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## PSYCHOSOCIAL COMPETENCIES OF THE 21ST CENTURY LEARNERS: A REVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS

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**Abstract:** Society always needs psychosocially competent individuals who can function effectively in any life situation, manage their lives, get along with others, and contribute meaningfully to society. But it can be argued that the idea of performing well in the 21st century is way too different than what it was in the 20th century or earlier. Adapting to a world characterized by globalization, mutual interdependency among nations, fast-changing technology, culturally diverse global workplaces, and changing market - place demand for the acquisition of competencies that empower today's individuals. So, there is a need to think of essential competencies and skills that 21<sup>st</sup> century learners need to cultivate to deal with the challenges posed by uncertainties and complexities of present society. In this paper, the researchers have attempted to explore the concept of psychosocial competence. In this regard, relevant international frameworks on skills and competencies were reviewed and findings were discussed.

**Keywords-** psychosocial competencies, life skills, socio-emotional skills, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

### 1.Introduction

Traditionally, schools have always been an active agency responsible for preparing children for life by equipping them with the right kind of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. Now, commensurate with socio-technical changes that happened during the last few decades, the role played by schools in the 21st century needs to be redefined. Today's world is not limited by geographical boundaries or technical insufficiencies-social and technological phenomena like globalization, digitalization, liberalization, the fourth industrial revolution, AI-empowered technologies have empowered the modern world to function better; however, these benefits pose new, unforeseen, unpredictable challenges (WEF, 2023, IMF, 2021, OECD, 2021). The concept of workplace has also changed - teamwork is valued more than organizational hierarchy in this new type of open, flexible, and transparent working climate (OECD, 2019). So, there is a demand for new set of skills deemed necessary for success in the job the market (World Bank, 2014). Now, how should schools prepare learners of the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowing that the world has become more complex and uncertain (UNESCO, 2021, OECD, 2021)? Moreover, in the last couple of years humankind has witnessed the devastating impact of covid 19 pandemic which made us realize that to save this planet, to survive and thrive, we need mutual dependency (UNESCO,2021). In this interdependent world where we all are global citizens, function of schools needs to be reconceptualized to ensure learners' academic as well as non-academic development (OECD,2015, OECD, 2021, UNESCO, 2021, Lipnevich et al,2016) which is even more essential in this era. Though personal and social development of learners is considered an important goal of education (Delors, 1996), it is yet to receive due attention in educational policies and curriculum frameworks. For the last few decades, notably after 1990, educators and researchers all over the world have expressed concern regarding development of psychosocial competence of learners for their overall well-being and the well-being of the society and tried to identify ways how best it can be done. According to them, skills like self-awareness, self-management, perseverance, optimism, and compassion should be taught to children right from early years

with equal emphasis as given to academic subjects. The leading international organizations like WHO, UNICEF, OECD, WORLD BANK, CASEL have developed frameworks that recommended competencies required for optimum human functioning be it in school or beyond. Though the skills and competencies recommended in one framework might not be there in the other but the important domains in all the frameworks are the very same-cognitive, social, and emotional- sometimes it includes related values, attitudes, and knowledge also. In the research literature different terms like psychosocial competencies, socio-emotional skills, non-cognitive skills, personal and social competencies, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are used alternatively to denote a plethora of these skills (UNICEF 2012, OECD 2019, Lipnevich et al, 2016). When there is much going on in the field of education as to what it is beyond academic learning that the schools need to cultivate in learners, the researcher found it necessary to review the existing frameworks which concentrated on the competencies and skills necessary for today's learners.

## 2.Objectives

To understand what it means to be psychosocially competent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1. To explore how psychosocial competence has been conceptualised in the research literature.
2. To review the frameworks proposed by International Organisations which addressed development of learner's psychosocial competence.

