

Social-Emotional Learning and Parent Engagement



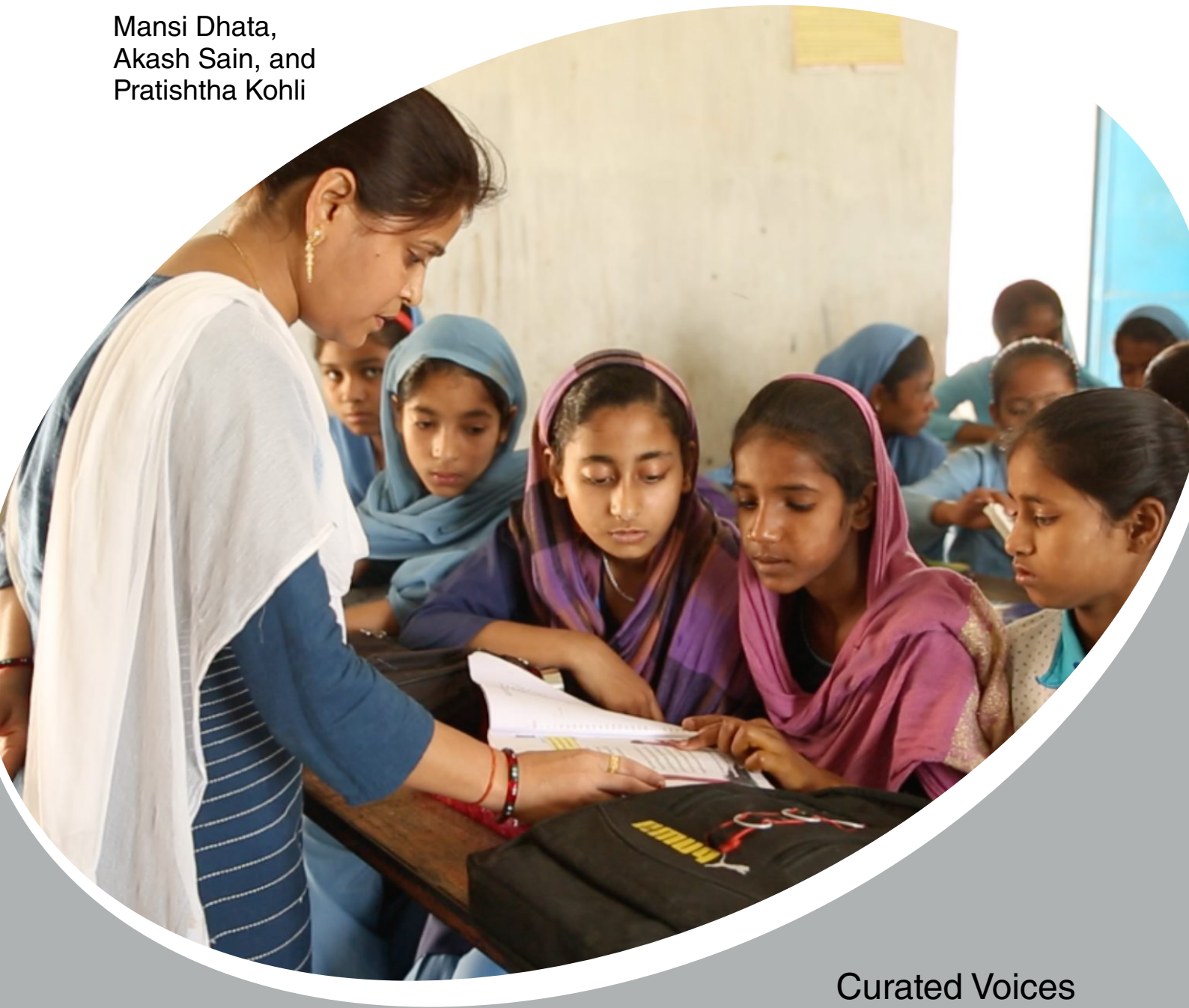
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A Primer on Project Sampoorna

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Contributors:

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Akash Sain, and
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Curated Voices

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CURATED VOICES

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A Primer on Project Sampoorna



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ABSTRACT

Project Sampoorna aims to strengthen social emotional learning for 10 lakh adolescents in Jharkhand by engaging with the adolescent ecosystem. To create a systemic impact, this includes parents, teachers, school heads, and government officials. The objective of engaging with parents is to enable mindset change so that they can support their children's emotional wellbeing at home since it deeply impacts an adolescent's development. The article discusses learnings from deploying two key strategies – Interactive Voice Responses [IVRS] and thematic webinars, to engage with 7000 parents in Jharkhand during COVID lockdown.

