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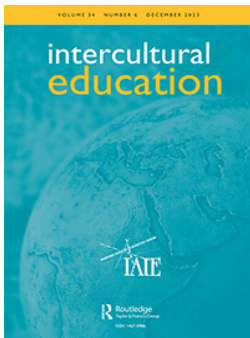et al.

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# Social and Emotional Learning pedagogy and practices for children living in poverty: teacher perspectives at two Akanksha foundation schools in India

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# Social and Emotional Learning pedagogy and practices for children living in poverty: teacher perspectives at two Akanksha foundation schools in India

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## ABSTRACT

As social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives gain traction in primary and secondary schools worldwide, research is needed to understand how schools can implement SEL in culturally responsive, strengths-based ways with children experiencing poverty. This study emerged from a university-non-profit partnership between the University of California, San Diego and the Akanksha Foundation in India. The purpose was to investigate school staff's perceptions of holistic youth development and SEL pedagogy at two Akanksha school sites. Data collection involved 51 surveys and 10 interviews conducted with Akanksha school staff. Researchers applied an equity literacy theoretical framework to centre non-deficit approaches to working with children and families experiencing poverty. Findings reveal that staff prioritised a holistic pedagogical approach to SEL that focused on parent engagement and youth leadership as strategies to resist and prevent social inequities. We conclude with recommendations for other global school leaders implementing SEL, such as prioritising authentic staff development, implementing culturally affirming practices, and developing positive relationships within the larger community.

The Akanksha Foundation is a non-profit organisation that provides youth from low-income communities in India with innovative and empowering programming through K-10 public-private partnership schools. In 2019, the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) and two Akanksha Schools initiated a research partnership to investigate social and emotional learning (SEL) pedagogy in classrooms, school-wide, and within the larger community. The aim of this study was to contribute to the growing body of SEL research that seeks to improve the social-emotional development of children in poverty. Through this

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study, we examined educators' perspectives on the key components of their pedagogical approach that promoted SEL, with the goal of informing global research and practice in high-poverty contexts.

## The Akanksha and UCSD partnership

The Akanksha and UCSD partnership began as a philanthropy-driven, research-embedded, service-learning intercultural exchange for UCSD undergraduate students. A research study was collaboratively designed with Akanksha leadership and UCSD professors and students with goals to understand, from teachers' perspectives, what SEL pedagogy means and looks like in practice in their day-to-day teaching. Meetings were held with leadership representatives, including UCSD undergraduate leaders, from both sites every four to eight weeks for one year. A UCSD research trip to Mumbai was planned for August of 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, research with teachers and Akanksha programme leaders was conducted virtually. As part of the intercultural educational experience, UCSD undergraduate students learned from Akanksha partners about community-engaged research, SEL, and the local context in India.

## School context and teacher professional development

The Akanksha Foundation is a public-private endeavour that has been developing after-school and during-school programming for over 30 years. In 2007, the foundation opened its first full-day school sites in India. As of 2022, Akanksha operates 27 schools in Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur, totalling 10,000 students and 575 educators (Akanksha n.d..). Since their inception, Akanksha Schools have focused on SEL as ways to enhance learning experiences and academic engagement, including adapting their pedagogy to align with SEL frameworks.

### SEL pedagogy

Pedagogy is defined as the 'instructional techniques and strategies that allow learning to take place. It refers to the interactive process between teacher/practitioner and learner and it is also applied to include the provision of some aspects of the learning environment (including the concrete learning environment, and the actions of the family and community)' (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002, 10). For the past few decades, SEL has primarily been conceptualised as a set of skills that can be taught through a curriculum. More recently, researchers and practitioners have introduced the term 'SEL pedagogy'. While the field continues to examine what SEL pedagogy means and looks like in practice, scholars in the field of SEL state, 'Within schooling, this process [SEL] involves, but is not limited to teachers implementing pedagogies which develop students'

cognitive regulation, emotional processes, social/interpersonal skills, character, and mindset' (Jones et al. 2017 via Dyson et al. 2021, 625). Part of the value of this research is that the results can add to this growing conversation regarding SEL pedagogical approaches.

