

The Silent Game-Changer: Social Emotional Learning (SEL)'s Role in Education

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in 2020 had a major impact on the mental health and education of adolescent girls particularly in Sindh, Pakistan. With schools closed and limited access to technological facilities, the majority of young girls were stressed, anxious, and isolated due to no provision of online education. This research paper looks into the young schoolgirls' mental health problems in Sindh during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the absence of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in school. SEL allows students to manage emotions, build relationships, and make moral decisions, which was in severe deficiency, exacerbating the psychological toll of the pandemic. The data were collected from 30 students by means of action research. The gathered data were subjected to qualitative analysis. The research points out the implementation of a SEL-based project, "**Digital 9 to 1x19**," to tackle such issues. Through a series of web-based interventions, such as self-care diaries, competence-enhancing exercises, and digital literacy sessions, the project attempted to sensitize and decrease the mental toll of 100+ beneficiaries, which included, 30 teenage girls, their parents, teachers, coordinators, and school principals in the seven districts of Sindh. Entrepreneurship was also promoted, and a few of the participants initiated small online businesses to earn money and improve the financial conditions of their families. The study concludes that SEL activities not only helped participants cope with the emotional stress of the pandemic but also helped them gain new skills and confidence. This initiative also diminished old gender stereotypes and norms, allowing girls to utilize technology to learn and educate themselves. The study also highlights the necessity of integrating SEL into school curricula to allow the mental well-being and emotional health of learners, especially during crisis periods. It

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warns of increased investment in SEL programs, teacher training, and online resources to allow all learners, especially in low-income communities, to gain the resources they require to succeed emotionally and academically.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Digital Transformation, Learner autonomy, Anxiety.

Introduction

This pandemic is an eye-opener to global educational ministries towards the educational gaps that become more visible than ever before, even globally, especially for many vulnerability factors such as the developmental age, youth especially girls having special needs, preexisting mental health conditions and being economically underprivileged.

Among the above-mentioned, the most vulnerable that encounter challenges during lockdown are girls with special needs having autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, cerebral palsy, learning disability, developmental delays, or other behavioral and emotional difficulties. (Holmes *et al.*, 2020; Hyseni Duraku, Z., & Nagavci, M. (2020); Korupolu, R., Stampas, A., Gibbons, C. *et al.* (, 2020).

The sudden change in the routine life with the closure of special schools, daycare centers, non-availability of learning resources at home, and no peer Interaction has caused regression, triggered outbursts, temper tantrums, and trauma. and many times violent behavior of adolescents with parents (Aries.S *et al.*, 2021)

Although prior to the pandemic, these children had been facing difficulties even at home or while attending special schools, in due course, however, they had learned to develop a schedule to adhere to for most of the time of the day (APA, 202, Waite, P., Patalay, B. M., McElroy, E., Creswell, C. (2020; Cortese *et al.* 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Though there is a dearth of research on how parents are dealing with educating differently-abled girls in typical situations, overall, with the spread of the coronavirus, catering to these challenges was a major difficult task for parents to carry out on their own, as they lack professional expertise. They primarily relied on schools and therapists to help them out (Dalton *et al.*, 2020).

Research Question:

How did the absence of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) during the

COVID-19 pandemic impact the mental health and educational experience of adolescent girls in Sindh, Pakistan, and how effective was the "Digital 9 to 1x19" intervention in addressing these challenges?

Statement of Problem:

Mental health issues in Pakistan, a developing country, in the last few decades, reached an appalling level (David DB, Malik MH, 2000; Gadit AAM, 2005) however with the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, dealing with mental issues of young teenagers explicitly in Sindh has become a challenge for schools, staff and parents.

According to the National Human Development Report 2018, by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), two-thirds of Pakistan's total population is between 15-30 years of age. Out of that only, 10% have access to recreational facilities, 15% have access to the internet, 8% to radio, and 48 % own a mobile phone and it will require an additional 60 years to reach the target of zero out-of-school children.

