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Teacher Competencies for Social Emotional Learning in Higher Education: A Qualitative Inquiry Through Systematic Literature Review and Multi-Site Case Study in West Bengal

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Systematic Review

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Abstract

Background: Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in higher education places student well-being, engagement and holistic development globally. Although there is a lot of research on SEL implementation in the school, teacher competences for HEIs are still relatively unexplored, particularly in a developing country context. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India mandates holistic education, little is known about higher education faculty's preparedness to implement SEL practices.

Objective: The aim of this qualitative inquiry is to develop a rich and contextualized understanding of teacher competencies required for SEL implementation in higher education. It addresses the research question: How do teachers in HEIs experience, perceive and enact competencies for the implementation of SEL practices, and which contextual factors shape these competencies?

Methods: A multi-method qualitative design integrating (1) a Systematic Literature Review (SLR covering 87 peer-reviewed publications from 2015 through until 2026 on teacher SEL competencies; (2) multi-case studies of four higher education institutions in West Bengal, India—a public university, a private university, an affiliated college and a teacher education institution; and (3) methodological triangulation across the data sources to help establish trustworthiness and theoretical richness. Data were collected through 48 semi-structured interviews with faculty, administrators, and teacher educators; 24 classroom observations; document analysis of institutional policies and training materials; as well as focus group discussions, data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis within a critical realist framework.

Key Findings: The systematic literature review (SLR) identified four main theoretical perspectives on teacher social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies: competency deficit models, ecological systems approaches, culturally responsive frameworks, and critical perspectives that challenge Western dominance in SEL discourse. The cross-case analysis highlighted four major themes:

The Emotional Labour Paradox: Teachers face a conflict between the demand for emotional availability and insufficient preparation, causing emotional exhaustion, identity conflicts, and moral distress.

The Training Void: There is a notable lack of SEL training in doctoral and faculty development programs, creating a gap filled by personal experience and intuition, which leads to uneven and sometimes harmful practices.

Institutional (Dis)orientations: The presence or absence of SEL competency support depends heavily on institutional culture, leadership priorities, and resource distribution, varying significantly across different institution types.

Cultural Negotiations: Teachers must balance Western SEL frameworks with Indian cultural norms concerning emotions, hierarchy, and seeking help, prompting the need for culturally relevant teaching approaches

Theoretical Contributions:

The study develops a contextually grounded Integrated Model of Teacher SEL Competency that combines individual, institutional, and cultural factors.

It introduces the concept of a "competency vacuum" to capture the systematic lack of SEL preparation in higher education faculty development.

It extends Schonert-Reichl's (2017) teacher SEL framework by showing its relevance in non-Western higher education settings and highlighting cultural negotiation as a key mediating process.

It provides empirical evidence supporting the view of SEL as fundamentally relational and context-dependent, rather than merely a set of technical skills.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to develop a deep, contextualized understanding of teacher competencies for implementing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Indian higher education. This is broken down into key objectives:

Explore Lived Experiences: Understand how teachers in diverse higher education institutions perceive, experience, and enact competencies to address students' socio-emotional needs.

Examine Contextual Factors: Investigate how institutional contexts (type, culture, leadership, resources) and cultural norms influence teachers' SEL competency development and application.

Address a Research Gap: Fill the gap in SEL research by focusing on higher education rather than K-12, using qualitative methods, and providing insights from a non-Western, developing country context.

Develop a Theoretical Framework: Synthesize literature review and case study findings to construct a contextually grounded theoretical model of teacher SEL competencies for Indian higher education.

Inform Policy and Practice: Offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, administrators, and teacher educators to support the holistic education goals of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Research Implications

The study opens multiple new avenues for investigation, including:

Need for Intervention Research: Designing, implementing, and evaluating culturally adapted faculty development programs based on identified competency gaps and cultural factors.

Longitudinal Studies: Tracking the development of teacher SEL competencies over time to understand their evolution and the long-term effects of professional development and institutional support.

Comparative Research: Expanding research beyond West Bengal to other Indian states and regions to explore how different cultural norms, policies, and institutional contexts influence SEL competency and implementation.

Student Outcome Research: Investigating the relationship between teacher SEL competencies and student outcomes such as well-being, engagement, mental health, retention, and academic success in India.

Further Theoretical Development: Testing, refining, and expanding the Integrated Model and competency vacuum concept through more qualitative and quantitative studies in diverse settings.

Critical and Indigenous Perspectives: Promoting research that examines power dynamics in SEL and develops frameworks rooted in indigenous Indian educational and philosophical traditions rather than solely adapting Western models.

Institutional Change Research: Exploring how institutions can systemically integrate SEL, including policy change, leadership development, and resource allocation for sustainable implementation.

Social Implications

Improved Student Well-being and Mental Health: Addressing the "competency vacuum" equips teachers to better support student mental health, potentially reducing distress, dropout, and severity of issues.

Enhanced Quality of Higher Education: Recognizing teaching as relational and emotionally demanding promotes more supportive, humane learning environments, improving educational quality and graduate outcomes.

Workforce and Societal Impact: Holistic education fosters empathy, resilience, and ethical decision-making, producing emotionally intelligent, socially responsible professionals who contribute positively to workplaces and communities.

Teacher Well-being and Retention: Highlighting faculty emotional labor and moral distress underscores the need for systemic support, which can reduce burnout and improve teacher retention.

Advancing National Policy Goals: The study offers a practical roadmap for operationalizing India’s NEP 2020 holistic education vision by emphasizing faculty development.

Culturally Sensitive Educational Practice: It encourages pedagogical practices that respect and integrate Indian cultural norms alongside Western SEL frameworks, strengthening local values.

Equity and Social Justice: The research highlights that SEL competency gaps disproportionately affect under-resourced institutions serving vulnerable students, framing SEL development as an equity issue.

Originality:

Pioneering Context: The first systematic qualitative study on teacher SEL competencies in Indian higher education, filling a major geographic and educational gap.

Conceptual Innovation: Introduces the novel concept of a "competency vacuum" to describe systemic lack of SEL faculty preparation.

Theoretical Advancement: Extends Schonert-Reichl's (2017) teacher SEL framework to higher education in a non-Western context, adding "cultural negotiation" as a key mediating factor.

Methodological Integration: Integrates a systematic literature review with a multi-site case study as an integral, triangulating component of the inquiry.

Nuanced Findings on Culture: Provides rich empirical detail on cultural negotiation in India, moving beyond broad calls for adaptation to reveal real-world tensions teachers face.

Development of an Integrated Model: Creates a unique multi-level model synthesizing individual, institutional, and cultural dimensions of teacher SEL competency, offering a holistic framework for future research and practice.

Practical Implications:

Culturally Responsive Framework for Faculty SEL Development:

Integrate SEL into doctoral education and faculty induction programs.

Provide practice-based, sustained professional development focusing on emotional regulation and managing difficult conversations.