Keywords:

Social Emotional Learning, Adolescent Girls, Parents, Remote learning, Interactive Voice Responses System, Jharkhand, systems change, COVID response, Parent engagement

INTRODUCTION

A UNICEF study reported that 1.6 billion children and youth were impacted by school closures across 188 countries globally (UNICEF, 2021). Children were one of the most vulnerable groups during COVID-related lockdowns since they do not have a voice in most spaces, including inside their own homes. Restriction in movement, loss of livelihood and income, isolation, and the physical distancing measures led to heightened levels of stress and anxiety among children and also their caregivers.

To combat this, a focus on Social Emotional Learning [SEL] and wellbeing of students can help mitigate COVID related distress and also enable adolescents to realise their full potential as adults. “Social Emotional Learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.)¹.

Initiated in December 2020, Project Sampoorna is an initiative to strengthen SEL for 10 lakh adolescents in Jharkhand. It is being implemented in partnership with the Government of Jharkhand along with funding and strategic support by Porticus. This programme is being implemented by a consortium of organisations comprising of Dream a Dream, IDInsight, Kaivalya Education Foundation, Quest Alliance, and Sattva Consulting. The programme aims to improve SEL competencies by adopting and integrating a Whole Child Development approach in education policies and priorities. India’s National Education Policy 2020 has recognised the importance of SEL for holistic development of children and mentions that education needs to prioritise SEL in schools. The policy lays emphasis on “development of both the ‘foundational capacities’ of literacy and numeracy and ‘higher-order’ cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving – social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

Since home environment steers adolescent development, extending SEL beyond school is required to create safe homes and communities. According to the CASEL (2020, p.5), “the insights and perspectives of families and caregivers are critical to informing, supporting, and sustaining SEL efforts. Experience of education practitioners suggests that SEL programmes are more effective when they are extended into the home. Avenues for family partnership may include creating ongoing two-way communication, helping caregivers understand child development, helping teachers understand family backgrounds, providing opportunities for families to volunteer in schools, extending learning into homes, and coordinating family services with community partners.”

¹ The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is helping make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school.

OBJECTIVE OF PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT UNDER PROJECT SAMPOORNA

Project Sampoorna is currently being implemented in 60 schools covering 27,000 adolescents, 7000 parents, and 500 teachers. As part of the parent engagement strategy, the project's objective is to enable parent mindset change so that they can support their children's emotional wellbeing at home. The aforementioned interventions such as the Interactive Voice Response System and the thematic webinars were implemented between May 2021 and January 2022² to enable parents to drive SEL activities at home. These interventions were undertaken across 5 districts of Jharkhand, namely Giridih, Chatra, Palamu, East Singhbhum, and Dumka.

Adolescents who experience adversities are at a higher exposure of vulnerability. This can affect their ability to grow and thrive into healthy adults, amplifying their need for social emotional learning support. In the case of Jharkhand, children are prone to extreme hardships, given the prevalence of substance abuse, political disturbance, poverty level, and malnutrition. These figures are coupled with the highest proportion of married girls in India aged 15-19 years at 49% (2011 Census Data, n.d.).