## 3.Psychosocial Competence- the conceptual underpinning

In order to understand what it means to be psychosocially competent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to see how the construct has been conceptualised in the research literature. To begin with, even before any formal attempt was made to consider development of psychosocial competence of learners an important objective of schooling, the idea of psychosocially competent individuals was put forward by Socrates (Norquist, 1985). Norquist (1985) wrote one of the earliest known definitions of psychosocial competence was Socrates's view of competent individuals :“those who manage well the circumstances they encounter daily, and who possess a judgement which is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and rarely miss the expedient course of action.” So, we can see, it is an age-old concept but not scientifically studied for long. However, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century interest grew among the researchers to explore the patterns of psychosocial effectiveness (Tyler,1978). References made in Norquist's study (1985) about the conceptual development of the construct 'psychosocial competence' suggest that there was a lack of consensus among the researchers as to what is meant by psychosocial competence. Nonetheless, acceptance of self and acceptance of others were the central components of the construct in most of the definitions. As discussing all the relevant studies in this area is beyond the scope of this paper, the researcher will draw upon some notable works to provide a conceptual clarity of the concept.

Building on earlier studies on the present construct, Tyler developed a model of psychosocial competence consisting of three components: self-efficacy attributes, self-world attributes and behavioural attributes (Tyler, 1977, Tyler, 1978). The presence of these attributes would markedly differentiate between more competent and less competent individuals. According to Tyler, those who are psychosocially competent have an internal locus of control and they see themselves as responsible for all that happens in their lives with quite a favourable self-evaluation; they trust others and can build good relations; and cope actively in any given situation while learning and building from both failure and success. Research done in the subsequent years showed that the attributes mentioned in this model were present in children, high-school students, college students as well as in adults whosoever have demonstrated competent functioning particularly in terms of having a mastery-oriented problem-solving approach to life's events (Tyler 1981,1988,1991).

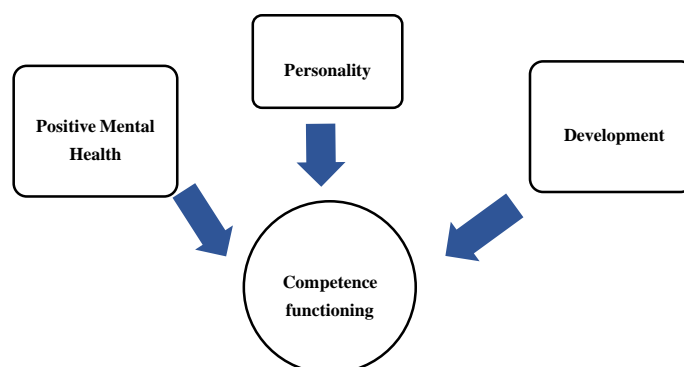


Fig. 1. – Competent Functioning- a component of development, personality, and positive mental health (Tyler, 1977)

Greenberger and Sorensen (1971 and 1973) took an interest in examining non-academic development of learners in the context of school. They held this view that school's role in personal and social growth of learners is of paramount importance. But, since non-academic goals of schooling was not systematically specified as it was for academic development, they came up with a model of psychosocial maturity, integrating goals of socialization with goals of individual development, which specifies measurable attitudes and dispositions (though meant for students in the age range 11-18). The dimensions of maturity, as proposed in this model, are relevant in all societies. For attaining psychosocial maturity learners are expected to develop their individual adequacy, interpersonal adequacy, and social adequacy. When it comes to fostering capacity to function effectively on one's own -individual adequacy- learners need to be self-reliant, develop a sense of identity and work orientation; for interpersonal adequacy-they need good communication skills, should have the capacity to trust others when needed, and awareness of social roles to be performed in different occasions; and the attributes required for social adequacy are- social commitment, openness to socio-political change and tolerance of individual and cultural differences. Based on the integrative concept of psychosocial maturity a measurement tool was constructed for assessing young learner's personal and social development (Greenberger et al., 1974) and keeping a record of their psychosocial development during the school years. While Greenberger and other researchers considered non – academic development an essential goal of schooling, Adams, Shea and Kacerguis (1978) showed how children's school experiences like social interaction, friendship quality, teacher – student relations impact psychosocial development of learners.

While these researchers developed models that look at the attributes one should have for being psychosocially competent, Kurtines and other researchers (1991) argued that acquisition of full range of psychosocial competencies, essentially governed by maturational and learning processes, depends on emergence of competencies in interrelated domains of development. As per their theoretical framework, it is only in adolescence that one acquires a full range of psychosocial competencies which includes linguistic, cognitive, communicative and sociomoral competencies, and achieves psychosocial maturity.

