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## **BUILDING INNER STRENGTH: LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MAHARASHTRA – STATUS, CHALLENGES, AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the status and challenges of Life Skills Education (LSE) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) among secondary school students in Maharashtra. Adolescence is a period of rapid emotional, social, and cognitive change, and Indian secondary schools are increasingly expected to nurture not only academic competence but also emotional resilience and interpersonal maturity. Drawing on the World Health Organization's ten core life skills and established SEL theory, the paper reviews how life skills provisions are currently woven into Maharashtra's secondary school system through co-curricular activity, guidance and counselling cells, and national programmes such as the Adolescence Education Programme. It identifies structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural challenges that limit effective implementation, and proposes practical directions for teacher training, curriculum integration, and school-level monitoring. The paper concludes that embedding life skills within everyday classroom practice, rather than treating it as an isolated activity, is essential for the holistic development of adolescents in the state.*

**KEYWORDS:** Keywords not detected.

Life Skills Education, Social-Emotional Learning, Secondary Education, Maharashtra, Adolescent Development, WHO Life Skills Framework, School Guidance and Counselling

## INTRODUCTION

Secondary education in India has traditionally placed heavy emphasis on examination performance and subject mastery, often at the cost of the emotional and social preparedness of young learners. Maharashtra, with one of the largest secondary school systems in the country under its State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, mirrors this national pattern. Yet the years between fourteen and sixteen are precisely when adolescents face intense pressure related to board examinations, career choices, peer relationships, and identity formation. It is in this context that Life Skills Education and Social-Emotional Learning have gained attention among Indian educators, policy makers, and researchers as a way of equipping students with the inner resources needed to manage these transitions constructively. Life Skills Education, as defined by the World Health Organization, refers to the ability to adopt positive behaviour that enables individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Social-Emotional Learning, a closely related idea developed largely in Western

educational research, describes the process through which young people acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to understand and manage emotions, set positive goals, show empathy, and maintain healthy relationships. When read together, these two frameworks offer a useful lens for understanding how Maharashtra's secondary schools are, and are not, preparing adolescents for the emotional realities of growing up in a rapidly changing Indian society.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this paper rests on two complementary models. The first is the World Health Organization's ten core life skills, introduced in the mid-1990s and widely adapted by Indian institutions such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training and the Central Board of Secondary Education. These skills include self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, coping with stress, and coping with emotion. The second is the Social-Emotional Learning framework, which groups similar competencies under five broad domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Although the vocabulary differs, both models converge on the idea that emotional and social competence can be taught systematically, much like literacy or numeracy, rather than being left to chance or family upbringing alone. In the Indian context, these frameworks have been absorbed selectively into national curriculum documents, most notably the National Curriculum Framework of 2005, which called for education that nurtures the whole child rather than only the intellect.