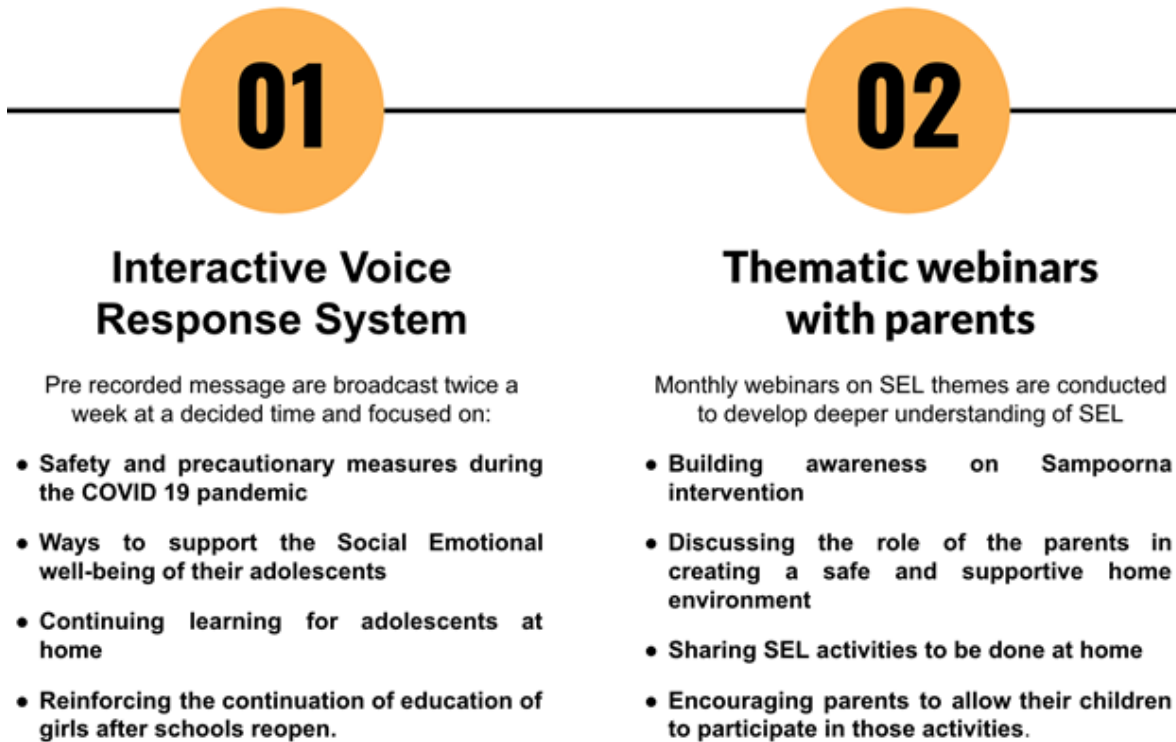
Due to the difficult geographical terrain, connectivity issues abound. Only 1,427 panchayats in the state have access to broadband, while 4,459 panchayats do not have broadband or internet facilities (Mudakavi, 2021). Jharkhand faces a myriad of issues, one of which is hunger and food security. Through the course of discussions conducted during the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown in India, many families wanted schools to open so that children could get at least one meal a day. Such adverse conditions in Jharkhand affected adolescents' and their caregivers' emotional wellbeing, creating a gap which could be bridged by social emotional learning. SELs offer the people a safe space where they can share, feel heard and supported. Though SELs in themselves don't address issues such as hunger, they provide avenues to address mental distress that may result from such adversities.

² Due to the lockdown, the engagement was completely virtual.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING PARENTS

As part of Project Sampoorna, Quest Alliance developed two core strategies (Figure 1). The goal of these initiatives was to help parents experience SEL, observe the behaviour of their children, adopt some practices at home, and enable growth for their children.

Figure 1: Core strategies implemented under Project Sampoorna



METHODOLOGY

The IVRS intervention was initiated in May 2021 and will be continued as the core strategy of Sampoorna until 2024. Data between May and August was utilised for analysis. Until August 2021, the project collected phone numbers of 10,000 parents and reached out to more than 60% of parents through both IVRS and webinars under the programme. The webinars with parents were initiated from the month of February and one webinar was conducted for each of the five districts under the intervention once a month.

1. Interactive Voice Response System [IVRS]

The team observed that the call pick-up behaviour is influenced by factors such as the agriculture season and parents' movement for livelihood opportunities, which were factors beyond the team's control. Thereafter, the call timings were reworked based on parents' availability. Following these changes, the call pick-up rates increased over time. To sustain listenership, it is important to avoid

any gaps in the broadcast of the message, they should be broadcast as decided and communicated to parents. To sustain the interest of parents, different content formats could be used such as story, roleplays, narration, jingle, call-and-response, and others.

Among the parents who heard the IVRS message, over the course of May to August 2021, 43% reported some understanding of SEL while 24% reported an improved understanding and 23% reported no understanding of SEL. Qualitative feedback showed an increased understanding and empathy towards children's needs and areas of support by parents.