In sum, these conceptual models collectively suggest that psychosocial competence is essential for competent human functioning in every sphere of life and psychosocial development of learners is necessarily one of the objectives of schooling.

Though several researchers contributed largely to the conceptual development of the construct, the term got widely recognised once WHO took initiative to promote psychosocial competence. It was in 1994 that WHO developed a life skills education framework for the enhancement of psychosocial competence of children and adolescents (this framework along with other frameworks will be discussed at length in the next section). Working along the same line, UNICEF has also suggested that quality education must aim at development of essential psychosocial skills (UNICEF, 2012, UNICEF, 2019). Here we can examine some other viewpoints which find psychosocial competencies as integral to preparing learners for life-situations. In a World Bank multi-country study, it was seen that psychosocial competencies like resilience, personal agency, and self-confidence could empower one to move up and out of poverty (UNICEF, 2012; UNICEF, 2019). Most importantly, in the context of COVID 19 outbreak, researchers emphasized how psychosocial competencies can act as protective factors and help individuals to be resilient (Verger et al., 2021).

In the next section a brief overview of frameworks proposed by International Organisations will be presented. But as mentioned before, the research literature seems to be fragmented in terms of using terms to mean the same construct (OECD, 2019, UNICEF, 2012, Opstoel et al., 2020). The researcher would attempt to find coherence among these frameworks despite seemingly different names chosen for the central construct in the given frameworks.

#### **4.1 WHO- Life Skills Education for Children and Adolescents in School, 1994**

In 1994 WHO defined psychosocial competence from the perspective of mental health. In their words 'psychosocial competence is a person's ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It is a person's ability to maintain a state of mental well-being and to demonstrate this in adaptive and positive behaviour while interacting with others, his/her culture and environment.'

WHO found it necessary to enhance psychosocial competence of school-going children and adolescents for their physical, mental and social well-being and this can be achieved by teaching them the life skills necessary to 'deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life'. These life skills are psychosocial in nature (WHO, 1999, UNESCO, 2004, UNICEF, 2012). They outlined a framework for life skills education to assist different agencies engaged in school curriculum development, health education, and the development of school-based health and social interventions to introduce life skills education in schools to promote psychosocial competence. Life skills is defined as 'abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life'. They identified 10 core set of skills which learners can acquire through learning and practice. Though the content of the life

skills education varies depending on the cultural and social factors, these core skills are at the heart of life-skills based approach undertaken in different countries.

To promote psychosocial competence among school children, the WHO suggested that life skills education can be introduced as early as at the age of 6 though ideally it is suitable for all the children as well as adolescents. The following life skills are suggested by WHO. These skills are applicable across culture.

- Decision-making and problem-solving;
- Creative thinking and critical thinking;
- Communication and interpersonal skills;
- Self-awareness and empathy; and
- Coping with emotions and coping with stress

In April 1998, the WHO held a United Nations Inter-Agency Meeting to clarify the meaning and decide on a common conceptual basis for life skills education in schools. Though the term 'life skills' was open to wide interpretation, there was a clear consensus regarding the meaning of life skills education and what its objectives are. It was concluded that all participants were using the term life skills to refer to psychosocial skills (World Health Organization, 1999). In addition to this, they prepared a list of keywords which were used to describe psychosocial skills including personal, social, and interpersonal, cognitive, affective, universal skills. Interestingly, it was also considered in this meeting what are not 'life skills'. Terms like self-esteem, sociability, they argued, should be considered as desirable qualities but not skills. Now, teaching life skills was essential for addressing a number of concerns but one of the primary objectives was to promote healthy child and adolescent development.

#### **4.2 UNICEF- Global Evaluation of Life Skills Education Programs, 2012**

In its report on Global Evaluation of life skills education UNICEF pointed out that since there is no clear definition of life skills and different sectors emphasize different psychosocial life skills, it is challenging for educators to identify and prioritize the most relevant psychosocial skills which can be considered as core life skills. Now, upon reviewing and consolidating the existing frameworks prepared by different United Nations agencies and other organizations like CASEL, UNICEF developed a guiding framework for life skills education putting all the relevant skills under three broad categories of 'generic life skills.' These generic life skills empower all individuals, irrespective of social and cultural differences, 'to deal with the challenges they face, and to participate fully and productively in society'.