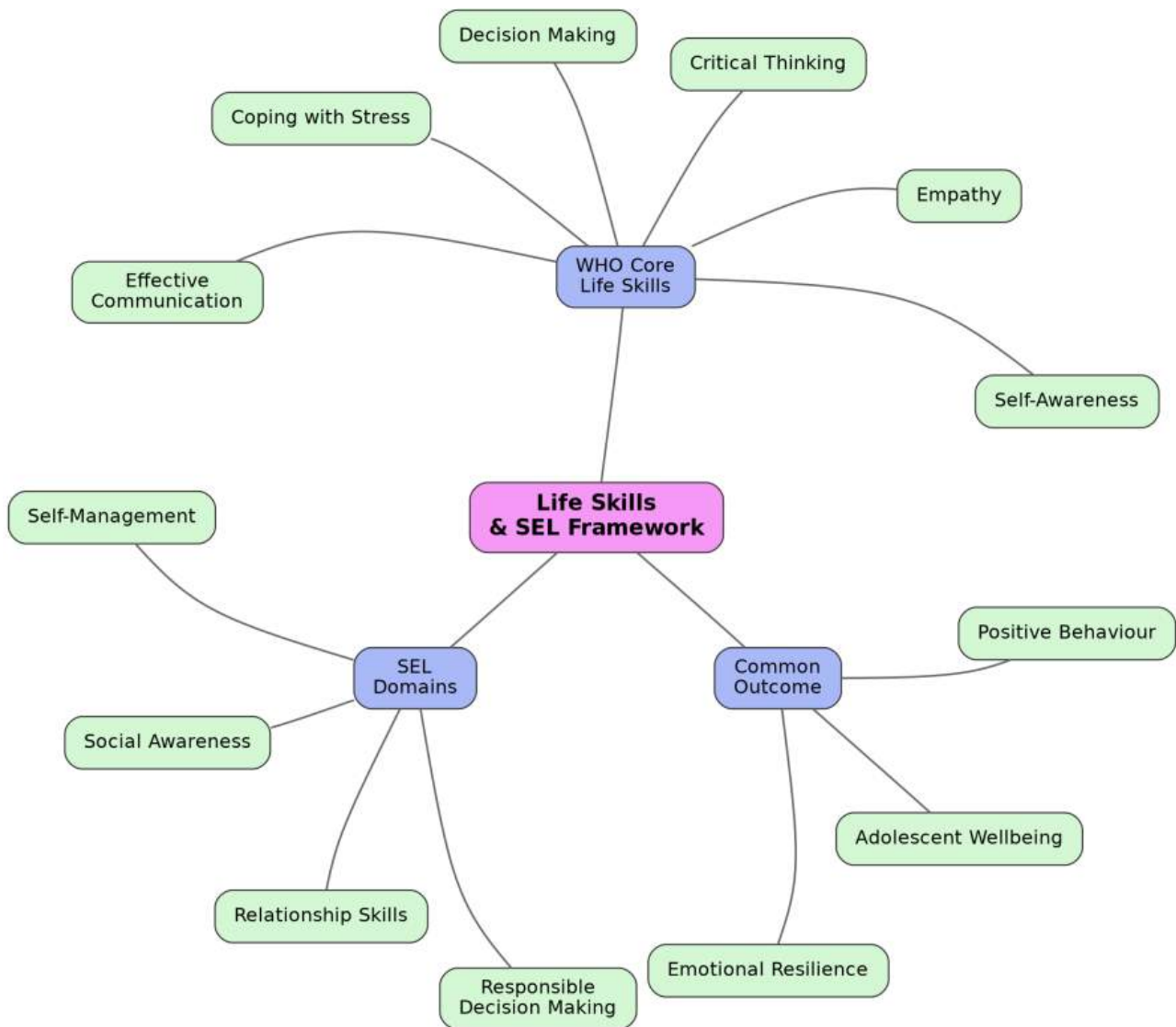


Diagram 1: Convergence of WHO Life Skills and SEL domains toward adolescent wellbeing.

#### Status of Life Skills Education in Maharashtra's Secondary Schools

Within Maharashtra, life skills content is not typically offered as an independent, examined subject but is instead distributed across several channels. State Board schools are expected to conduct periodic guidance sessions through school counselling cells, many of which were strengthened following state-level directives linked to the national Adolescence Education Programme developed jointly by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and NCERT. Co-curricular periods, health and physical education classes, and value education sessions often become the informal carriers of life skills content, with topics such as stress management, peer pressure, and study skills discussed in a largely non-graded, activity-based manner. Urban schools in cities such as Pune, Mumbai, and Nagpur, particularly those affiliated with CBSE, tend to have more structured life skills modules because CBSE has issued specific curriculum guidelines since the early 2000s. Rural and semi-urban State Board schools, by contrast, rely more heavily on individual teacher initiative, NGO partnerships, and occasional workshops conducted by district education offices. This uneven distribution means that a student's exposure to systematic life skills learning in Maharashtra currently depends considerably on the type of school, its location, and the personal commitment of its teachers rather than on a uniform state-wide curriculum.