The Akanksha leadership team had focused on building a culture that embraced a whole school approach to SEL through the following pedagogical 'shifts' during the seven years preceding this study: 2) promoting 'self skills' with students, such as self-reflection and self-understanding through youth circles and youth-centred conversations of support; 3) increased parent engagement opportunities; 4) school culture surveys for teachers in the areas of leadership, teacher wellbeing, respect/trust, and engagement/commitment to ensure that teachers were well supported; 5) teacher-led meetings on supporting student interest clubs both after and during school to engage students in their interests; 6) social and emotional learning strategies including professional development on facilitating mindfulness and/or reflection activities across the content area. These professional development opportunities were implemented through workshops and monthly meetings that encouraged teachers and staff to learn methods and implement them in their own lives prior to rolling out the strategies to students. This study did not evaluate one specific curriculum, but rather focuses on how teachers perceived the pedagogical application of SEL in the context of working with low-income youth and families at two Akanksha school sites.

## Social and Emotional Learning: definitions and critiques

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the leading institution for SEL research and practice, was originally designed as a response to the interest of researchers and practitioners focusing on promoting youth development within a school context (Hoffman 2009). According to Jagers et al. (2019), SEL is defined as:

> A process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions; set and achieve positive goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain positive relationships; and make responsible decisions. The intended idea was to have a framework that encompassed five basic competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. (p.162)

SEL skills are strongly correlated to higher educational and life outcomes among K-12 students of diverse backgrounds (Durlak et al. 2011; Dweck 2006; Jeynes 2019). Other benefits of SEL include lower aggression, depression, anxiety, and stress (Barnes, Smith, and Miller 2014; Coelho et al. 2017). Since exposure to poverty and trauma has adverse effects on students' understanding and self-

management of emotion and behaviour (Gunnar et al. 2000, as cited in Jones, Bailey, and Kahn 2019, 20–21), SEL programmes are often adopted to use with such affected students because they, '…tend to have their largest effects among students who face the greatest number of risks, including those with lower socioeconomic status and those who enter school behind their peers' (Jones et al. 2011, as cited in Jones, Bailey, and Kahn 2019, 21). Thus, a pedagogical approach centring SEL is imperative to attend to both the academic and holistic wellbeing of students experiencing poverty.

SEL is not without criticism, however. In a review of the international use of SEL, McCallops et al. (2019) find that few studies engage in culturally responsive SEL interventions. Culturally responsive SEL requires educators to exhibit empathy, self-awareness (of their own biases or cultural viewpoints), awareness of others, self-regulation (modifying their own thoughts, actions, expressions of emotions), and motivation to direct attention and energy to fully interacting with those who are culturally different (Barnes and McCallops 2019). When SEL lacks cultural responsiveness, educators may further marginalise students who are not members of the dominant culture (Higheagle Strong and McMain 2020). Hoffman (2009) argues that without critical inquiry of SEL, education runs the risk of remaining in a deficit-view of students, whereby students need to be taught skills and competencies that they are lacking, and then they need to employ these skills to regain and maintain non-disruptive behavioural and emotional control in the classroom. From this perspective, SEL can be used to punish and control, rather than to empower.

A final issue is the field's lack of attention towards social justice. Without labelling power dynamics and the effects of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and other injustices, the social and emotional skills that students learn are a disservice: students are not prepared for these realities and are not taught how to change them. In response, researchers at CASEL have proposed an emerging concept of transformative SEL (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019). Transformative SEL centres the skills and capacities needed to engage in justice-oriented citizenship, such as identity, agency, belonging, and engagement. Transformative SEL explicitly recognises the larger socio-political context and seeks to reduce societal inequities.