Cognitive - critical thinking and problem-solving skills for responsible decision-making;

Personal - skills for awareness and drive and for self-management;

Inter-personal - skills for communication, negotiation, cooperation and teamwork, and for inclusion, empathy and advocacy.

In this evaluation study, it was reported how different countries (40 UNICEF countries) have introduced life skills education in formal schools. It was seen that in some countries it was introduced as a new subject whereas in other countries it has been integrated with other subject-areas and teaching practices. Instances were found where life-skills initiatives were part of co-curricular activities. As an effective life-skills education largely depends on delivery of life skills education, this report brought it to the fore that much needs to be done regarding professional development of teachers. Notwithstanding some instances of pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes that addressed the needs of teachers, it was observed that development of teacher's psychosocial skills and right attitude require due attention.

#### **4.3 UNICEF INDIA-A Comprehensive Life Skills Framework, 2019**

A comprehensive life skills framework for the children and adolescents of India was developed by UNICEF India by consolidating the efforts of various international and national agencies and educational institutes such as NCERT, UNESCO, World Bank etc. According to them, learning life skills make children empowered and responsible towards the cause of society at large. The skill-sets outlined in this framework, though particularly applicable for India's complex and diverse context was suggested keeping in view the global requirements of the present century- competencies that today's children are expected to cultivate.

They have seen Life Skills through a bigger lens- necessary not only for health but pertains to all domains of learning-learning to know, to do, to be and to live together. They defined Life skills as 'a set of abilities, attitude and socio-emotional competencies' that empower individuals to live a healthy and productive life, to contribute to society by actively participating in decision-making and bringing about positive changes by right action. Today's India needs empowered human capital empathetic to others, capable of solving problems, and able to think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, make informed decision; thus, also meeting the standard of global dynamic workplace. After holding a series of workshops with the representatives from the UN sister agencies, civil society, institutions and independent experts, UNICEF India proposed the following framework

1. Empowerment: Self-Awareness, Communication, Resilience
2. Citizenship: Empathy, Participation
3. Learning: Critical thinking, Creativity, Problem Solving
4. Employability: Negotiation, Decision-making

In this framework they proposed 10 core skills which come under four dimensions. These dimensions are interdependent since skills relevant for one dimension can be equally important for another dimension. This framework also addressed one important aspect of skill development – identification of the skills the learners are expected to acquire at a particular stage of development. Through a life skills continuum it showed that learning, self-awareness and interpersonal skills should be nurtured in the early childhood, during the elementary years communication and participation skills should be emphasized, and finally resilience and employability skills become prominent in the later years, between 14 to 19 years and onwards.



UNICEF,2019

Fig. 2: A cluster of 10 core skills organised according to Four Pillars of Education outlined in the Delor's Report

It was also highlighted in this report that life skills and foundational skills like reading and mathematics, if developed in an integrated fashion rather than treating them in isolation, will yield better results only, in terms of attendance levels, classroom behaviour and academic achievement. Regarding the subjects through which these skills can be taught, UNICEF India suggested different subject areas have the scope to address these skills be it core subjects, health education, peace education, civic education, or environmental education; the list includes many more. In addition, it recognised the platforms having the potential to deliver life skills education which necessarily include but not limited to family, community, and school. Moreover, an operational strategy was constructed that indicates the practices to be taken place at various platforms. In order to make this process of empowering the children and the youth of India sustainable, UNICEF India focused on training and development of functionaries and groups who will be responsible for building the skills in children and young people; and in any setting this training must primarily aim at sensitizing the stakeholders, develop their listening skills and nurture participatory approach in them. In the school setting, the best practices include embedding life skills in the 'pedagogies used to teach curricular subjects, which could include not only maths, literacy and science, but also sports, arts, etc'.