On the other hand, in September 2020 ³having more than 260,000 confirmed cases of Novel coronavirus, approximately 5,700 deaths in Pakistan and the highest number of cases in the provinces of Sindh (Waris et al. 2020. Saqlain et al. 2020) has led to the situation worse, causing approximately 930,00 children to drop out from educational institutes. Given that 22 million are already out of school in Pakistan (PAMS, 2017, Malala Funds, 2020), this represents an increase of almost 4.2 percent according to the World Bank Report (Geven. K & Hasan. A, 2020), thereby generating more exposure towards traumatic conditions. Additionally, it was linked with an increased incidence of depression and anxiety, particularly among schoolgirls belonging to both marginalized and privileged families.

Considering the existing poverty, lack of economic resources, and lack of government support towards mental health care, education, and technological facilities during the pandemic, this paper reflects the immediate mental stress and anxiety amid Covid 19 on teenage schoolgirls and how social and emotional learning projects have helped to combat the issue to the selected cohort of 30 teenage school girls across Sindh. Further, the paper provides strong considerations for weaving SEL in teaching and learning in schools.

³ At the time of the start of the project implementation (Digital 9to 1 x 19)

2. Literature Review:

COVID-19 (Global Pandemic) and Mental Stress

The impact of COVID-19 on youth's mental health and wellbeing is disrupting. The complete lockdown for months, closure of schools in over 180 countries, causing millions of students out of school (Azevedo, 2020; World Bank, 2020), social distancing, abrupt changes in living style, and quarantine restrictions resulted in increased stress and anxiety among the young generation and families across the globe. (Morgul, E et al., 2020; Frank & Grady, 2020., Education Links, USAID, 2020).

According to a recent survey in the United Kingdom, the frustration level among children increased to 61.4%, along with anxiousness, loneliness, restlessness, anger, stress, anxiety, sadness, dispute, and argument among families and children amplified and was reported by more than 30% of the caregivers that was part of that survey. (Borbás. R & Fehlbaum. L. *et al.*, 2021).

Further studies conducted in other parts of the world, such as in China, track down higher depressive and anxiety symptoms among youth, thereby resulting in adverse psychological disorders during the pandemic (Xie X, Xue Q, Zhou Y, Zhu K, Liu Q, Zhang J, *et al.*, 2019; Saurabh. K 2020). Similarly, developing countries like India and Bangladesh have found a greater level of distress, fear, insecurity, and stigma that increased mental pressure in young adults, especially teenage girls, due to the fear of quarantine in COVID centers set up by the local government that lacks safety, security, facilities, and resources mandatory for a human being in such situation. Additionally, youngsters in countries like Pakistan also experience an elevated level of psychosomatic consequences due to stigmatization by their immediate and extended family members, neighbors, friends, and overall by electronic and social media for catching coronavirus symptoms.

While the long-term consequences of the lockdown on mental health are yet to be understood the current literature, articles, blogs, and analysis of projects implemented by many national and international NGOs and governments of different countries suggest that the effects of lockdown are not only associated with poor or marginalized communities, but are equal for the privileged class. (OECD, 2020; OCHA 2020). Young teenagers from the upper-middle and wealthy classes missed their regular schooling, weekend meet-ups, social hangouts, shopping, and traveling the most. In contrast, teenagers from poor or marginalized backgrounds faced school dropouts, family disputes, gender

discrimination, and no love and care from parents due to financial constraints or lack of family resources. Additionally, young adults suffered the most (Brooks et al., 2020) compared to small children or old age people (Jiao *et al.*, 2020; Orgilés, Morales, Delvecchio, Mazzeschi, & Espada, 2020).

Despite the fact that most of the young generation suffer due to abrupt changes in living style and standards after the outbreak of Covid 19, there are also a few countries and areas where the young generation have met social and mental health issues due to strong religious beliefs and faith. For example, in Iran, Iraq, or Afghanistan, where the regime denied the existence of COVID-19 for months, or in urban and rural parts of all provinces of Pakistan where people believe no such virus exists or existed, diminishing it as a propaganda of the government to hide their negligence

Isolation of learners:

The pandemic outbreak has brought complete restrictions on everyday life globally, from lockdowns in countries, curfews in cities, closure of markets, offices, and educational institutes, and the encouragement of homestays and quarantine.