Develop institutional policies that recognize and support the emotional aspects of teaching.

Adapt SEL frameworks to align with Indian educational traditions and cultural contexts.

Establish faculty peer support systems that promote collective well-being.

Conclusion: Teacher SEL competencies in higher education emerge from the interplay of personal histories, institutional environments, and cultural norms, rather than being isolated individual traits. Closing the competency gap demands systemic interventions that acknowledge teaching as relational and emotionally demanding work. This study offers both theoretical insights and practical strategies to advance the holistic education goals of India's NEP 2020 through dedicated faculty socio-emotional development.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Imperative for SEL in Higher Education

Higher education today faces a paradox: while academic rigor and specialization have advanced, the holistic development of students into emotionally intelligent, socially skilled, and ethically grounded individuals has lagged. Social Emotional Learning (SEL)—defined by CASEL (2015) as acquiring skills to manage emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions—addresses this gap.

University students undergo a critical developmental phase involving identity, relationships, career choices, and emotional challenges. Globally, one in three university students shows signs of mental health issues (Auerbach et al., 2016). In India, nearly 20% of college students experience significant psychological distress (Gururaj et al., 2016), a figure that has risen post-pandemic (Sonawane & Desai, 2022). Therefore, SEL is essential not just for educational quality but as a vital foundation for student well-being and academic success.

1.2 The Teacher Competency Gap:

Successful SEL implementation in higher education institutions (HEIs) hinges on educators' competencies. While HEI teachers play a crucial role in fostering student development, their readiness to deliver SEL remains largely unexplored. Unlike school teachers—who increasingly receive SEL-focused training—higher education faculty are primarily selected for disciplinary expertise, not socio-emotional or pedagogical skills (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

This gap creates an "implementation dip" (Fullan, 2016), where policy goals do not translate effectively into practice. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 mandates holistic education emphasizing 21st-century skills like empathy, resilience, and ethical decision-making, aligning with SEL principles. However, achieving NEP's vision of flexible, student-centered curricula depends on faculty who embody and can facilitate SEL competencies—a critical need that remains unaddressed systemically.

1.3 The Research Gap: Why a Qualitative Inquiry?

Despite increasing policy focus and emerging initiatives, systematic research on teacher competencies for SEL implementation in Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) is nearly nonexistent. Existing literature has key limitations:

Most SEL research centers on K-12, with scant attention to higher education (Cipriano et al., 2023).

Available higher education studies are mainly quantitative, relying on self-reports that fail to capture teachers' lived experiences and contextual challenges (Ryan, 2024).

Predominantly Western-origin frameworks raise concerns about cultural relevance in contexts like India (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Institutional and systemic influences on teacher competencies remain underexplored.

Critical qualitative questions remain unanswered, such as how HE teachers experience emotional demands, perceive their preparedness for SEL, navigate institutional contexts, reconcile Western SEL

models with Indian cultural norms, and develop informal coping strategies without formal training.

Qualitative methodologies are essential to uncover these complex, context-dependent processes and meanings, providing insights beyond what quantitative surveys offer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

1.4 Study Objectives and Research Questions

To develop a deep, contextualized understanding of teacher competencies for implementing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in higher education, focusing on the Indian context.

Primary Objectives:

Systematically review and synthesize existing theoretical and empirical literature on teacher SEL competencies in higher education, identifying key perspectives, gaps, and tensions.

Explore how teachers in diverse higher education institutions (HEIs) in West Bengal experience, perceive, and enact SEL competencies.

Examine how institutional contexts (type, culture, resources, leadership) influence teachers' SEL competency development and practice.

Investigate how teachers navigate cultural tensions between Western SEL frameworks and Indian educational and social norms.

Develop a contextually grounded theoretical framework for teacher SEL competencies in Indian higher education.

Research Questions:

RQ1: What does existing literature reveal about teacher competencies for SEL in higher education, including gaps, tensions, and theoretical perspectives?

RQ2: How do HE teachers in West Bengal experience and interpret their competencies in addressing students' socio-emotional needs?

RQ3: How do institutional contexts shape teachers' capacity to develop and enact SEL competencies?

RQ4: How do teachers manage cultural tensions between Western SEL models and Indian norms related to emotion, relationships, and help-seeking?

RQ5: What contextualized model of teacher SEL competencies can be constructed from literature and empirical data integration?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Conducts the first systematic qualitative investigation of teacher SEL competencies in Indian higher education, filling a critical research gap.

Combines a systematic literature review with multi-site case studies, offering both theoretical foundation and rich contextual insights.

Explores institutional variation across four distinct types of higher education institutions, highlighting how context influences competency development.

Explicitly addresses cultural dimensions often overlooked in SEL research.

Develops a contextually grounded theoretical framework to guide future research and practice.

Provides practical recommendations for policymakers, administrators, and teacher educators to implement the holistic education goals of India's NEP 2020.

2. Systematic Literature Review

2.1 Review Methodology

Approach:
The study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by PRISMA 2020 standards (Page et al., 2021) to ensure rigor, transparency, and reproducibility. The SLR was integral to the qualitative inquiry, providing theoretical grounding for empirical case studies and enabling triangulation between existing literature and lived experiences.

SLR Research Questions:

SLR-RQ1: What theoretical frameworks conceptualize teacher competencies for SEL in higher education?

SLR-RQ2: What empirical evidence exists on teacher SEL competencies and key findings?

SLR-RQ3: What gaps, tensions, and contradictions characterize the literature?

SLR-RQ4: How does the literature address cultural contexts, especially non-Western settings?

Search Strategy:
A comprehensive search was conducted across ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, and Google Scholar, covering January 2015 to March 2026. Search terms combined:

Population: higher education, university, college, faculty, academic staff, teacher educator

Phenomenon: social emotional learning, SEL, emotional intelligence, teacher well-being

Context: teacher competencies, preparation, faculty development, professional development

Inclusion Criteria:

Peer-reviewed articles, books, chapters, dissertations

English language

Focus on higher education (not K-12)

Attention to teacher/faculty SEL competencies, preparation, or development

Empirical or theoretical works

Exclusion Criteria:

Opinion pieces, editorials, abstracts without full papers

Studies only on student SEL without teacher focus

School-only settings without higher education relevance

Non-English publications

Screening and Selection:

Initial records: 1,247

After duplicates removed: 835

Title/abstract screened: 835

Excluded as irrelevant: 621

Full-text assessed: 214

Included studies: 87

The PRISMA flow diagram is presented in Figure 1.

Quality Assessment

Studies were appraised using Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists tailored to study designs.

No studies were excluded based on quality, but quality ratings informed interpretation and weighting of findings.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Extracted data included authorship, year, country, theoretical framework, methodology, sample, key findings on teacher SEL competencies, and cultural factors.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified patterns, themes, and tensions across the literature.