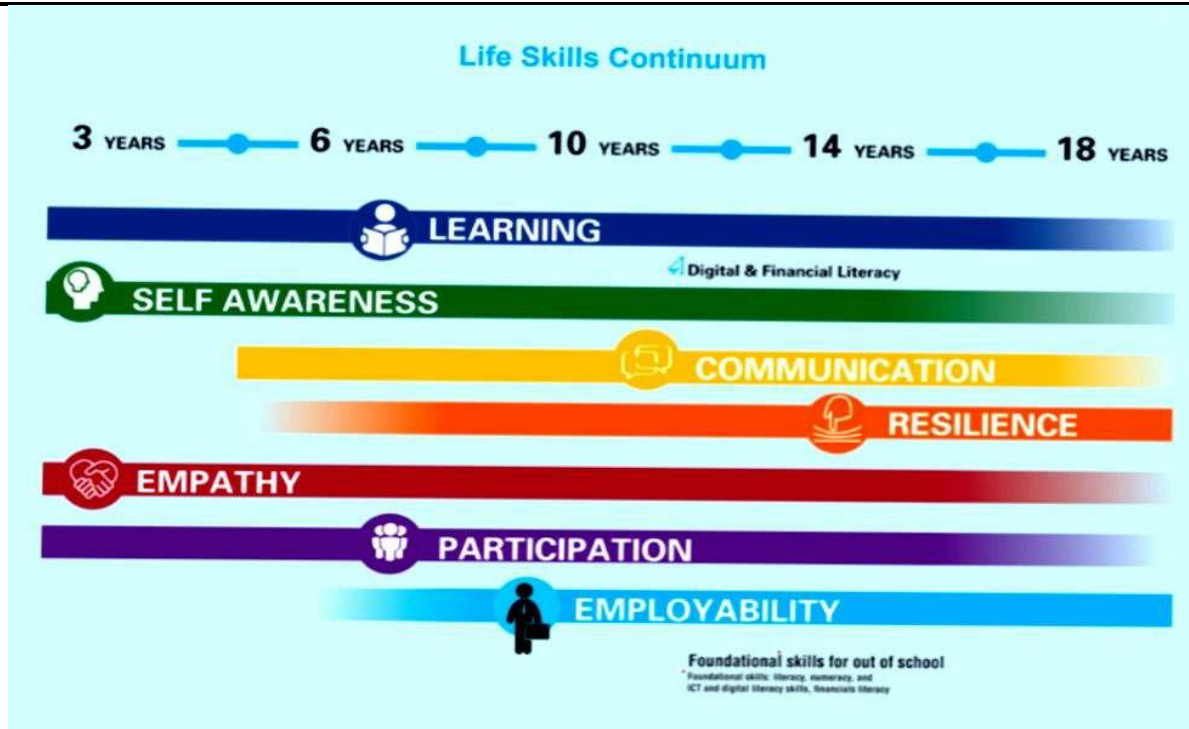


Fig. 3: UNICEF,2019  
Development of Life skills across developmental stages

#### 4.4OECD- Skills for Social Progress-The Power of Social and Emotional skills, 2015

‘What are the skills that drive well-being and social progress?’-this was the question discussed in the OECD’s informal meeting on Skills for Social Progress held in 2015 and the report itself is an answer to this question. To deal with the economic, social and technological challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century, children need a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills. So, the development of whole child is what education of 21<sup>st</sup> century must aim at. Whereas cognitive skills, particularly which are measured in schools are important for success in school and work, it is the socio-emotional skills that enable learners to face the unexpected, to control impulses, to cope with demands and work effectively with others.