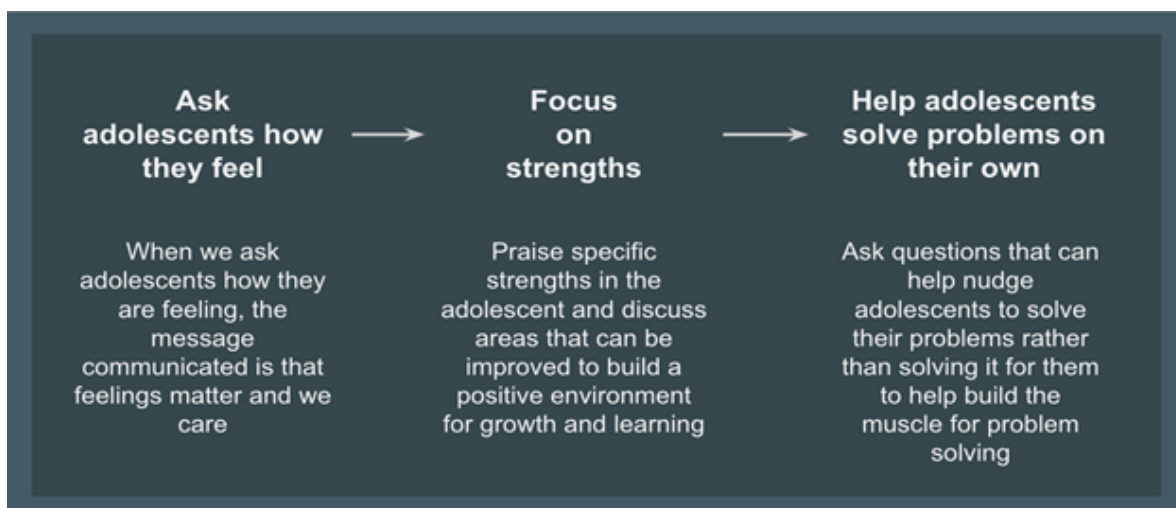
2. Webinars

The team was initially sceptical about the response that could be expected from parents, especially because most of the parents are engaged in farming or other livelihood activities during the day. However, an attempt was made and the first webinar was conducted in February 2021 saw the participation of 545 parents. The information about the webinars was shared through the school leaders and teachers along with support from the District administration. In total, 15 webinars were conducted till October 2021. In subsequent webinars, parents' participation increased to 3200, as the team found a suitable time slot to engage with parents upon receiving feedback.

The programme reached out to 6077 parents through the IVRS and 3200 parents through Webinars. These are parents from government schools and from interior tribal areas. This challenges the assumption that parents from marginalised communities are not interested in the education or wellbeing of their children. While both these engagement strategies helped to build awareness and enable dialogue, more intense interventions such as parent meetings and immersion exercises are needed over a sustained period to bring about a much deeper shift in mindsets. The support of the larger system including district-, block-, and school- level functionaries is required to support adolescent girls and make parents allies in SEL. Each of these functionaries need to understand the importance of these interventions as they exercise an influence on the other.

More than 60% of parents have developed some understanding of SEL through the various interventions that were made under Sampoorna. Parents' small changes can have a large impact on the growth and development of their adolescents (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Examples of approaches parents can use at home



Giving families the resources to foster social and emotional experiences at home, as well as the tools to reflect on those experiences together, is an important part of engaging families in SEL. The benefit of families reinforcing critical social and emotional skills and language at home extends beyond the school walls. These strategies are a huge opportunity to influence the behaviour and mindset of male members since it is generally the male members of the household who have access to mobile phones.

MAJOR FINDINGS

In the current times and to sustain life-long learning and support for children, SEL needs to make its way into homes and parents need to become central stakeholders. So, while interventions with parents help them empathise with children, parents are able to nudge adolescents towards academics and learning processes. Interactive Voice Response Systems and webinars have been a key tool to reach the parents during the pandemic and they will remain a means to build, connect, and initiate dialogues in the future.