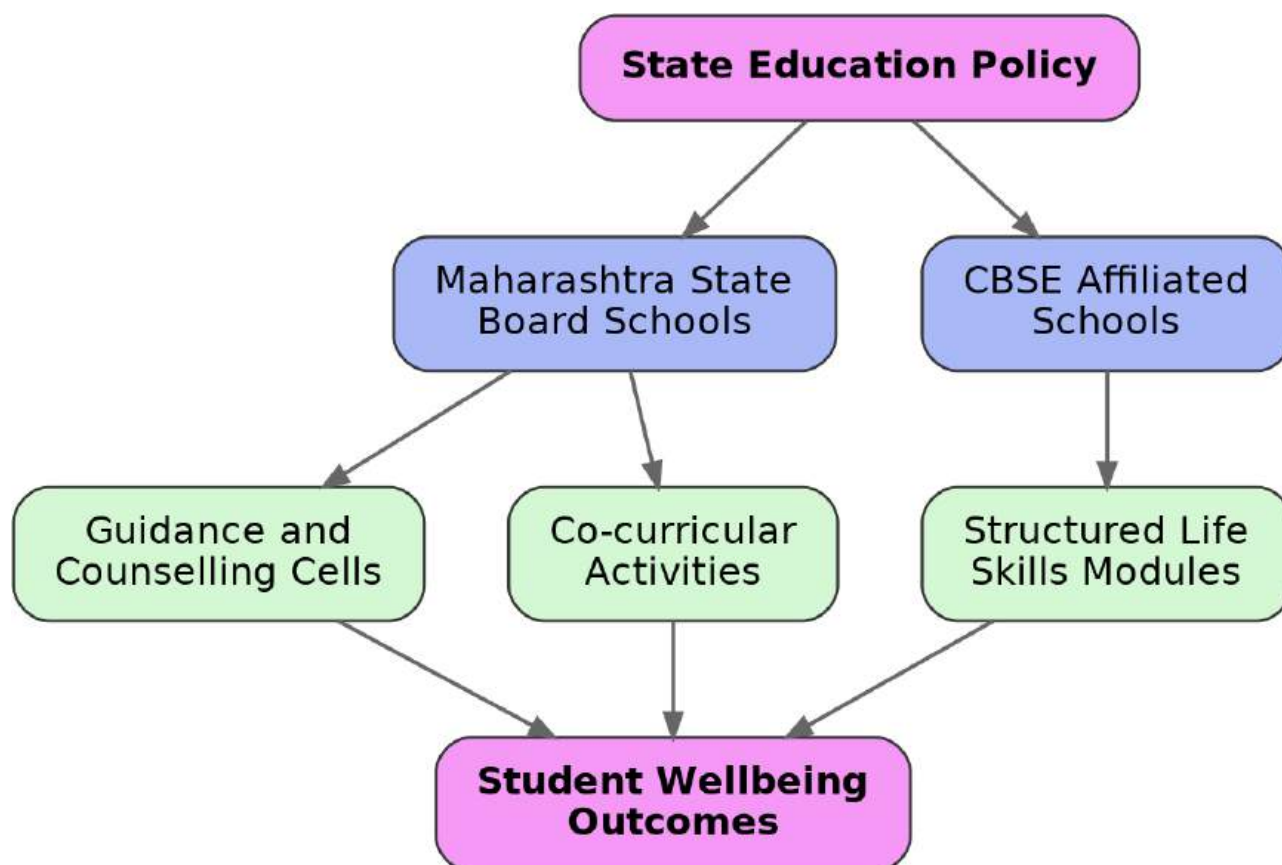


Diagram 2: Pathways through which life skills content currently reaches secondary students in Maharashtra.