During the suspension of classroom teaching, two main institutional approaches were carried out in most countries, firstly as remote learning by the government at the general level and secondly as online teaching and learning methodology worldwide both by public and private institutions. For example, the Ministry of Public Education, in Mexico introduced a project: “Learn at Home on TV and Online” through paid television channels (Secretaría de Educación Pública. 2020) which was on air along with other teaching programs through radio in 15 different languages and organized free provision of textbooks to promote access to education. (Secretaría de Educación Pública. Boletín No. 98). African countries like Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Nigeria that have already experienced working during the Ebola virus strengthened and implemented their existing multi-model remote learning programs during COVID-19 widespread, through national radio and TV learning as soon as the announcement was made for the closure of schools during the pandemic. Many other countries that had limited experience with remote learning or online teaching, for example in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Cameroon, Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, Estonia, and Uruguay partnered with telecommunication operators and informational technology companies, apart from teachers and principals contacting families through phone calls in order to introduce students and families with the mobile application learning and implementing teacher-

student interaction at no cost. (Cobol. C *et al.* 2021). However, in other countries like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, many of the private schools continued the education by establishing communication through social networks such as WhatsApp or providing recorded lectures through platforms like Zoom, MS Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams (Naveeda, 2023). Initiatives like “Radio School” and Educational Portal “E-Taaleem” to provide education through distance learning during pandemics were also taken by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training Pakistan to ensure continuity of education, disrupted due to Covid-19.

While much effort was made to cope with the education system and integration of different digital models globally, the experiences for both the teachers and learners were worse. The lack of knowledge for using technology by teachers and students, virtual learning environment, self-learning and understanding of the curriculum, and demanding more time on-screen created significant barriers to acquiring quality education. The teaching methodology also played a significant effect, for example, passive teaching style, long hour recorded lectures without breaks, video lessons without question and answers sessions, WhatsApp group work, theoretical assignments provided through Google links, focus on completing syllabus rather than creating conceptual understanding, learning or time management, have all put down the efficiency of the learner, increased pressure to improve performance thus creating a negative impact as depression and frustration overall to teenagers.

Moreover, lack or non-availability of gadgets, poor or no internet access in urban, semi-urban, or remote areas, and electricity shortfalls all deteriorated the learning environment. Along with the lack of resources and lack of expertise in the usage of online tools, the social distancing restrictions imposed by nearly all government bodies globally (Anderson *et al.*, 2020) to minimized the spread of the novel coronavirus and impeded the socio-economic life eventually increasing loneliness, negative thinking, alcohol dependency and created difficulties in emotional regulation among students especially after the suspension of class teachings in educational institutes, abolition of face to face interactions with friends for assignments or group work, and social distancing with institute’s faculty (Kawachi, 2020, Bavel *et al.*, 2020). According to the study of close to 800 university students with an average age of 18, carried out by researchers from McGill and the University of Toronto stated that students with no prior mental health problems suffer

greater psychological stress compared to those who are already “at-risk” with preexisting mental health issues. (Hamza *et al.* 2020).

Furthermore, family disputes, conflicts among siblings, violence at home, gender discrimination, poverty, hunger, starvation, parental dismissal from work, school pressure for fee payments, peer pressure, and dropouts all have diverted the learners into isolation resulting in a lack of concentration on studies, low productivity and worsen quality of assignments, deteriorating the mental health of students, forcing them to demand delay in exams or cancel and provide predicted grades for their tests or exams for promotion to next class.

Theoretical framework: SEL & Action Learning:

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which students of all ages acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop positive identities, manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, ensure successful planning to achieve dream goals, make inform and responsible decision. (Elias *et al.*, 1997; Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003; CASEL. (2019). In other words, it is a capacity to handle oneself through recognizing and managing feelings, setting goals, making a decision, and problem-solving for self, community, or society.

The learned behavior through SEL is considered essential in the early years of a student’s life (Weissberg, Kumpfer & Seligman, 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang & Walberg, 2004) as it includes competencies that later help in learning and growth. (Jones, 2017). The skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making improve mental health and well-being, academic performance, handling pressure, controlling failures, career readiness, and success.

Numerous research reports showed that SEL creates positive, short and long-term impacts on student’s life. (Education Links, USAID, 2020, UNESCO, 2024). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, And Emotional Learning National Principal Survey Report 2011 from a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions that looked across 213 studies involving more than 270,000 students found that students participating in SEL programs have improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school. Another study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) revealed that students who lack SEL instructions have poor

health conditions, perform low, are often unemployed, and maintain unhealthy relations.