Descriptive Overview of Included Studies

Geographic Distribution:
United States (34), Europe (21), Australia/New Zealand (12), Asia (11; India=3), Middle East (5), Africa (2), South America (2)

Methodology:
Quantitative (38), Qualitative (27), Mixed-methods (15), Theoretical/conceptual (7)

Publication Years:
2015-2018 (23), 2019-2022 (38), 2023-2026 (26)

Focus Areas:
Teacher competencies (42), Teacher well-being/burnout (23), Teacher preparation/professional development (22)

Thematic Synthesis of Literature

Theme 1: Theoretical Frameworks for Teacher SEL Competencies

Competency Deficit Models: Focus on individual attributes like emotional intelligence; criticized for neglecting systemic/contextual factors.

Ecological Systems Approaches: Emphasize multi-level influences (individual to macrosystem), incorporating workplace and policy conditions.

Culturally Responsive Frameworks: Argue SEL competencies are culturally constructed and advocate for equity and social justice; highlight tensions in Asian contexts.

Critical Perspectives: View SEL as embedded in power dynamics and neoliberal agendas, questioning whose interests SEL serves and how it may reproduce inequalities.

Theme 2: Empirical Evidence on Teacher SEL Competencies

Competency Levels: Generally moderate to low, with deficits in emotional regulation and stress management.

Teacher Well-being and Burnout: Strong links between SEL competencies and reduced burnout, better job satisfaction.

Professional Development: Effective programs are sustained, practice-based, and institutionally supported but remain limited in scale and duration.

Theme 3: Gaps and Tensions in the Literature

Higher Education Neglect: Majority focus on K-12; only a small fraction address higher education teacher competencies.

Western Hegemony: Most research from Western contexts; limited and superficial treatment of non-Western cultural dynamics.

Individualized Focus: Predominance of studies on individual traits over institutional/systemic influences.

Methodological Narrowness: Quantitative dominance limits understanding of contextual and meaning-making processes.

Teacher Well-being Framed Instrumentally: Often treated as a means to improve student outcomes rather than an intrinsic value.

Theme 4: Cultural Considerations and the Indian Context

Tensions between Western SEL models and Indian traditions emphasizing emotional restraint, hierarchical relationships, collectivism, stigma around help-seeking, and rich philosophical educational heritage.

Examples include SEL initiatives adapted for India emphasizing compassion and mindfulness (e.g., UNESCO MGIEP SEEK program).

Synthesis and Implications for Empirical Study

The SLR highlights significant gaps: focus on K-12, Western dominance, individualistic framing, methodological limits, cultural adaptation needs, and scarcity of Indian higher education research.

These gaps justify the empirical study's qualitative, multi-site case design in West Bengal, focusing on higher education, non-Western context, institutional factors, cultural negotiation, and in-depth qualitative inquiry.

Theoretical perspectives from the SLR—competency deficit, ecological systems, culturally responsive, and critical—provide interpretive lenses.

Empirical insights on competency gaps, teacher well-being, institutional support, and cultural dimensions inform study sensitivity and analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

Paradigm: Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1975; Archer et al., 2016)

Recognizes real teacher competencies and institutional structures experienced through cultural and personal lenses.

Identifies generative mechanisms (e.g., policies, norms) producing observable events.

Supports methodological pluralism and theory building.

Approach: Qualitative multi-site case study (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2006)

Suitable as boundaries between phenomenon (teacher SEL competencies) and context are blurred.

Addresses “how” and “what” research questions to develop contextual and theoretical insights.

3.2 Case Selection and Sampling

Cases

Four purposively selected HEIs in West Bengal, India, maximizing diversity:

Public University (PU) – large, traditional, research-focused

Private University (PRU) – mid-sized, innovative, industry-linked

Affiliated College (AC) – semi-urban, government-aided, typical Indian HEI

Teacher Education Institution (TEI) – focused on teacher preparation

Participant Sampling:

Disciplines: Sciences, social sciences, humanities, professional programs

Experience levels: Early (< 5 yrs), mid (5–15 yrs), experienced (> 15 yrs)

Roles: Faculty, department heads, leaders, teacher educators, counselors, administrators

Sample Size: 58 participants total; sampling until thematic saturation

Balanced across cases and categories (see Table 1 for details)

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews: 60–90 min with all participants; topics informed by SLR and research questions; conducted in English, Bengali, or Hindi and transcribed/translated.

Classroom Observations: Non-participant, focused on interactions, emotional expression, pedagogy, socio-emotional attention (24 participants).

Document Analysis: Faculty handbooks, policies, course syllabi, student support documents, NEP 2020 plans.

Focus Groups: One per case (6–8 participants), exploring shared challenges and institutional culture.

Researcher Reflexive Journal: Documented methodological decisions, emergent interpretations, emotional responses, positionality reflections.

3.4 Data Analysis

Method: Reflexive thematic analysis within a critical realist framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phases:

Familiarization with all data

Systematic coding (inductive and deductive) using NVivo

Theme generation (within-case and cross-case)

Theme review with disconfirming evidence sought

Theme definition with scope and relationships

Write-up supported by illustrative quotations

Cross-Case Analysis: Systematic comparison to identify commonalities and differences.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Credibility: Triangulation (data, investigators, methods), member checking, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing.

Transferability: Thick description, case diversity, contextual documentation.

Dependability & Confirmability: Audit trail, reflexivity, negative case analysis.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Approved by Institutional Review Board (Protocol # IRB-2025-112).

Informed consent

with ongoing rights emphasized.

Confidentiality maintained via pseudonymization; institutions anonymized by type.

Emotional safety prioritized, with optional question skipping and counseling resources provided.

Attention to power dynamics; emphasis on learning from participants.

Reciprocity through sharing findings and institutional reports.

3.7 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Lead researcher: Indian doctoral scholar with higher education teaching experience.

Reflexive awareness of insider/outsider dynamics, professional identity, theoretical commitments, and emotional responses.

Strategies include bracketing, seeking disconfirming evidence, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling.

Reflexive journal excerpts incorporated into analysis for transparency.

4. Findings

4.1 Within-Case Analysis

4.1.1 Case 1: Public University (PU) — "The Weight of Tradition"

Institutional Context

PU is a prestigious public university in Kolkata, established in the 1950s, with a strong research orientation and traditional academic culture. Faculty are selected primarily for research credentials; teaching is often viewed as secondary. The institution has no formal SEL policies or programs, though individual faculty occasionally address student needs informally.

Theme PU1: "We Were Never Trained for This" — The Competency Vacuum

Across all experience levels, PU faculty described a complete absence of preparation for the emotional dimensions of teaching. This "competency vacuum" was filled by intuition, personal experience, and trial-and-error, often with unsatisfactory results.