## Theoretical framework

### *Equity literacy*

The theoretical framework that guides the analysis of this study is equity literacy. Equity literacy rejects deficit ideology in education. Deficit ideology justifies outcome disparities, such as standardised test scores, by pointing to deficits within marginalised individuals and communities (Brandon 2003; Valencia 1997; Yosso 2005). Because nearly all of the

students attending Akanksha live in poverty, this lens is important for determining teachers' views on the potential of their learners. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) advocate for the need for equity literacy: Rather than attributing student learning challenges to a lack of intelligence or work ethic for parents living in poverty, teachers working from an equity literacy stance involve parents as equal members of the community while fighting to interrupt the systems of inequity that are barriers to student success. Additionally, teachers functioning through an equity literacy pedagogy recognise that there is not a 'consistent true nature' shared among people living in poverty, which reduces prejudice and hasty decision-making when planning programming (Gorski 2016). Equity literacy encompasses five abilities: recognising biases and inequities, responding to them skilfully and immediately, redressing biases by under-standing their institutional roots, applying an equity commitment to decision making, and the ability to sustain equity efforts, even in the face of discomfort or resistance (Equity Literacy Institute 2021).

## Methodology

Through planning meetings between UCSD and Akanksha leadership we designed a multi-step mixed-methods study using surveys and interviews to understand how teachers implement SEL pedagogical approaches. We selected these methods because they allow for triangulation of data (Campbell and Fiske 1959; Denzin 1978). Using a 'between (or across) method' (Denzin 1978, 268) enabled us to cross-validate survey and interview responses. Following a consent form, an online survey, written in English, was administered to staff at two school sites. The initial survey was designed by the UCSD research team with feedback from Akanksha leadership regarding accessibility, cultural aware-ness, and language needs. Survey results were analysed using Qualtrics soft-ware. Next, survey respondents were invited to sign up for a semi-structured interview about their experiences with SEL. All interviews lasted between 30–45 minutes and were conducted via Zoom Pro between December 2020 and January 2021.

Interviews were transcribed and coded along with open-ended survey questions. Four members of the research team separately coded four inter-views via inductive process coding to build a codebook (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). A codebook includes codes, brief definitions, example definitions, and discussions of when to use the code and when not to use the code (MacQueen et al. 1998 After forming the codebook, the research team coded all interviews deductively, with two researchers coding each interview. Any codes that were suggested outside the codebook were evaluated and

added if the team supported the adoption of new codes. Finally, the whole research team met to evaluate the codes within the theoretical framework of equity literacy.

## Results

First, we present participant demographic data. Then, we describe the themes that emerged from our quantitative and qualitative data: the importance of shared values and goals, creating safe spaces for connection, integrating culturally affirming practices, centring parent engagement, and facilitating student leadership.

### *Study participants*

This study was conducted at two Akanksha sites: one in Pune and one in Mumbai. Fifty-one adult staff members participated in the survey in July 2020. 63 staff/faculty were sent the Qualtrics survey with 51 completing for a response rate of 81%. Of the 51 participants, 73% identified as teachers; the remainder identified as social workers, counsellors, helpers, teacher leaders, or administrators. Six participants identified as male and 43 identified as female, a gender ratio that represents overall demographics at Akanksha Schools. About a quarter of the participants had worked at Akanksha for one year or less (24.5%); nearly one-third had worked there for two to three years (30.6%); nearly one-third had worked there for 4–6 years (32.7%); and the remaining participants had worked there for seven or more years (12.2%).