The 2015 review report from Colombia University found an average return on investment for six evidence-based programs of 11 to 1, meaning for every dollar invested, there is a return of \$11. Simultaneously, policymakers and non-governmental organizations considered SEL competencies critically crucial for the long-term success of all students in today's economy, as reported by the American Express Institute and Brookings Institution in 2015. More recently, in 2021, a report from the Early Intervention Foundation states that SEL interventions support comparative to positive youth developments and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and The Educator Confidence Report 2021 indicated that 86% of the educators agreed that a well-crafted, fully integrated SEL approach in the classroom makes a positive impact on the outcomes related to post-pandemic.

However, it is still an emerging concept in Pakistan, and very few private educational institutes have made SEL a designated part of the school curriculum. In contrast, poor learning outcomes or learning crises are observed in informal and non-formal public and private schools (Shahid. N 2017, UNICEF 2020) because neither SEL has been ever added as a fully designed set of standards in the curriculum by educational policymakers at any level nor implemented by stakeholders at an institutional level.

Methodology of Action

The design of this research study closely aligns with the characteristics of an action research design, as it incorporates systematic steps and occurs in an educational and social setting. It focuses on addressing practical, real-world problems and aims to generate practical knowledge that can be applied to address these problems.

The study follows the four-stage method proposed by Mertler and Charles (2005): planning, acting, developing, and reflecting.



Fig.1 Four-Stage Method by Mertler and Charles (2005)

Step 1: Planning

During this stage, a need assessment was conducted to identify the specific problem of stress and its impact on teenage school girls. A research plan was developed, including the specific interventions using the E-STRESS KIT and E-STRESS GROUP social media platforms. The target population and sampling criteria for participant selection were defined, and a timeline for the research project was created.

Step 2: Acting

In this stage, a Google Form was designed to collect applications from potential participants. The form included relevant information about the online program, eligibility criteria, and informed consent. The Google Form was then circulated through various social media platforms, targeting the Sindh province. From the received applications, 30 participants were selected to participate in the program.

Step 3: Developing

During this stage, the necessary materials for the E-Kit, such as diaries, crafting tools, and counseling sheets, were provided to the participants. The online program commenced through the E-STRESS GROUP social media platform, where guidance and teaching activities were provided. Specific tasks and activities related to self-care, skill learning, and technology were assigned to address stress and anxiety. Participants posted their work online, and regular

feedback and responses were provided to support them and address any concerns or difficulties they encountered.

Step 4: Reflecting

In this final stage, data collected from the research project, including survey forms, was analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to stress reduction and well-being. The findings were then reflected upon in comparison to the initial research questions and objectives. This iterative approach allowed for refining and improving the program over time, maximizing its effectiveness in combating stress among teenage school girls in the digital age.

Overall, the study employed action research methodology, following a systematic process and incorporating reflection and adaptation based on the collected data. This approach ensured that the program could be refined and enhanced, increasing its effectiveness in addressing stress among teenage school girls in the digital age.

Reflection on Action Learning and Analysis

The classrooms are the first place where children's beliefs, values, capabilities, skills, and interests, venture out; however, in Pakistan, the school remains the most neglected field (Aubusson & Watson, 1999; Habib, 2013; Hathaway, 2005; Rahman & Uddin, 2009). The sudden shutdown of schools, lack of preparedness for catastrophe management, especially in the IT, educational, and health sectors, the outdated educational methodology adopted in schools for teaching and learning, absence of counselors, lack of trends in visiting psychological therapists, and insufficient economic resources are the primary reason due to which mostly teenage students have undergone mental stress and pressure during COVID-19 all over Pakistan.

In the context of Sindh Province, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a myriad of challenges in the education sector. Schools in Sindh, as in many other regions of Pakistan and around the world, faced abrupt closures and uncertain path forward. As the pandemic continued to disrupt traditional teaching and learning methodologies, it became evident that students, especially teenage girls, were confronted with significant mental stress and pressure. The shutdown of schools not only disrupted educational routines but also created a sense of isolation and vulnerability among students. Teenagers who were already in the formative phase of their lives, found themselves cut off from the supportive environments of their classrooms and peers. This

isolation amplified the psychological toll of the pandemic, leading to a sense of abandonment, stress, and anxiety.