"My PhD trained me to be a researcher. I know how to design studies, analyze data, write papers. My teaching came from watching my own professors. No one ever talked about emotions or relationships or how to support a struggling student. When a student comes to me in distress, I have no framework, no skills. I just... react. And I'm rarely happy with how I react." (PU-F8, Sciences, 12 years)

The competency vacuum was particularly acute for early-career faculty, who described feeling "thrown into the deep end":

"In my first year, a student broke down in my office. She was crying, talking about family problems, financial stress, thoughts of dropping out. I sat there completely paralyzed. I didn't know what to say, what was appropriate, what boundaries I should maintain. I ended up just listening silently and then referring her to counseling. But the counseling center has a three-month waiting list. I felt useless." (PU-F2, Humanities, 3 years)

Even experienced faculty, despite years of classroom exposure, reported persistent gaps:

"You'd think after 20 years, I'd have figured this out. But every situation is different. Every student is different. And I'm still guessing. I still lie awake some nights wondering if I handled something right, if I made things worse, if there was something I should have said but didn't." (PU-F12, Social Sciences, 22 years)

Theme PU2: "The System Doesn't Care" — Institutional Neglect

Faculty consistently described an institutional culture that neither recognized nor supported the emotional dimensions of teaching. Research productivity was the sole metric for evaluation and promotion; teaching, mentoring, and student support were invisible labor.

"The message is clear: publications matter, grants matter, everything else is optional. I've spent hours with struggling students, but that doesn't appear anywhere in my annual report. It doesn't count toward promotion. So why would I invest time in developing skills that aren't valued?" (PU-F5, Sciences, 8 years)

This institutional neglect extended to faculty well-being. Multiple participants described burnout, stress, and lack of support:

"We're expected to be emotionally available for students, but who's available for us? I've had panic attacks before class. I've cried in my office between meetings. But I show up and pretend everything is fine because that's what's expected. There's no space to acknowledge that this work is emotionally draining." (PU-F11, Social Sciences, 15 years)

The counseling center, while existing in principle, was described as under-resourced and inaccessible:

"The counseling center has two counselors for 20,000 students. Two. The waitlist is months long. So students come to us because we're accessible. But we're not trained for this. It's a system failure at every level." (PU-A1, Administrator)

Theme PU3: "We Figure It Out Alone" — Informal Learning and Peer Support

In the absence of formal preparation, faculty developed informal learning strategies. Peer support, while not institutionally recognized, emerged as a crucial resource:

"There's an unofficial network. We share stories, ask each other for advice. 'A student said this, what would you do?' 'Have you ever dealt with this situation?' It's not formal mentoring, just colleagues helping colleagues. That's how I've learned most of what I know about the human side of teaching." (PU-F7, Humanities, 6 years)

However, this informal learning was inconsistent and dependent on individual relationships. Faculty without supportive colleagues felt isolated:

"I'm the only woman in my department. I don't feel comfortable sharing personal struggles with my male colleagues. There's no one I can turn to. I just struggle alone." (PU-F4, Sciences, 4 years)

4.1.2 Case 2: Private University (PRU) — "Innovation Meets Inadequacy"

Institutional Context

PRU is a private university established in the 2010s, positioning itself as innovative and student-centric. It has smaller class sizes, modern infrastructure, and explicit attention to holistic development in its mission. PRU has initiated some SEL-related activities, including faculty workshops on student mental health.

Theme PRU1: "We Talk About It, But We Don't Know How to Do It" — The Awareness-Competence Gap

PRU faculty demonstrated greater awareness of SEL concepts and their importance, reflecting the institution's emphasis on holistic education. However, awareness did not translate into competence:

"We have workshops. We have emails about student well-being. We have a mission statement that talks about developing the whole person. But when a student is actually sitting in front of me in crisis, I freeze. The theory goes out the window. I don't actually know what to do." (PRU-F6, Professional Programs, 5 years)

This awareness-competence gap was widely experienced:

"I can define SEL. I can tell you why it's important. I can quote NEP 2020. But ask me to facilitate a difficult conversation about emotions in my classroom, and I'm lost. The workshop gave me information, not skills." (PRU-F3, Humanities, 8 years)

Faculty distinguished between "knowing about" and "knowing how":

"There's a difference between intellectual understanding and embodied capability. I understand the concepts intellectually. But when I'm in the moment, when a student is emotional and I'm emotional, I don't have the embodied skills. I haven't practiced them. I haven't internalized them." (PRU-F9, Social Sciences, 12 years)

Theme PRU2: "Innovation as Performance" — The Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality

While PRU marketed itself as innovative and student-centric, faculty described a gap between institutional rhetoric and actual support:

"The website talks about holistic education, about caring for students, about innovative pedagogy. But when you look at how faculty are evaluated, it's still publications, publications, publications. The rhetoric is progressive; the reality is traditional. SEL is marketing, not practice." (PRU-F11, Sciences, 15 years)

This performative innovation created cynicism:

"We had a 'mental health awareness week' with posters and events. It looked good for the website. But nothing changed. The counseling center is still understaffed. Faculty still have no training. It's window dressing." (PRU-F2, Social Sciences, 4 years)

However, some faculty noted that the rhetoric created openings for advocacy:

"They talk about holistic education, so I can use their own language to push for change. When I asked for funding to attend a workshop on trauma-informed teaching, I could point to the mission statement. The rhetoric becomes a resource." (PRU-F7, Humanities, 9 years)

Theme PRU3: "Small Classes, Bigger Relationships" — Structural Advantages and New Demands

PRU's smaller class sizes (typically 30–40 students compared to 100 + in public institutions) enabled more meaningful teacher-student relationships:

"I know my students' names. I know something about their lives. When they're struggling, I notice. In my previous institution, with 150 students in a lecture hall, I couldn't even see them, let alone know them." (PRU-F10, Sciences, 7 years, previously at public university)

However, these closer relationships created new emotional demands:

"Knowing students more deeply means carrying more of their weight. When a student I've worked closely with for three years is in crisis, it affects me deeply. I take it home. I lose sleep. The closer the relationship, the greater the emotional toll." (PRU-F5, Humanities, 11 years)

Faculty described needing skills for managing boundaries and emotional self-protection—skills they hadn't been taught:

"I've had students become dependent on me, texting late at night, expecting me to be available 24/7. I didn't know how to set boundaries without seeming cold or uncaring. I had to figure it out through painful trial and error." (PRU-F1, Professional Programs, 3 years)

4.1.3 Case 3: Affiliated College (AC) — "Surviving, Not Thriving"

Institutional Context

AC is a government-aided college in a semi-urban area, affiliated with a public university. It serves predominantly first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Resources are limited; faculty teach heavy loads (4–5 courses per semester) with minimal support for professional development.