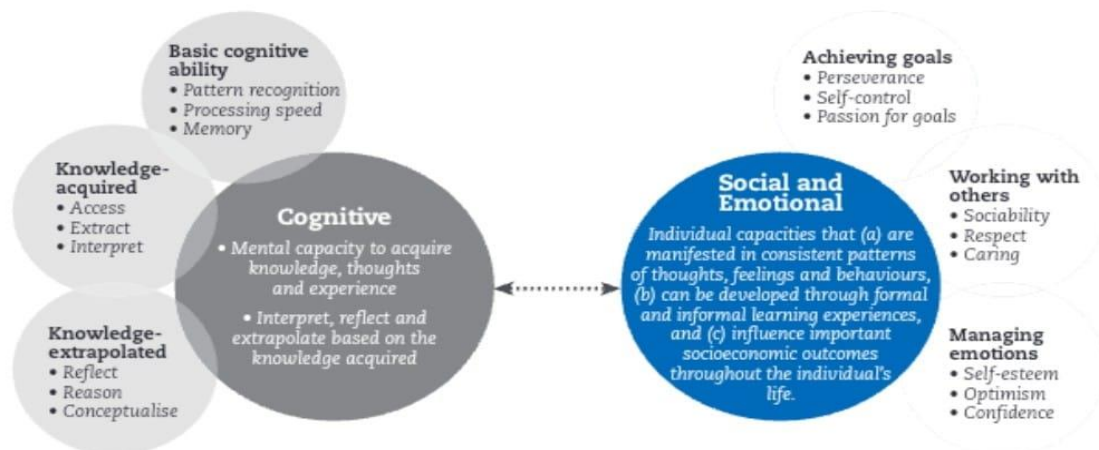


Fig. 4: A Framework for Cognitive, social and Emotional Skills (OECD, 2015)

The framework presents the full spectrum of skills need to be fostered in learners for individual well-being and socio-economic progress. While it recognizes the importance of cognitive skills that predict a number of positive future outcomes, it equally stressed the role of socio-emotional skills in achieving goals, managing emotions, working with others and in dealing with everyday life situations. All OECD countries recognize that these skills develop through schooling and the objectives of education as stated in their educational policy, act and national curriculum include these skills. Though not all the social emotional skills mentioned in this framework are targeted in the national curriculum frameworks of these countries but the terms used to refer to the specific ‘socio-emotional skills’. This report allocates a section on policies and practices with regard to formation of skills. At primary and secondary level of schooling development of these skills is an important objective of education in all these countries which get prominence not only in their policy statements but also in curricular frameworks. In most countries subjects like physical and health

education, civic and citizenship education, moral or religious education are specifically designed to develop socio-emotional skills of primary and secondary level learners. A growing number of schools (in some countries) are adapting their curricula to enhance the scope of teaching these skills by incorporating it as a general theme cutting across all core subjects like language, mathematics. This report also presents instances of those few countries where curriculum has been transformed significantly to better address the development of the socio-emotional skills; a new curriculum that lays more emphasis on teaching these skills through all the subjects is now being prepared. In this newly designed curriculum these skills will also be featured in the learning outcomes.

#### 4.5 OECD-Beyond Academic Learning 2021

OECD published its first report from the survey of socio-emotional skills in 2021. This survey is one of the first international initiatives attempting to study learner's socio-emotional skills comprehensively. This report is especially significant in the context of pandemic as it made it evident that while going through a time of uncertainty one should be prepared ahead how to deal with this, how to become resilient and thrive. Skills like autonomy, emotional regulation which are associated with student's performance during normal times, have become essential for educational attainment in time of remote online learning. Self-directed learning is possible only when learners are intrinsically motivated and possess several skills that will help them get through the hard times. At this juncture this survey did a phenomenal work by considering what present and future competencies look like beyond academic learning.

