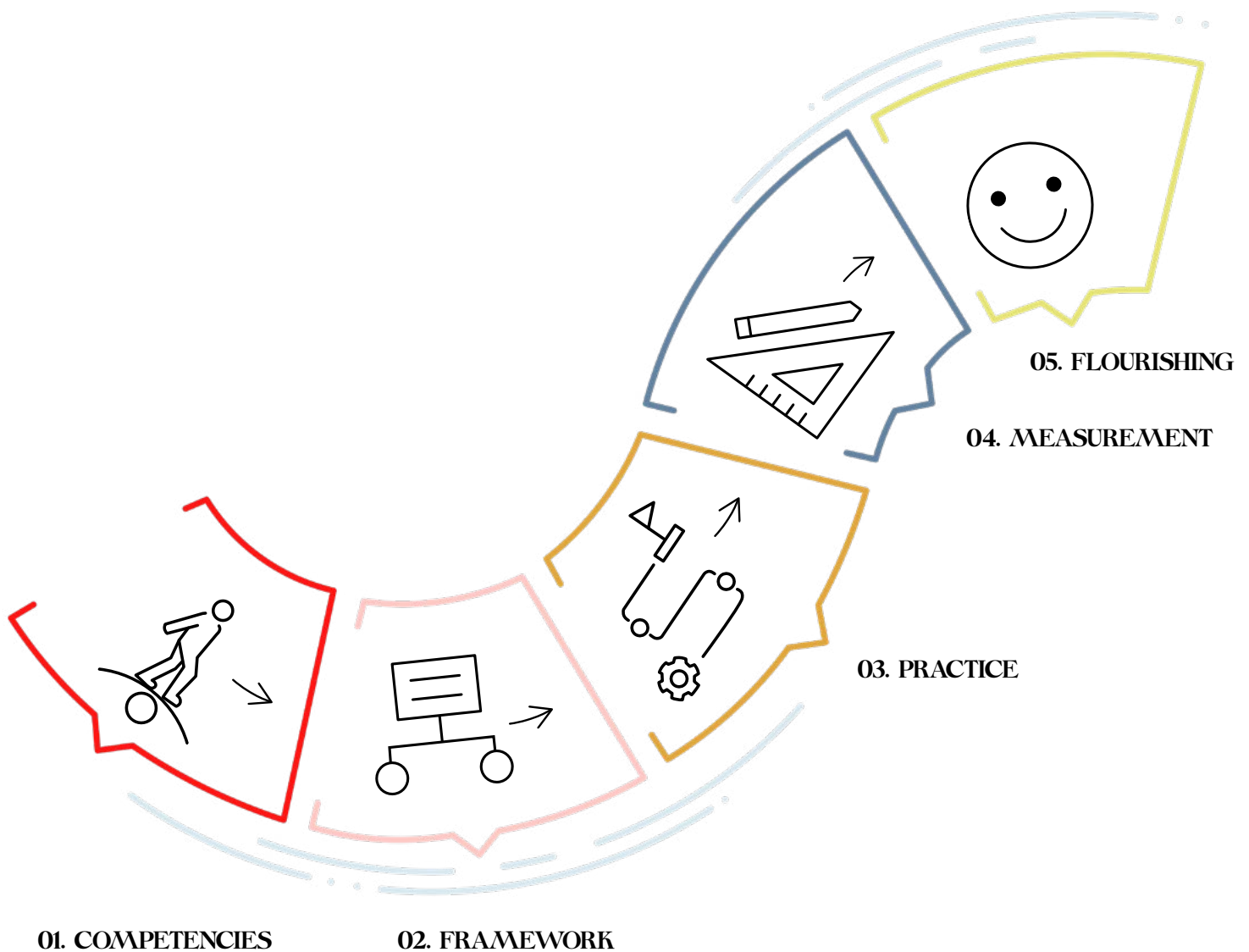
CURRICULUM

SEL should be mainstreamed as part of core learning outcomes by explicit inclusion in curricula and extra-curricular activities. A randomised control trial that investigated self-regulatory abilities such as mindfulness - found significant improvements in cognitive flexibility and prosocial behaviour in children. SEL practices need to be strategically included in all curricula and best cultivated through experience and practice.

Digital video games and interactive technologies have emerged as extremely effective ways to include SEL in learning and instruction if properly designed and implemented.

A guide to implementing SEL

The key to successful SEL implementation lies in building an SEL ecosystem mandated by policy. Effective SEL programmes need to be part of a larger ecosystem, reaching beyond the classroom to involve the whole school, families, communities and the media. The key steps involved in implementing SEL in policy are outlined below.



01. COMPETENCIES

The first step is to adopt a competency based approach to SEL. To build peaceful and sustainable societies, key competencies should include those that address the self, others and nature. A building block approach is useful since it ensures that foundational skills form basic blocks to build meta SEL skills.

02. FRAMEWORK

Following the identification of competencies, an SEL framework that represents and includes the competencies identified in Step 1. Effectiveness of an SEL framework is determined by five factors, including specificity, balance, developmentally appropriate, cultural sensitivity, and empirical evidence.

03. PRACTICE

Research shows that SEL competencies are grounded in procedural learning and are best cultivated through practice. Procedural learning is the process of acquiring skill at a task so that it can be performed automatically. Therefore, a practice-based approach that embeds SEL competencies in pedagogy, curriculum, teacher training, leadership and professional development is key for SEL to have institutional and societal impact.

04. MEASUREMENT

What is not assessed is often not managed and addressed. Continuous behaviour-based measurements of SEL are key to not only evaluate learning but also to meet changing needs and development of children.

05. FLOURISHING

The focus of the education system needs to shift from cultivating human capital to human flourishing. Central to this notion is lifelong learning, the celebration of kindness and prosocial behaviour over academic achievement and financial success and the recognition of the planet as one big family - Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.





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**Mahatma Gandhi Institute of
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UNESCO MGIEP focuses on achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 towards education for building peaceful and sustainable societies across the world by developing programmes that promote social and emotional learning, innovate digital pedagogies and empower the youth.

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