### Challenges in Implementation

Several interlinked challenges limit the effectiveness of life skills provision in Maharashtra's secondary schools. The first is curricular marginalisation: because life skills sessions are rarely linked to formal assessment, they are frequently the first activities dropped when examination

pressure intensifies, especially in the months before board examinations. The second challenge concerns teacher preparedness. Most secondary school teachers in the state receive limited pre-service or in-service training in facilitating emotional or social learning, since teacher education programmes continue to emphasise subject content and pedagogy over counselling-oriented skills. The third challenge is socio-cultural: discussions of emotions, mental health, or personal difficulties are still viewed with some hesitation in many Indian family and school settings, which can make open classroom conversation about feelings or stress feel unfamiliar to both teachers and students. A fourth challenge lies in resource disparity between well-funded urban private schools and government-aided or rural schools, where counsellors are often shared across multiple institutions or absent altogether. Finally, the absence of a shared, state-wide monitoring framework makes it difficult to assess whether life skills sessions are actually improving student outcomes, since schools use varied, informal methods to track participation rather than any standard indicator of emotional or social competence.

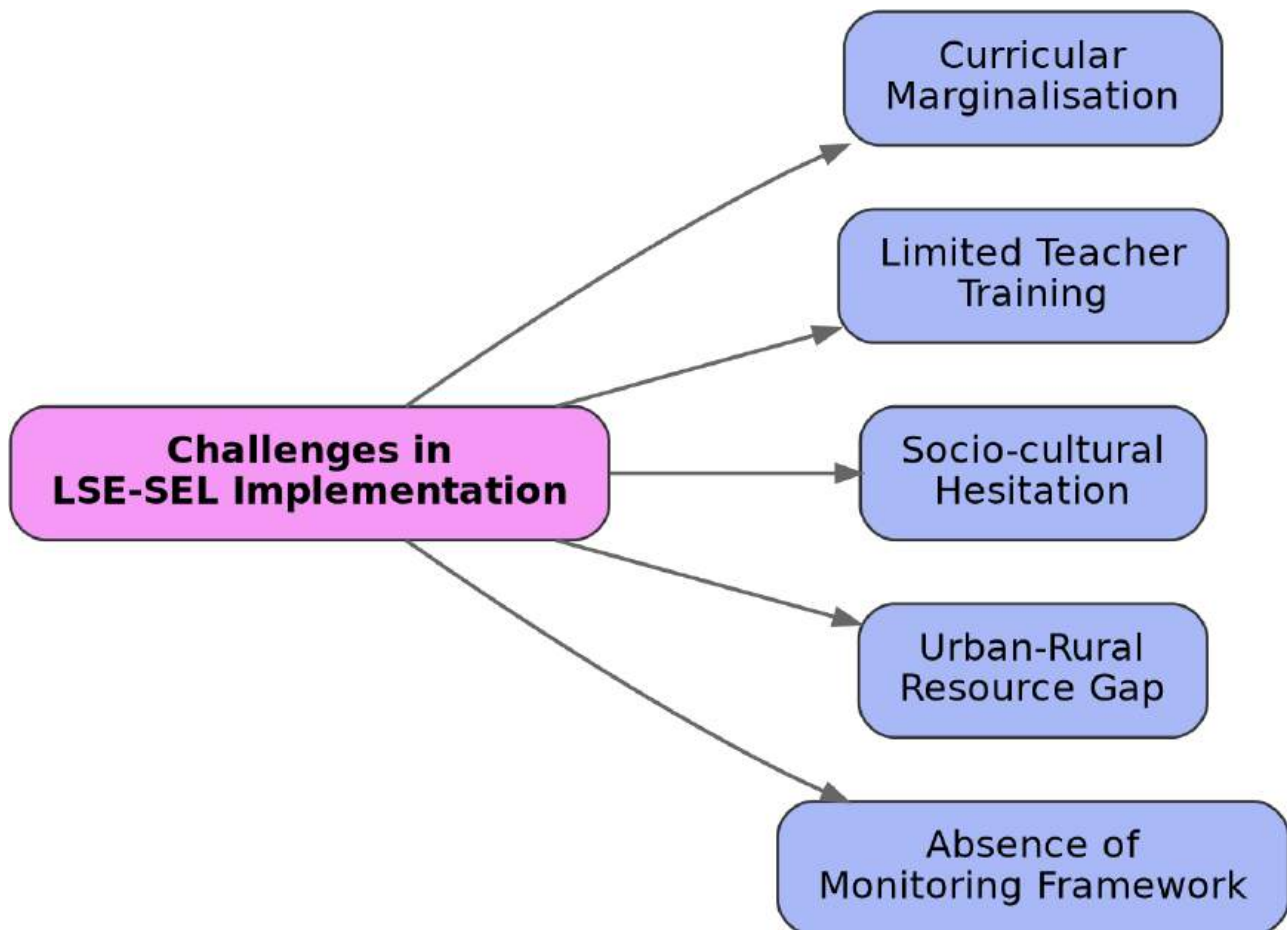


Diagram 3: Key structural and cultural barriers affecting life skills delivery.

#### Educational Implications and the Way Forward

The evidence gathered in this paper points toward a clear set of implications for policy and school practice in Maharashtra. Life skills learning is more likely to succeed when it is woven into everyday subject teaching, for example through cooperative group work in language classes or reflective discussion during science lessons, rather than confined to a separate and easily neglected period. Teacher education institutes affiliated with the state need to strengthen pre-service training in basic counselling techniques and classroom facilitation of emotional discussion, so that teachers feel confident guiding such conversations rather than treating them