### *Importance of shared values and goals*

Teachers' commitment to and belief in the importance of SEL '...likely influences their ability both to implement SEL programming and to model the skills it promotes in children' (Brackett et al. 2012, 220). The survey results indicate a strong level of staff support and buy-in for the SEL training and professional development, indicating a widespread positive response and shared values. Over 90% of staff reported that students needed some level of support in meeting SEL objectives, which show a fairly unified recognition of youth needs. 87% of participants responded positively to SEL training they received and 90% of participants reported receiving the needed support to promote SEL. The vast majority of participants (85%) reported seeing positive changes in youth behaviour that they attributed to the SEL programme. As one teacher noted on a survey, 'Students have been more open to sharing, to know the community. They are able to express themselves. Self management has increased'. Evidence of some of these changes are provided in the following sections.

When asked about this high level of teacher buy-in, or overall agreement of the initiatives, one of the school leaders stated that it took time. He attributed the high buy-in to stamina and persistence. By giving staff leadership roles in the processes, as well as allowing them to practice the new training within their own lives before implementing them in their classrooms, staff began to see positive results within their students which maintained motivation for programme implementation. Each Akanksha School has their own unique school culture, which school leaders leveraged to help groups of teachers feel a sense of belonging and a sense of agency when planning innovative SEL opportunities for their students.

### *Creating safe spaces for connection*

Participating teachers indicated that fostering connectedness in their classrooms was crucial and beneficial for their SEL goals. One way in which teachers promote connectedness was through Circle Time activities. After creating norms, such as turn taking and listening to others, youth and teachers gathered in a circle, prompts were provided, and students were invited to express their thoughts and feelings. Occasionally the prompts were youth-generated or based on community needs, and other times the prompts were pre-planned as part of the curriculum. Survey results indicated that respondents found Circle Time as the most beneficial activity for students (21.6% of participants ranked Circle Time as the most beneficial activity), followed by personal safety education (19.5%) and youth leadership activities (14%). 'Circle Time' enabled teachers to build rapport with students and promoted connectedness amongst students by allowing students to be vulnerable. One teacher stated,

> They [Students] have been able to express themselves because that space itself has brought in safety, but also a space where each one has something to talk about. Each one could be going through something. . . And so it's okay to feel that way and be able to talk about something that is uncomfortable.

During Circle Time, students were invited to express their thoughts and feelings as part of the Circle protocol, but they were also informed of additional options in case they did not feel comfortable with sharing during Circle, such as connecting with the teacher, or another staff member of their choice, one-on-one after class or during lunchtime.

Another way teachers created spaces of connections for students was by implementing peer counselling at school, a process by which older students mentored younger students. Through peer counselling, teachers reported witnessing positive shifts in younger students who benefited from relationships with older near-peers. Younger students described feeling less alone in confronting daily challenges.

### *Integrating culturally affirming practices*

Teachers also intentionally integrated socio-cultural aspects into SEL programming. The policy at Akanksha Schools is that any child, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, caste, or class, can apply to attend, with a lottery determining final placement due to space and staffing restrictions. This inclusive policy permeated all aspects of curriculum and pedagogy. School staff created welcoming spaces that recognised the diversity within the school body. Akanksha staff hosted cultural festivals and events such as Language Day and promoted student interests through art and poetry. One teacher describes how she integrated students' various languages into the activities in order for students to be able to understand the SEL concepts behind the activities and be able to express themselves more effectively.

### *Centering parent engagement*

A fundamental component of Akanksha Schools and their SEL approach was to partner with parents. As one teacher described, 'We feel that the parent is definitely there as one of the stakeholders of a school. So a child, a child is there in school for nearly, like, around six or seven hours, but we know that the child is at home for the whole time'. School staff cultivated high levels of parent engagement through developing familial bonds with students and their parents, supporting the parent-child connection, and responding to inequities in the community.

### *Developing familial bonds with students and parents*

Akanksha staff intentionally facilitate connections between teacher, student, and parent that promotes wellbeing of all involved. According to Akanksha staff, these connections are fundamental to their roles and philosophy of teaching:

> My main important work is to be the link between the organization and the community. Community is equal; talks about children, parents, everybody. So I try to solve all the problems around the children that affect them to come to the school.