Theme AC1: "They Come With So Much" — The Weight of Student Need

AC faculty described students arriving with profound socio-emotional needs rooted in poverty, family stress, and limited prior educational support:

"My students aren't just dealing with coursework. They're dealing with hunger, with family pressure, with anxiety about the future, with trauma. One student told me she hadn't eaten in two days. Another was being pressured to drop out and get married. The need is overwhelming." (AC-F7, Social Sciences, 10 years)

This concentration of need created extraordinary demands:

"I had a student break down in class yesterday. His father had died, his mother was ill, he couldn't afford fees, he was about to be evicted. He wasn't asking for academic help—he was asking for someone to see him, to acknowledge his humanity. What do I do with that? I have 80 other students waiting for me to teach." (AC-F3, Humanities, 8 years)

Faculty felt the weight of being students' only support:

"There's no counselor. There's no mental health services. There's no financial aid office that actually helps. When students have nowhere else to go, they come to us. We're the last resort. And we're completely unprepared." (AC-A1, Administrator)

Theme AC2: "We're Drowning" — Resource Scarcity and Emotional Exhaustion

The combination of heavy teaching loads, limited resources, and intense student needs led to widespread emotional exhaustion:

"I teach 25 hours a week. I have 150 students. I'm also expected to do research, serve on committees, advise students. There's no time, no energy, no space for anything beyond survival. When a student needs emotional support, I have nothing left to give." (AC-F9, Sciences, 14 years)

This exhaustion was described as moral distress—the pain of knowing what students need but being unable to provide it:

"The worst part is knowing. I know what they need. I know I should be able to help. But I can't. I physically and emotionally cannot. And then I feel guilty, which makes everything worse." (AC-F4, Professional

Programs, 6 years)

Some faculty described coping through emotional numbing:

"I've had to build walls. I can't let myself feel every student's pain—I'd drown. So I distance myself. I keep interactions professional and brief. It protects me, but it also means I'm not really present for them. I hate that, but I don't know another way." (AC-F11, Social Sciences, 18 years)

Theme AC3: "No One Ever Asked" — Invisible Labor and Lack of Recognition

The emotional labor of supporting students was entirely invisible in institutional evaluation:

"In my annual report, there's no category for 'hours spent listening to students in crisis.' There's no box for 'emotional support provided.' It doesn't exist. It doesn't count. I could spend 20 hours a week on student well-being, and it would appear as nothing." (AC-F6, Humanities, 9 years)

This invisibility was compounded by lack of any professional development:

"In 15 years, I've never had any training on student mental health, on emotional support, on anything related to the human side of teaching. Not once. No one ever asked if I needed these skills. No one ever offered. It's assumed that either you have it or you don't, and if you don't, that's your problem." (AC-F12, Sciences, 15 years)

Faculty described feeling abandoned by the system:

"The institution expects us to solve problems it won't resource. Students have needs, but there's no counselor. Faculty have needs, but there's no support. Everyone is just supposed to cope individually. It's a recipe for burnout." (AC-F2, Professional Programs, 5 years)

4.1.4 Case 4: Teacher Education Institution (TEI) — "Preparing Others, Unprepared Ourselves"

Institutional Context

TEI is a college of education offering B.Ed., M.Ed., and PhD programs. It prepares future teachers for schools and, to a lesser extent, higher education. The institution includes SEL in its curriculum theoretically, but with minimal attention to developing students' own SEL competencies.

Theme TEI1: "We Teach About It, But We Don't Model It" — The Theory-Practice Disconnect

Teacher educators acknowledged teaching SEL concepts while failing to model them in their own practice:

"I have a module on emotional intelligence in my course. I talk about self-awareness, empathy, relationship skills. But my own classroom? It's a lecture. I don't know my students. I don't create space

for emotional connection. I teach about SEL, but I don't practice it." (TEI-F5, Education, 12 years)

This disconnect was recognized as problematic:

"How can we prepare teachers to facilitate SEL when we don't model it ourselves? Our students watch us. They learn from how we treat them, not just what we say. If we're not embodying these competencies, we're teaching that they're just content to be covered, not ways of being." (TEI-F2, Education, 8 years)

Some faculty described wanting to change but lacking skills:

"I know I should create a more emotionally supportive classroom. I know my students would benefit. But I don't know how. I was trained in traditional lecture methods. I don't have the skills for relational pedagogy. I'm stuck teaching what I don't practice." (TEI-F7, Education, 20 years)

Theme TEI2: "The Hidden Curriculum of Emotional Suppression"

Teacher educators described an institutional culture that implicitly taught emotional suppression:

"From day one, our students learn that emotions don't belong in the classroom. Be professional. Keep distance. Don't get personal. The hidden message is that real teachers are emotionally controlled, emotionally detached. By the time they graduate, they've learned to suppress rather than engage." (TEI-F3, Education, 15 years)

This hidden curriculum was reinforced through observation and evaluation:

"When we observe student teachers, we look for lesson planning, content knowledge, classroom management. We never look for emotional attunement, for relational skills, for creating emotional safety. Those things aren't on the rubric. So they aren't valued. Students quickly learn what counts." (TEI-A1, Administrator)

The consequences for graduates entering higher education teaching were concerning:

"We're sending teachers into higher education who have never been asked to reflect on their own emotions, who have no practice with difficult conversations, who have no framework for student support. They're set up to fail, and their students pay the price." (TEI-F8, Education, 25 years)

Theme TEI3: "We Need What We're Supposed to Teach" — Recognizing the Gap

Teacher educators increasingly recognized that they needed to develop their own SEL competencies:

"I've started to realize that I can't teach what I don't have. If I want my students to be emotionally intelligent, I need to work on my own emotional intelligence. If I want them to build relationships, I need to build relationships with them. It's uncomfortable to admit, but we need what we're supposed to teach." (TEI-F4, Education, 7 years)

This recognition was leading to informal initiatives:

"A few of us have started meeting informally to talk about our own emotional challenges in teaching. We share struggles, support each other, try to practice what we preach. It's small, it's unofficial, but it's a start. We need institutional support to go further." (TEI-F1, Education, 5 years)

However, institutional barriers remained:

"The system doesn't support this. Our work is measured by publications, by grants, by course completion. Emotional work doesn't count. Until that changes, these efforts will remain marginal, dependent on individual commitment rather than institutional priority." (TEI-F6, Education, 18 years)

4.2 Cross-Case Analysis

Integration of findings across the four cases revealed four overarching themes that transcend institutional boundaries while manifesting differently in each context.

4.2.1 Theme 1: The Emotional Labour Paradox

Across all cases, teachers described a fundamental paradox: they were expected to be emotionally available for students while receiving no preparation for the emotional demands of teaching and no support for their own emotional well-being. This paradox created three interrelated tensions:

Tension 1: Availability vs. Protection: Teachers felt pulled between being emotionally available for students and protecting their own emotional well-being. Without skills for managing this tension, they oscillated between over-involvement (leading to exhaustion) and emotional withdrawal (leading to guilt).