In this challenging context, the introduction of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiative in Sindh emerged as a beacon of hope. The “Digital 9 to 1x 19”⁴ project recognized the urgent need to address the emotional well-being of students and therefore, incorporated SEL activities that aim to nurture among students’ essential life skills and traits such as confidence, positivity, self-awareness, empathy, resilience, and self-actualization during the pandemic. Additionally, the program stretched to online training as the need and demand for digital support for SEL has grown widely (Li L, Flynn KS, DeRosier ME, Weiser G and Austin-King K, 2021). It supports school girls in maintaining their well-being through learned skills and allowing them to apply them to various parts of their lives, considering how vital it was during COVID-19 for young teenage school girls to combat mental stress and anxiety caused due to the prevailing situation as closure of schools, financial constraints, lack of resources, family disputes, gender discrimination and lack of technological skills both of students and school stakeholders. The project was executed across seven districts of Sindh among selected teenage school girls through the following set of SEL activities:

1. Direct form of student skill-building is needed in the 21st century which is the most widely used and studied approach to SEL (Jones, Barnes, Bailey & Doolittle, 2017).
2. Positive behavior and resilience in ways that support social and emotional development in the critical time of the pandemic (Durlak et al. 2011).
3. Transformation from ordinary to extraordinary persona through exploration of self-identity, interest, and rejuvenation (Jones, S.M. & Bouffard, S.M. 2012).
4. Adaptation of cultural change and social norms in the framework of equity and equality (UNESCO, 2020).

As action research allows identifying the respondents' immediate problems and understanding the progressive reaction through the integration of daily

⁴ Digital 9 to x19 projects focused on mental health and psycho-social support through SEL to empower youth and promote creativity under Youth Innovation Challenge 2020 COVID-19 edition, launched by UNDP and funded by UN Geneva. <https://undp-pakistan.exposure.co/passion-for-tomorrowstories-of-the-youth-of-pakistan-part-1>

activities (San Antonio, Donna M. Dr., 2018), an overwhelming response from all participants of the public, private and community schools was found.

The studies by Anderson and Rainie (2012) and Watters (2020) have highlighted the importance of connectivity and collaborative efforts in overcoming educational disruptions, similarly, the project was not limited to traditional, in-person support but extended to online platforms recognizing the growing demand for digital resources in the wake of COVID-19 and beyond. Therefore, from the start of the project, where the girls were asked to fill online “Google Form” - The first step to instilling technological skills, to the selection of the final cohort, not only the participants but also the school head, coordinators, teachers and even mothers engaged in making the project success. It was interesting to note that the program is only announced for the province of Sindh however, applications from all over Pakistan and even internationally were received. Thus, it resonates with the adaptivity and resilience of communities in response to educational challenges, particularly during the pandemic. Nonetheless, those young girls selected for training revealed later that mostly they got support from schools that were or unable to offer online classes previously because of a lack of resources or realization and eagerly wanted their students to engage in some kind of learning, For example, The Bridge School, a low-cost community school in a slum area of Karachi that welcomes below poverty gentry provided gadgets (Tabs) and internet facilitates to the students to let them participating and gaining online learning experience within school timings during the project tenure. According to Inan and Lowther (2010), the demand for online learning and digital educational resources has grown exponentially in response to the closure of schools in many areas. Apart from this, a coordinator of the girls’ school in Nawabshah made personal calls to many families in the villages and counseled parents to allow their daughters to participate online in the project. The enthusiasm displayed by school heads, coordinators, teachers, and parents underscores the urgency of addressing the educational needs of students during times of crisis (UNESCO, 2020). Surprisingly, it was vividly noticeable during the discussions that the school stakeholders, even in rural areas of Sindh have also adapted to using platforms like Zoom, MS Teams, and WhatsApp for learning, not only bridging the education gap but also discovering the potential of technology to build on further connections, create access to updated educational resources, and support healthy developments. Additionally, posting work on social media, interacting with innovative developments, implementing decision-making, and building relationships between teachers and students, children and parents, and peer and group learners created a dynamic change, thus extending the reach of the learning platforms during the pandemic.