As these connections are made, a synergy and mutual appreciation develops for the role that counsellors, teachers, and parents each play as partners in the students' social-emotional and academic development. In order to build these relationships, parents were regularly invited to school events, such as talking circles and workshops, as well as extra curricular activities like sport games and art showcases. Prior to COVID-19, when a child was not attending school, teachers and counsellors conducted home visits in order to check in and see how they could help. These face-to-face connections positioned Akanksha staff

to be able to be a trusted source of information and support. For one counsellor who grew up in the neighbourhood and attended Akanksha Schools himself, the bond with families was particularly strong. He said that staff are treated like family, sharing:

> Because any small issue or any kind of a problem they have, they are never hesitant to call me and the homes are always welcome for me. If I visit their house, they are like, 'You cannot leave my house until and unless you have a cup of tea with me. Stay with us, or a cup of milk'. They will, they will just offer, you go home and like they will give me 10,000 things to talk about. 'Bhaiya this is happening, bhaiya that is happening'. So they call me bhaiya. Bhaiya means brother.

### Supporting parent-child connections

Staff at Akanksha Schools recognised that there were significant barriers coming from structural inequities (transportation, work hours, etc.), which undermined wellbeing and reduced the time available for parents to connect with their children. In order to fully promote student holistic SEL and development, school personnel made conscious efforts to facilitate a deeper emotional connection between students and their parents. During the Building Bridges Program, for example, school staff facilitated dedicated spaces for students and their parents to talk and participate in activities, such as making lemonade or writing cards to each other, in order to facilitate SEL, skill-building, and parent-child relationships.

### Responding to inequities

Akanksha also responded to inequities that parents and children faced. When Akanksha Schools first began, incidences of child and domestic abuse were high in their community. Rather than blaming the parents or taking a stagnant position, the schools worked to address underlying causes of violence by interviewing parents about what stressors they were facing and what social values and beliefs were a part of the violence. School leaders and counsellors then gathered that data and planned workshops for parents. During the workshop, one counsellor describes the attitude of collaboration:

> We guide parents [through the workshop] and then we share with them that these are social issues have been, you know, a negative impact on the students. And then we have, like, parents coming up with a solution. What could they do better in this case, or what could they do if they find something like this at home.

In this way, parents were active participants in a constructive exchange between school and home, where teachers and parents learned from each other and parents were empowered to advocate for positive changes in their families and communities. According to a participating counsellor, cases of child abuse dropped significantly through these methods.

### *Facilitating student leadership*

Facilitating student leadership was another focus of Akanksha programming at these two school sites. To build student leadership, Akanksha staff focused on problem solving, student-led presentation, voicing opinions, ownership, making choices, and active participation. Akanksha staff helped students develop these skills in contexts inside and outside of the classroom with both informal and formal leadership opportunities.

### *Cultivating student voice and ownership in the classroom*

Teachers welcomed students to speak up in class. As one teacher described:

> Kids share their feedback at the end of the class. So at the end of the class, they'll be the ones who tell you what they liked in your class, what they didn't like, or if there's a different way they would like you to teach the same topic.

Student leadership was further developed through teaching and presenting. For example, one teacher gives the class a list of topics the students can plan and lead, which students volunteer to take ownership of. Students' active participation, sense of ownership, and leading of presentations is so embedded in the classroom culture that one teacher remarked that, 'along with the teacher, they co-teach with the teacher. So this is like a student-led class'. Teachers also consistently incorporate opportunities for student choice in the classroom, which fostered student sense of agency and autonomy. For example, as part of a lesson on acids and bases, one teacher described, 'They will explore YouTube, they will explore Google and then they will come back to me and say, teacher, we want to do this particular activity. Can we do a tower turmeric paper test?' When presented with choices, students developed a sense of ownership over their learning and had opportunities to explore their interests. One teacher commented on seeing students' leadership in action and described it as 'the best reward a teacher can get'.