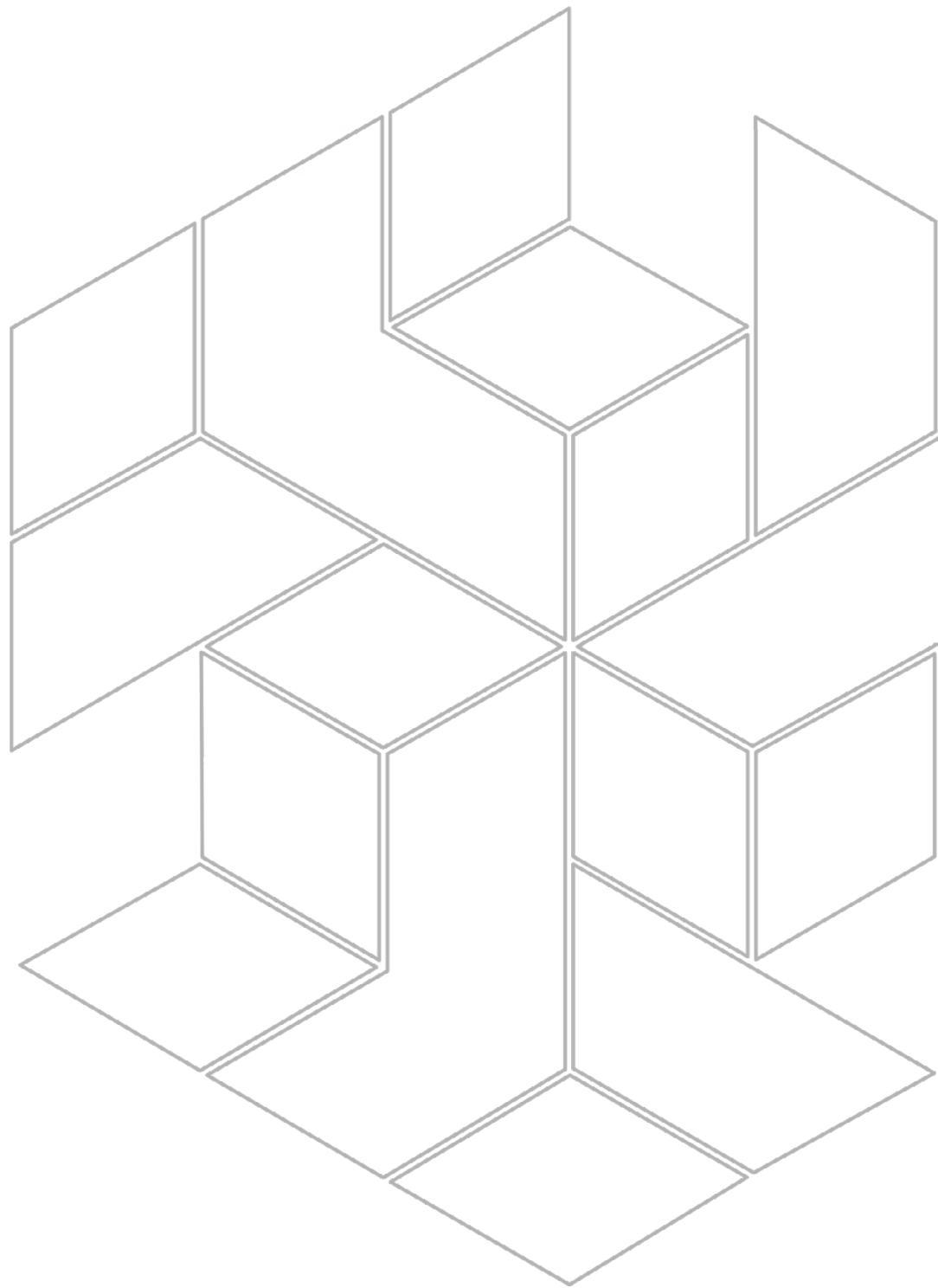
POLICY IMPLICATIONS

National Education Policy 2020 focuses on the role of teachers to foster Social Emotional skills as part of holistic development of children. The policy rightly recognises that a good school is one where children feel cared for, safe, and welcomed. However the policy does not factor in the after-school realities where a child could face neglect or abuse at home. Even prior to the pandemic, home has always been a space for learning.

It is therefore critical for education policies, including the NEP, to factor in the potential in the relationship between teachers and parents to foster a supporting learning environment at home. Strategies such as IVRS are cost effective, can be scaled up, and should be supported by state education departments. In addition, SEL must be discussed alongside academics during parent-teacher meetings. Teachers can play a critical role in supporting parents to develop the SEL skills of children and parents can help teachers understand the child in a holistic way. A policy that takes into account the after-school realities of children and encourages collaboration between schools and parents is required to ensure the well being of children.

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