as outside their professional role. District and block-level education offices could also benefit from a shared, simple monitoring tool that records student participation and basic wellbeing indicators, allowing schools to compare progress without requiring elaborate new infrastructure. Partnerships between schools and local health or psychology departments, including those at state universities, offer a low-cost way of bringing trained facilitators into government-aided schools that currently lack dedicated counsellors. Finally, sensitising parents through periodic school meetings can gradually ease the socio-cultural hesitation that surrounds open discussion of emotions, helping to create a more supportive environment both inside and outside the classroom.

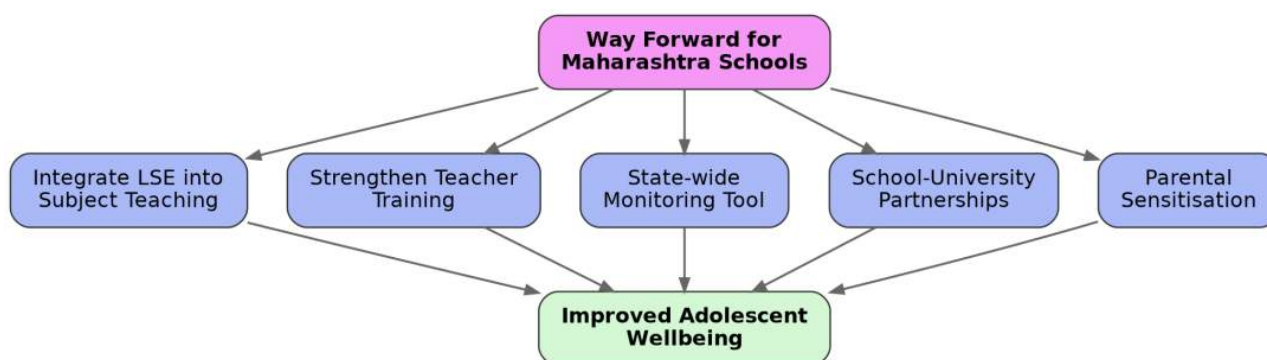


Diagram 4: Recommended pathway for strengthening life skills education outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

Life Skills Education and Social-Emotional Learning represent a necessary complement to academic instruction for secondary school students in Maharashtra. While national frameworks and state-level guidance structures already provide a foundation, actual delivery remains inconsistent, shaped strongly by school type, location, and individual teacher initiative rather than by a coherent, state-wide approach. Addressing the curricular, pedagogical, and socio-cultural barriers identified in this paper would allow Maharashtra to move toward a more holistic model of secondary education, one in which academic achievement and emotional wellbeing are treated as equally important goals. Future research could usefully examine district-level variation in implementation more closely and evaluate the outcomes of specific school-based interventions, providing the empirical basis needed to inform state policy in the years ahead.

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