### *Developing confidence through formal leadership opportunities*

In addition to building leadership skills in the classroom, students were given opportunities for formal leadership roles within the school community. Students from kindergarten to grade 10 were able to join the student council, where they were provided additional leadership training on various topics, such as ownership, respect, and providing feedback. Students were invited onto event committees, and as one teacher explained, 'All our events, we make sure, are completely student-led'. With the support of teachers, students were involved in event brainstorming, planning, delegating, and execution. In one example, students organised and hosted a multi-school virtual funfair during COVID-19, which required coordination with students and

teachers from other schools. As one teacher described, when students were talking to strangers to plan this event, 'They handled it with ease, and it was so nice. In this way we like, we just train them, and we like to give them an opportunity to share their skills'.

### Empowering students as leaders in the community

Students were also encouraged to take on leadership roles within the larger community. For example, the school hosted community projects focused on a variety of issues, and students led these events by participating in role plays and advocacy at community events. Teachers described how these events had a profound effect not only on students' leadership abilities, but also on the community's perceptions of children. When community members saw students' confidence and growth, 'the whole perspective towards looking towards our children is totally different'. Teachers have noticed that community members are beginning to shift their own deficit thinking about youth living in poverty through this counter-narrative.

## Limitations

One limitation of the study is the lack of student and parent voice in the data. Although the original study planned to have student representation, students and their parents were inaccessible to the research team due to the logistical and technological challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and travel limitations. The complicated logistics of facilitating relationships between the research team and students/parents, as well as additional technological limitations in some students' households during the pandemic, ran the risk of adding pressure to the system when in crisis. Thus, data collection methods were limited to virtual staff interviews in favour of health, capacity, and safety.

Our study is also lacking measurement tools to address a key part of the equity literacy framework: the ability to recognise even the subtlest biases and inequities. Without prompting directly asking a question about bias and inequity, each teacher, counsellor, and school leader brought up themes of bias and injustice on their own, which conveys the centring of these issues within their philosophy and programming. However, even though we know that school and teacher goals include plans to reduce inequity, without observations, we do not have the ability to analyse other biases and inequities that may go unnoticed or unresolved.

Finally, any cross-national partnership is subject to limitations that can arise from different cultures, languages, communication styles, goals or expectations. We worked to mitigate these differences, and to instead convert them into strengths, through regular conversations with Akanksha leaders and by approaching the research with an open-mindedness to learn from each other throughout the process.

## Discussion

In this study, we examined school staff perceptions of their SEL initiatives at two Akanksha Schools in India. Staff shared their experiences with SEL and the impacts they noticed on themselves and their students when this pedagogy was applied school-wide and through community engagement. Findings that emerged from survey and interview data were the importance of shared values and goals among staff, creating safe spaces for connection, integrating culturally affirming practices, and deconstructing power dynamics through parent engagement and student leadership.

Our findings speak to the importance of the context in which SEL initiatives are implemented. The vast majority of staff at Akanksha recognised and agreed upon the need for SEL in their school community, and the purpose of their SEL work together. This is in line with previous research that shows that level of staff buy-in, perceived needs for SEL, and amount of staff training are all associated with the degree to which SEL is implemented in a school setting (Lendrum, Humphrey, and Wigelsworth 2013). Other research confirms that when schools take a whole-school approach to SEL, involving the entire school community, the resulting positive school climate contributes to positive student outcomes (Banerjee, Weare, and Farr 2014).

Meanwhile, Akanksha staff emphasised the importance of safe, trusting relationships among staff, parents, and students. While staff accomplish this with specific strategies, such as Circle Time and well-being phone calls, they also folded SEL into their overall teaching philosophy, and they consistently infused SEL into their interpersonal interactions. At Akanksha Schools, SEL was not just a curriculum: it was a way of being with students, and a way of students being with each other. Jones and Bouffard (2012) similarly call for schools to 'integrate the teaching and reinforcement of SEL skills into their missions and daily interactions with students' (p. 3). Akanksha staff centre on safety and connection throughout these interactions, which help foster the strong relationships that lay the foundation for positive youth development to occur (Bowers et al. 2015; Shean and Mander 2020).