"It's a constant negotiation. How much do I give without depleting myself? How do I stay present without taking on their pain? I don't have answers. I just try to survive." (AC-F8)

Tension 2: Authenticity vs. Professionalism: Cultural and institutional norms around professional distance conflicted with teachers' desire for authentic connection.

"I want to be real with my students. I want them to know I see them as people. But I'm also told to maintain boundaries, to be professional. What does professionalism mean when a student is crying? I don't know." (PRU-F4)

Tension 3: Responding vs. Referring: Teachers felt caught between wanting to help directly and knowing they lacked skills, while referral options were inadequate or unavailable.

"I know I should refer students to counseling. But the waitlist is months. So I try to help, knowing I'm not qualified. It's a no-win situation." (PU-F9)

The emotional labour paradox was most acute in AC, where student needs were highest and resources lowest, but manifested across all contexts.

4.2.2 Theme 2: The Competency Vacuum

Across all cases, teachers described a systematic absence of preparation for the socio-emotional dimensions of teaching. This "competency vacuum" had three characteristics:

Pervasiveness

The vacuum affected all career stages, disciplines, and institution types. No participant reported receiving adequate preparation for addressing students' emotional needs.

"It doesn't matter if you're new or experienced, sciences or humanities, public or private—no one has been trained for this. We're all figuring it out alone." (TEI-F3)

Consequences

In the absence of competencies, teachers relied on intuition, personal experience, and trial-and-error, with inconsistent and often unsatisfactory results. Some described causing harm through well-intentioned but unskilled responses.

"I said something once that I thought was helpful. Later I realized I'd made it worse. I still think about that student. I wish I could apologize." (PRU-F8)

Compensatory Strategies: Teachers developed informal strategies to fill the vacuum: peer consultation, self-education through reading, learning from mistakes. These strategies were valuable but inconsistent and placed burden on individual teachers rather than the system.

"I've read everything I can find on trauma-informed teaching. I've joined online communities. I've made it my personal project. But that's not sustainable. Not everyone has the time or energy for that." (PU-F6)

4.2.3 Theme 3: Institutional (Dis)orientations

Institutional contexts profoundly shaped teachers' experiences of and responses to the competency vacuum. Four dimensions of institutional variation emerged:

Mission and Values

Institutions with explicit commitments to holistic education (PRU) created greater awareness of SEL but not necessarily greater competence. Traditional institutions (PU) rendered emotional dimensions invisible. The gap between rhetoric and reality was a source of frustration.

Resources and Structures

Smaller class sizes and better counseling resources (PRU) enabled different possibilities than resource-scarce contexts (AC). However, even well-resourced institutions lacked systematic faculty development for SEL.

Leadership and Culture

Departmental and institutional leadership significantly influenced whether emotional dimensions of teaching were recognized or ignored. Supportive leaders created space for peer learning and advocacy; unsupportive leaders reinforced invisibility.

Evaluation and Recognition

Across all cases, emotional labor was unrecognized in formal evaluation systems. This invisibility communicated that SEL competencies were optional, not core professional requirements.

"The message is clear: what's measured matters. SEL isn't measured, so it doesn't matter. No matter what the mission statement says." (PRU-A2)

4.2.4 Theme 4: Cultural Negotiations

Teachers navigated complex cultural tensions between Western SEL frameworks and Indian norms around emotion, relationships, and help-seeking.

Emotional Expression vs. Restraint

Participants described tension between SEL emphasis on emotional expression and Indian cultural norms favoring emotional restraint, particularly in professional contexts.

"In our culture, we don't talk about feelings openly. Especially not with teachers—there's hierarchy, respect, distance. When a workshop says 'encourage students to express emotions,' I think, that doesn't work here. Students would be uncomfortable. I'd be uncomfortable." (AC-F5)

Individual vs. Collective

Western SEL frameworks emphasize individual emotional development, while participants described more collectivist orientations.

"It's not just about the individual student. It's about family, community, relationships. When a student is struggling, the whole family is struggling. We need frameworks that recognize that." (PU-F10)

Hierarchy and Relationship

Traditional teacher-student relationships in India involve greater hierarchy and distance than Western SEL models assume.

"I can't be friends with my students. That's not our relationship. But I can be caring within appropriate boundaries. The question is, what does caring look like in this context? We need our own answers, not imported ones." (TEI-F7)

Help-Seeking and Stigma

Stigma around mental health created barriers to both student help-seeking and faculty acknowledgment of their own needs.

"Students won't go to counseling. They're ashamed. They'll come to me because it's less stigmatized. But I'm not trained. So they're stuck between stigma and inadequacy." (PRU-F12)

Some faculty were developing culturally resonant adaptations:

"I don't use words like 'emotions' or 'feelings.' I talk about 'well-being,' about 'balance,' about 'strength.' I frame it in ways that make sense here. The concepts are universal; the language needs to be local." (PU-F3)

4.3 Integration with Systematic Literature Review

Triangulation between SLR findings and empirical data revealed both convergence and divergence:

Convergence

The empirical findings strongly align with the SLR's identification of competency gaps (Canli et al., 2025; Ryan, 2024), the importance of institutional context (Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Collie et al., 2016), and the emotional demands of teaching (Klusmann et al., 2016; Gagnon & Miller, 2024). The competency vacuum concept extends the SLR's documentation of inadequate teacher preparation.

Divergence

The empirical findings reveal cultural negotiations largely absent from the mainstream literature. While the SLR identified culturally responsive frameworks as an emerging perspective (Jagers et al., 2019; Garner et al., 2014), the depth and complexity of cultural tensions in the Indian context exceed what the literature describes. Teachers are not simply applying or adapting Western frameworks but actively constructing culturally resonant approaches.

Extension

The empirical findings extend ecological systems approaches (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Schonert-Reichl, 2017) by revealing how institutional variations (public/private/affiliated/teacher education) shape competency development differently. The four institutional cases provide concrete illustrations of ecological principles in action.

Challenge

The findings challenge competency deficit models that individualize what are fundamentally systemic issues. Teachers' gaps are not personal failings but predictable outcomes of systems that provide no preparation, no support, and no recognition for the emotional dimensions of teaching.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

5.1.1 An Integrated Model of Teacher SEL Competency in Higher Education

Based on the integration of SLR findings and empirical data, we propose an **Integrated Model of Teacher SEL Competency in Higher Education** (Figure 2). The model synthesizes individual, institutional, and cultural dimensions within a critical realist framework.

5.1 Key Features of the Model and Theoretical Contributions

Multi-Level Structure:
Teacher SEL competency arises from interactions across multiple levels—individual, microsystem (classroom), mesosystem (institutional culture), exosystem (policy frameworks), and macrosystem (cultural norms). Competency cannot be understood solely by examining individuals.

Cultural Negotiation as Mediating Process:
Teachers must navigate cultural tensions between Western SEL frameworks and local norms. Effective implementation depends on culturally sensitive adaptation, allowing competency to be expressed within specific contexts.