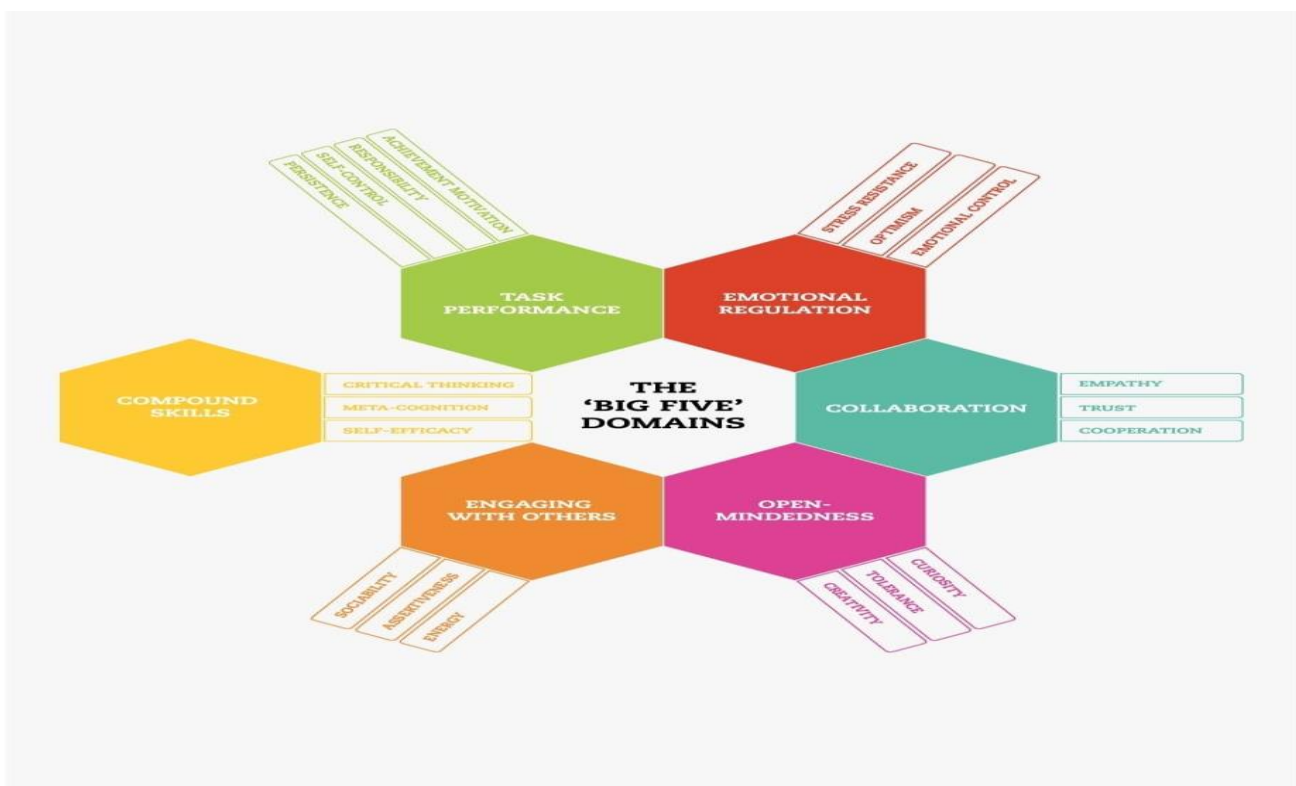


Fig. 5. Structure of Social and Emotional Skills (OECD, 2019)

For measuring the socio-emotional skills an assessment framework was developed by OECD which included skills most relevant for success and well-being of children as well as adolescents. The skill clusters were categorised into the Big Five personality dimensions and one compound skills dimension.

#### 4.6 WORLD BANK- Developing Social and Emotional skills for the labour market-the PRACTICE Model

World Bank explored the personal and social attributes that employers value the most and can predict school and labour market success and subsequently came up with a coherent framework integrating psychology, economics, policy research, program implementation, and education literatures. Additionally, this framework considered the developmental perspective of skill development.

Skills are learned gradually and increase across the developmental stages, so the PRACTICE model contributes to this knowledge area by specifying optimal stages for each skill spanning from 0-29 years. Another important aspect of skills development is the method of teaching or pedagogy followed. They have also given suggestions regarding the question- 'how to teach the skills' by drawing in suitable examples of pedagogical practices from intervention studies.

Table 1: Stages appropriate for (PRACTICE) skill building (World bank,2014)

Skills for the labor market	Early childhood	Middle childhood	Adolescence	Emerging adulthood
Problem solving	Foundational	Optimal	Optimal	Reinforce
Resilience	Optimal	Optimal	Reinforce	
Achievement motivation		Optimal	Reinforce	
Control	Optimal	Optimal	Optimal	Reinforce
Teamwork	Optimal	Optimal	Reinforce	
Initiative	Optimal	Optimal	Optimal	Optimal
Confidence	Foundational	Optimal	Optimal	Reinforce
Ethics	Foundational	Optimal	Optimal	

Note: "foundational" indicates that skills developed in this period form the basis for the core skill building in a following period. "Reinforce" indicates that a skills acquired during the optimal period needs intense practice in the reinforcement period for the skills to be truly learned.