Akanksha staff created an SEL-oriented atmosphere by incorporating the lived experiences of students and parents into the school community. Staff believe that parents cannot be treated separately from their children's education and well-being; instead, they are essential partners. Students, meanwhile, are not passive recipients of education; they are active participants whose interests, insights, and experiences are valuable parts of the learning process. The power of this approach is evident in other literature on culturally affirming practices (Ladson-Billings 1995; McCallops et al. 2019), student voice (Mitra 2004), empowerment (Freire 1986), teacher-parent partnerships (Albright and Weissberg 2009; Epstein 2001), and transformative SEL (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019), among others.

Instead of using a top-down approach in which staff implement a predetermined curriculum, schools recognise that they are part of a community with rich cultures, values, and resilience, and staff work to deconstruct power dynamics through partnerships and trust.

This is related to our final discussion point: The role of school in promoting equity and transformation beyond the school walls and into the community. In Akanksha School neighbourhoods, as in many other places, trauma, poverty, and food insecurity bring challenges to the families' daily lives (Basu 2016; Lacour and Tissington 2011). These inequities also bring challenges to schools, such as the need to prioritise mental health and school psychology (Patwa et al. 2019). Staff recognise that these social issues, which stem from systemic and structural oppression, must be addressed to improve outcomes for students' academic achievement and well-being. School staff tackle these social issues head on instead of remaining siloed in the academic sphere, while also empowering students by building their efficacy to act and to lead. This is related to the whole-child approach to education (ASCD 2007), as well as the view of Greenberg et al. (2017) that SEL, in many ways, is an 'ideal foundation for a public health approach to education – that is, an approach that seeks to improve the general population's wellbeing' (p. 13).

Regarding equity literacy, Akanksha Schools model the power of schools to be a transformational agent within a community. The method used when reducing violence, for example, through listening, gathering information, inviting parents into discussions and solution-finding regarding social ills, is an important aspect of SEL that is not often found in Western institutions in which schools pass on information to external agencies, but do not necessarily participate in external advocacy and collaboration.

## Recommendations

Through this cooperative intercultural research, and based on the findings from this study, we propose the following recommendations that will be of interest to schools implementing SEL practices in a variety of contexts. First, providing sufficient time and training to staff is essential. School administration must take time to develop not only staff buy-in, but staff enthusiasm and ownership over a new curriculum or pedagogy in their school. This includes providing paid time for teachers to practice skills prior to full implementation. Second, we recommend that schools seek to establish emotional safety and connection among teachers, parents, and students as the foundation of their SEL initiatives. Third, we recommend that schools actively engage with parents and provide leadership opportunities to students in order to create genuine partnerships that value families' backgrounds and voice. As more schools adopt SEL, they must

include training on how to recognise and name bias and inequity and the capacity for school staff to address social inequalities with students and parents as key actors in the work. These two Akanksha Schools offer a guide that can inspire schools around the world to consider their important role not only in their students' lives, but in their communities as a whole.

## Disclosure statement

## Notes on contributors

*Patricia Benitez Hemans* recently earned her PhD with the Department of Education Studies at UCSD and has a graduate specialization in Critical Gender Studies. She holds a Master's in Education from the University of California, Los Angeles and is a former high school teacher.

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*Gagandeep Kaur* has done her Bachelor's in Economics from Delhi University, followed by a Master's in Business Administration. Gagandeep leads the Monitoring, Evaluation & Research teams at Akanksha. Her focus area is to develop a data-driven culture leading to evidence-based decision-making across the Akanksha schools. She is passionate about building an evidence base on the impact of Akanksha's programs to impact the education ecosystem.

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