Bidirectional Influences:
Teacher competencies and contexts influence each other reciprocally, with implementation outcomes feeding back into competency development.

Contextual Embeddedness:
SEL competency is context-dependent, shaped by institutional and cultural environments rather than universal attributes.

5.1.2 The Concept of "Competency Vacuum"

- **Systematicity:** A systemic gap affecting all faculty, regardless of career stage, discipline, or institution.
- **Consequentiality:** Leads to teacher distress, inadequate student support, and missed holistic education opportunities.
- **Invisibility:** Emotional labor is unrecognized in evaluation systems, and cultural norms discourage admitting inadequacy.

5.1.3 Extending Schonert-Reichl's Teacher SEL Framework

- Applies the framework to higher education with its unique preparation pathways and institutional cultures.
- Adds cultural negotiation as a critical mediating process in non-Western contexts.
- Highlights institutional variation in competency development across HEI types.

- Reframes teacher well-being as an intrinsic value and prerequisite for sustainable SEL practice.

5.1.4 Theorizing Cultural Negotiation in SEL

Identifies four key dimensions:

- **Expression-Regulation Dialectic:** Balancing Western openness with Indian emotional restraint.
- **Individual-Collective Tension:** Adapting individual-focused SEL to collectivist cultural contexts.
- **Hierarchy-Connection Balance:** Navigating traditional teacher-student hierarchies while fostering care.
- **Stigma-Engagement Navigation:** Addressing mental health stigma through culturally sensitive approaches.

5.2 The Emotional Labour Paradox

- Emotional distress is structurally produced by systems demanding emotional availability without support.
- Teachers experience moral distress from systemic constraints limiting their ability to meet student needs.
- Emotional labor is invisible in evaluations, risking exploitation and burnout; recognition must be material, not symbolic.

5.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

For Higher Education Institutions:

- Integrate SEL development systemically across hiring, induction, and evaluation.
- Address multiple ecological levels simultaneously.
- Recognize and value emotional labor in evaluation systems.
- Support teacher well-being with policies and resources.
- Facilitate peer learning spaces for faculty.

For Teacher Education:

- Model SEL competencies in practice, not just theory.
- Embed SEL across curricula, addressing hidden emotional curricula.
- Prepare doctoral-level faculty with SEL competencies, not only research skills.

For Policymakers:

- Invest in faculty SEL development to realize NEP 2020’s holistic vision.
- Embed SEL competency criteria in accreditation frameworks.

- Allocate dedicated funding for SEL faculty development and research.

5.3.4 Culturally Responsive Framework for Faculty SEL Development

- **Phase 1 (Foundational Awareness):** Introduce SEL concepts grounded in Indian traditions; self-assessment.
- **Phase 2 (Skill Development):** Practice-based workshops on emotional regulation and culturally adapted skills; peer coaching.
- **Phase 3 (Embodied Practice):** Ongoing professional learning communities, reflective practice, and local innovation.
- **Institutional Enablers:** Recognize SEL in evaluations, dedicate time/resources, model supportive leadership, provide well-being resources.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Limitations:

- Geographic focus limited to West Bengal, limiting broader transferability.
- Sample of four institutions cannot represent all Indian HEIs.
- Reliance on self-report data with potential biases.
- Cross-sectional design limits understanding of developmental change.
- Researcher positionality influences data interpretation despite reflexivity.

Future Research Directions:

- Design and evaluate culturally adapted faculty development interventions.
- Conduct longitudinal studies tracking competency development.
- Comparative studies across diverse Indian regions and institution types.
- Investigate links between teacher SEL competencies and student outcomes.
- Develop culturally grounded SEL frameworks drawing on indigenous traditions.
- Study systemic institutional integration of SEL and implementation challenges.
- Critical analyses of power, discourse, and ideology in SEL in India.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Contributions

Theoretical Contributions:

Developed an Integrated Model of Teacher SEL Competency in Higher Education, synthesizing individual, institutional, and cultural dimensions.

Introduced the concept of "competency vacuum" to describe the systemic lack of SEL preparation in faculty development.

Extended Schonert-Reichl's (2017) teacher SEL framework to higher education and non-Western contexts.

Provided empirical grounding for cultural negotiation as a key mediating process in SEL implementation.

Theorized the emotional labour paradox and its structural roots.

Empirical Contributions:

Delivered rich, contextualized data on teacher SEL competencies across four diverse Indian HEI types.

Documented the pervasive competency vacuum affecting all career stages and disciplines.

Revealed institutional variations shaping competency development.

Illuminated cultural negotiations often missing in mainstream SEL literature.

Centered teacher voices and lived experiences.

Practical Contributions:

Offered a Culturally Responsive Framework for Faculty SEL Development tailored to Indian higher education.

Provided actionable recommendations for administrators, teacher educators, and policymakers aligned with NEP 2020's holistic education vision.

Identified institutional enablers necessary for sustainable SEL implementation.

6.2 The Central Imperative: From Individual Competence to Systemic Transformation

Teacher SEL competencies emerge from complex interactions among personal histories, institutional contexts, and cultural norms. The "competency vacuum" is a predictable consequence of systems that:

Select faculty solely on research credentials.

Provide no preparation for emotional teaching demands.

Make emotional labor invisible in evaluations and promotions.

Offer no support for teacher well-being.

Import SEL frameworks without cultural adaptation.

Closing this gap requires systemic transformation at multiple levels—individual, institutional, and policy—not merely individual remediation.

6.3 A Call to Action: Realizing NEP 2020's Vision

NEP 2020's vision of education cultivating compassionate, resilient human beings depends on teachers who embody these qualities. This study urges:

Higher Education Administrators: Recognize SEL faculty development as fundamental, invest in systemic approaches, value emotional labor, and support teacher well-being.

Teacher Educators: Integrate SEL competencies deeply into programs, model socio-emotional skills, and prepare teachers for emotional realities.

Policymakers: Align resources with policy goals, embed SEL in accreditation, fund faculty development, and support culturally adapted research.

Faculty: Understand struggles as systemic, seek peer support, advocate for change, and practice self-compassion.

6.4 Closing Reflection

Teachers in this study candidly shared their emotional struggles and profound dedication despite lack of preparation and support. Their challenges stem not from personal failings but from systemic neglect of teaching's emotional demands. The path forward demands systemic transformation that recognizes teaching as relational and emotionally intensive work, with socio-emotional development as a core professional responsibility.

The holistic education vision of NEP 2020 is achievable—but only if teachers themselves are whole. This study offers both critical understanding and a roadmap for change. The work of implementation begins now.