#### 4.7 P21 FRAMEWORK

The Battelle for Kids (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning) identified key competencies and skills essential for students to succeed in work and life in the 21st century. It is designed to help practitioners integrate skills into the teaching of key academic subjects. Educators and business leaders who developed this framework recommended that along with mastery of key subjects like World Languages, English, Economics, Government, and Civics, it is also essential for the schools to weave global awareness, health literacy, entrepreneurial literacy - all these interdisciplinary 21st century themes into core academic subjects. The skills that learners need to acquire in a globally and digitally interconnected world characterised by constant change and innovation as recognised by P21 framework are - Learning and Innovation Skills, Information, Media and Literacy skills, Life and Career Skills. For example, learners need to be prepared to solve non-familiar problems in innovative ways where conventional ways do not work. And this very much applicable when one has to meet the requirements of today's quickly changing employment landscape. (NEP,2020)



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Fig. 6 Framework for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Learning  
P21 Partnership For 21<sup>st</sup> century learning

#### 5. DISCUSSION

Over the years, different models and frameworks have been proposed/developed by individual researchers and international organizations, and in the present study, the researchers sought common grounds among them. The concept of competence originated around the 1960s as researchers shifted their attention from personal deficiencies to personal efficacy and took a positive approach to analyze human functioning. So, instead of focusing on what one is not capable of doing (deficit model), competence model focused on what one is capable of accomplishing (competence model). These researchers though identified and measured



personality traits (attributes or skills as researchers used different terms) that determine psychosocially competent behaviour but did not specify ways how these skills can be addressed through schooling. Later, researchers found that these skills are malleable and can be taught to children (WHO 1994, Kautz et al., 2014). Whereas, in formal setting, it can be incorporated into the school curriculum and embedded in pedagogies, in non-formal setting this can be done by well-developed programmes or interventions suitable to age groups addressed. Pratham Life skills programmes is one such community-based intervention program.

Competencies and skills or attributes, associated with competent functioning, which were valued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are still very much relevant today; but in addition to that, some skills like resilience (NEP,2020, UNICEF, 2019), critical thinking (NCF,2005, NEP,2020, WHO, 1994, UNICEF, 2012, UNICEF 2019) are found to be relatively more important in today's scenario and appear frequently in research literature and accordingly many countries are adapting their curriculum to incorporate these skills (OECD, 2015). We have seen major technological breakthroughs and innovations in previous century, but there is a paradigm shift from what life was used to be 30 years back to what life is now. With various dramatic scientific and technological advancement, such as rise of big data, internet of things, social media, digitalisation (NEP,2020, OECD, 2019), one cannot deny increasing responsibilities 21<sup>st</sup> century schools are expected to perform in shaping the future of learners. These forces have moved the world leading organisations to think about specific skills required to adapt to the changing society, for example, digital citizenship (UNESCO, 2015) or Media literacy (P21, 2019) is a skill 21<sup>st</sup> century learners must have to participate responsibly in virtual communities. The term 'Entrepreneurial skills' is also quite a new inclusion in education policy and curriculum documents and found important as this century need competent individuals who can create jobs for themselves and others (UNESCO,2015). Global competence, inter - culture competence, cross-cultural skills, though appear to be familiar terms, the context has changed. So, it is evident that to be psychosocial competent in 21<sup>st</sup> century one will need a balanced set of skills – most frequently appear in the research literature during the recent years. There is no single framework to be followed to get the comprehensive idea about this construct. Multiple frameworks recommended multiple skills.

## 6. CONCLUSION

What education can help the students when our society has transformed radically? As accelerated technological innovations including automation, and AI, is changing employment opportunities, we might face the challenge of creating human-centred work. (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, digital technologies are offering individuals unlimited access to information and there is an explosion of knowledge - all these are overwhelming for young minds and one needs appropriate tools to navigate these unique challenges (WEF, 2023). Keeping these unprecedented changes in mind a number of researchers as well as organisations and agencies have expressed concern for building right set of skills and competencies to make the children ready for life and work. Now, this is a difficult question to answer what competencies and skills are valued more than others as multiple frameworks highlight a variety of competencies and it finally depends on the country which skills they would teach their students.

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