Moreover, the potential of digital technology to empower females and challenge gender norms is widely observed. According to Chami (2014) and Gajjala et al. (2016), such shifts in attitude contribute to the broader social and cultural transformation that empowers girls and women. During the project, the positive change toward allowing the use of the internet and smartphones for educational purposes to girls by families, especially fathers and brothers was notable. Moreover, gaining familiarity with digital platforms and confidence by teenagers was evidenced throughout the course of the implementation of the Digital 9 to1x19 project. According to one mother, before this project, the whole family is with the thinking that "*mobile use karne se larkiyian kharab ho jati hein*" that using mobile phones was often forbidden in many households by father and brothers as they thought it would have a negative social impact on the girls/women around their house, however learning through the project, they realized that the modern gadgets are also suitable for education, grooming oneself and earning, if used properly to its advantage.

SEL is more than a curriculum, it is a holistic approach to education that encompasses emotional well-being, social connection, and personal growth. According to Munro (2019), the potential of SEL activities is to develop life skills and promote financial independence. Similarly, girls were also trained in career readiness activities, especially to overcome their financial constraints and discrimination. As the findings of the research study of Munro (2019) further depicts that the role of education is to also provide avenues for economic empowerment, the project also incorporated SEL which acts more than a curriculum to further enhance socio-economic wellbeing. Some participants with support and guidance throughout the project started their online food businesses, for an instance "*GA Kitchen*" a home food supply chain was started by two girls with their mother in Karachi, and Five girls from different districts of Pakistan such as Nawabshah, Hyderabad, Karachi, Kashmore and Sukkur learned and started selling online artificial jewelry in different areas to earn and aid their families financially.

Since, the project's focus is more than just targeting and building skills (Jones, S. M. & Bouffard, S. M. 2012). It was also a means to support minimizing depression, isolation, and trauma, (Jones, S. M., Bailey, R. & Jacob, R. 2014;), and become therapeutic and preventive potential of SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). It was much needed during the COVID-19 pandemic when teenagers especially girls in Sindh found themselves neglected, victimized, and faced injustice towards their rights to learning, and the absence of good treatment in hospitals, attention, or care. In such a situation, SEL activities played a crucial role in the project by using a coping mechanism in the shape of an E-Stress

Kit and a Self-Care Diary which allowed reflection, allowing the principles of narrative therapy and the healing power of personal reflection and expression to encompass (White & Epston, 1990). Nearly all participants acknowledged the inclusion of the E-Kit and Diary, which helped them in combatting stress as they wrote or drew about their interests, their likes, dislikes, and some incidents they came across, or happy moments, sharing weekly, with their designated trainer.

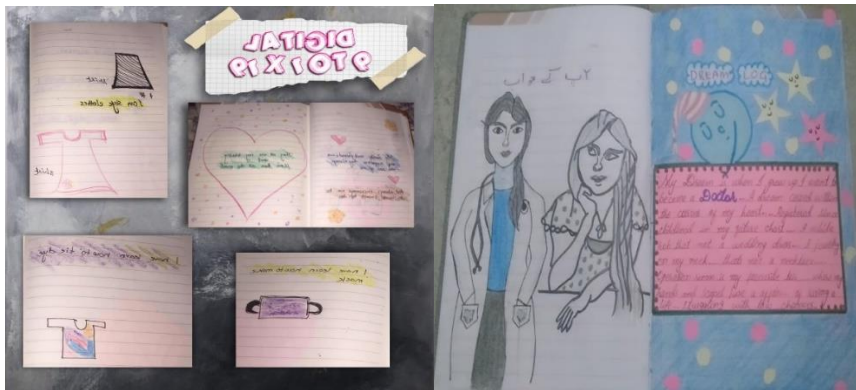


Figure 2: Snapshots of the Diary

It is important to mention here that the project is offered to only those girls who, for any reason, were not attending online schooling. Various research studies (Gupta & Sahu, 2020) depicted the need to address disparities in educational access and the social and emotional challenges faced by marginalized groups during the pandemic. During the project as well, the participants shared that they started feeling abandoned after the closure of schools and missed their school life compared to their friends and cousins who were studying in better private schools and continued their online education. Moreover, vulnerability and inequality were evident. For instance, girls from financially stable families have highlighted how they had been bullied by other boys/ male members at homes and neighborhoods for never experiencing online education as schools were not only offering education services to the boys who were provided with streaming gadgets by their parents. One girl said, " *Subah ka waqat mere liye mushkilat lata he kyonke mera school band he to me sab kam karte hon jabke mera bhai online parhta he*" The morning time is dreadful for me as my school is closed and not offering online class, therefore, I do all house chores but my brother studies online. By providing equal opportunities for online learning to all girls, the SEL activities sparked a positive change in attitudes towards gender norms within households. Amna (pseudonym) stated "*Shayad ab me kabhi school na jati agar me ye project na*