Declarations

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Tables

Table 1: Participant Sample by Case and Category

Category	PU	PRU	AC	TEI	Total
Early-career faculty	4	4	4	3	15
Mid-career faculty	4	4	4	3	15
Experienced faculty	4	4	4	3	15
Administrators/Leaders	2	2	2	2	8
Teacher Educators	-	-	-	5	5
Total	**14**	**14**	**14**	**16**	**58**

Figures

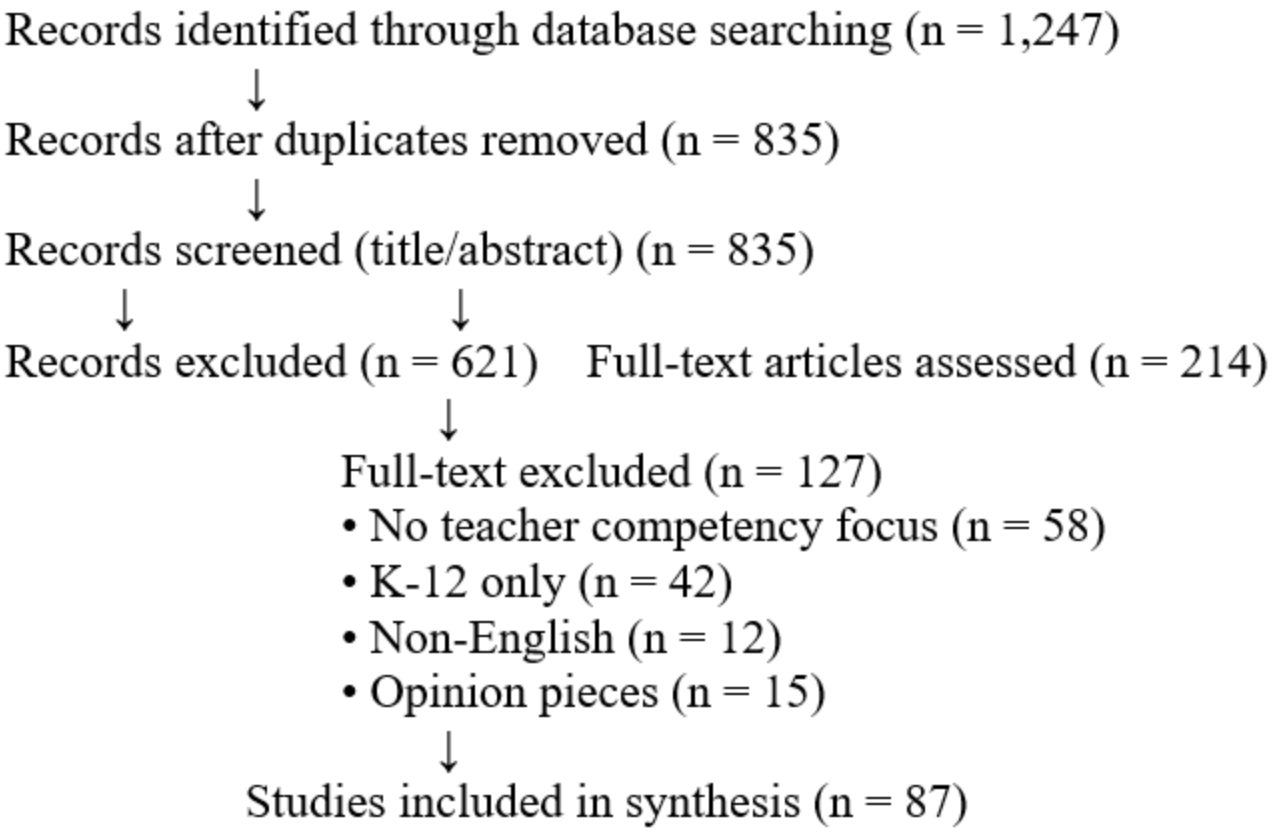


Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram

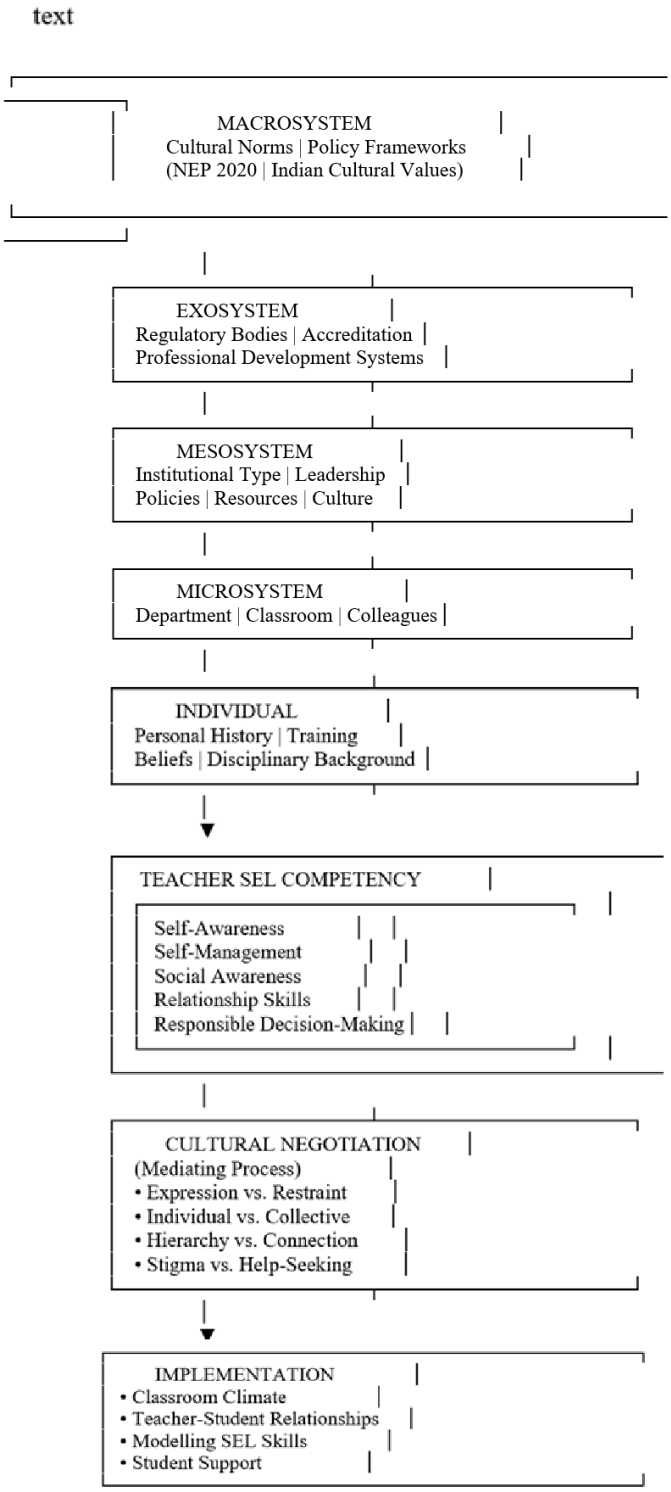


Figure 2

Integrated Model of Teacher SEL Competency in Higher Education