karte" I would never want to attend school if I had not participated in this project. Moreover, the participants and their families' statements regarding their changed perspectives on the right to education in line with international efforts to ensure equitable and inclusive education for all (UNESCO, 2024), their desire to continue learning along with the maintaining of sense of urgency (Bonanno et al, 2010) and purpose of students during COVID-19 was revealed from self-care diary where they wrote about how they had prepared to self-manage themselves in critical times and develop aptitudes to make informed decisions about their future career paths. Thus, SEL activities embedded in the project have helped to overcome their depression, promoting equality and boosting their morale and honor. Simultaneously, all the teenage girls have also benefitted from the ongoing community engagements, talks, and guidance received by the E Group comprised of mentors, parents, teachers, community role models, and especially the young trainer⁵. While students recognized the effectiveness of SEL and highlighted the acquired potential skills that supported them in preparing for life in the new normal, the teachers and mothers who stayed connected with participants learned that social and emotional learning approaches enhance educational and economic outcomes. (Dusenbury et al., 2003). The teachers additionally endorsed SEL as an inclusive and adaptable approach (Elias et al., 1997) and served as a means to support introverted, isolated, and stressed students in the project along with creating professional development of teachers who participated in the program.

Thus, the project findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, the significance of SEL, and the vulnerabilities faced by learners provide valuable insights into the protentional of innovative and inclusive educational initiatives to empower teenage students and communities. The success of this project in nurturing emotional resilience, promoting digital literacy, and nurturing entrepreneurship skills among teenagers highlighted the transformative power of education through SEL even in the face of adversity.

Conclusion and Consideration

In normal circumstances globally, SEL skills have proven overwhelmingly, however, it has become a priority as COVID-19 brings countless challenges and potential threats to parents, schools, staff, and students, especially teenage

⁵ The trainer received three days of training program funded by the UN and conducted by SoLF before the start of the project.. She was also continuously mentored by a professional psychologist from the UK provided by UNDP during the tenure of implementation of the project.

girls. The donor funding agencies, government, community leaders, and individuals have provided grants and funding to youth development organizations, NGOs, INGOs, public departments, hospitals, etc. Working for health and education sectors. Despite much work being carried out to improve mental health and anxiety among teenagers, countless actions are required to embed SEL in daily life activities through formal and informal educational platforms.

To prepare each student to understand and handle the demands in and out of school or short and long-term goals, here are important considerations.

1. Weaving SEL standards into education by the State, policymakers, and experts of education and health on a priority basis with a shared vision, sustainable policy, and practice for adequate and equitable SEL within the education system.
2. Design and implementation of structured curriculum integrated with SEL standards with age-appropriate benchmarks, guidelines, and goals across all levels of education, from early childhood to universities by education, literacy, and health departments.
3. As the most common SEL approach is direct instructions using a structured curriculum by teachers, trainers, counselors, mentors, etc. therefore, provision for professional development support, training, and guidance for stakeholders is considered mandatory.
4. Allocation of additional funds by government-led institutions and donor agencies to support SEL-based education at the district and provincial level, especially in the new normal when a large number of teenage students are likely to need intensive social and emotional instruction and support.
5. Execution of small and large-scale SEL projects, advocacy programs, training by NGOs, private and public organizations, educational institutes, individual experts involving youth, civil society, media, entrepreneurs, ministry, bureaucracy, and human rights organizations.
6. Align mental health services and counseling to all sectors, including educational professional organizations, trades, and industry.
7. Monitoring, Evaluations, Learning, and Accountability throughout the course of action (SEL) by special teams appointed at the government level.
8. Sharing results /publications of both large- and small-scale studies, surveys, interviews, discussions conducted from time to time by research organizations and experts.

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