

THINK EQUAL EARLY YEARS PROGRAMME:

Framework Summary

(Revised with Updated Academic References, 2026)

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Foreword

Based upon the evidence of neuroscience, the Early Years are without doubt the gateway to healthy, safe, and prosperous individual lives and communities. We all have a duty of care to ensure that our youngest children, and the educators and caregivers into whose care they are entrusted are empowered and supported with the tools that will develop those competencies and skills which will ensure positive life outcomes for them and for our society. We view educators and caregivers as a partnership which together are effectively the architects of the next generation and its leaders.

The journey of our children through nursery (3 year olds) to Year 1 of Primary School (6 year olds) should be focused not only on 'school readiness' but on 'life readiness' and 'health readiness'. In the critical and optimal window of opportunity we have between the ages of 3 and 6, while brains are being built and attitudes and behaviours are being shaped, we must ensure that we co-create with our children positive, healthy attitudes and behaviours and that prosocial neural pathways are laid in the developing architecture of their brains.

The "THINK EQUAL" movement and programme, champions critical investment in the early years and is dedicated to bringing what we regard as "the missing dimension to health and education" to be incorporated in national policies globally on an urgent basis, particularly critical post the Covid 19-pandemic. Given that this new subject, which we term "Social and Emotional learning for wellbeing, psychosocial support and social justice", is hitherto untrained and virtually untaught, Think Equal has been designed as a train-while-you-teach programme which empowers Early years educators with the confidence, the knowledge, skills, understanding and, perhaps most importantly of all, the tangible toolkit (narrative picture books, session guides, and accompanying resources) with which to mediate 25 critical inter-cutting competencies to help our young children build their brains pro-socially. The teachers are first trained by Trainers for between 1 to 2 days in person, with additional refresher courses and a comprehensive online training platform also available. The online training is self-paced and self-directed with modules (15 in total) taking approximately 8 hours in total to complete.

This blended modality of initial training prepares educators in how to effectively use the programme's resources and then begin the 'practicum training' during their first year of teaching following step by step, easy to implement session guides. This method ensures that educators are equipped in every way to teach our children even-handedly to be healthy, happy, respectful and empowered with wellbeing and positive health and life outcomes that last a lifetime long.

We owe this to our next generation. and I respectfully urge all Ministers of Education, Health, and all policymakers charged with a duty of care to our youngest and most vulnerable citizens to adopt the THINK EQUAL programme as national policy on an urgent basis.

Think Equal Founder and Executive Chair, Leslee Udwin

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

Think Equal is a holistic Early Years Programme based in social-emotional learning and committed to social equality, psycho-social support, gender, racial and religious equality, social, mental and emotional health and well-being, and global citizenship. The programme views children as individual threads within a collective, inclusive global fabric and supports them as they begin a lifelong learning journey unburdened by the restraints of discriminatory mindsets and antisocial behaviours or attitudes. It endows them with knowledge and experiential understanding of values and life skills such as empathy, inclusion, self-esteem, emotional literacy, self-regulation, peaceful conflict resolution, and other key foundational social and emotional competencies. It encourages and empowers them in assuming responsibilities as global citizens, and becoming 'upstanders' and transformers of society through the use of critical, inclusive and creative thinking. Think Equal views and celebrates children as unique, powerful, empowered beings and agents of social change.

The Think Equal Early Years Programme is evidence-based and neuroscience-led, and consists of 36 topic areas, containing within them rich resources designed to foster the development of personal, social and emotional competencies and skills in the early childhood setting and for positive later life outcomes. Through additional home-based activities allied to the weekly classroom learning, the extensive use of narrative and a focus on relationship-building, community, and social cognition, the wider context of the child's life is also engaged and positively influenced, helping to shape a shared language across the child's support network and ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The need for social-emotional learning in early years education has been long supported by educationalists and forward thinkers in the global community. Paulo Freire described education as 'the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and

discover how to participate in the transformation of their world' (2000, p.34). Aristotle stated, 'Education of the head without education of the heart, is no education at all'. Mahatma Gandhi said "If we want to achieve real peace in the world, we shall have to start with the children" and Bill Gates said: "The first 5 years have everything to do with how the next 80 turn out". Nelson Mandela who described education as "the most powerful weapon to change the world" defined 'Education' in the following terms: 'No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love'. Think Equal's framing question is: "If we take seriously our duty of care to our youngest, most vulnerable citizens: our children, then how can we deem numeracy and literacy to be compulsory yet consider it as optional for our children to learn to value another human being and lead healthy relationships?

Think Equal teaches our children to love. It is both a tangible programme and also a movement which calls for a system change in education. It constructs and delivers an international curriculum with a tangible programme of narrative picture books, session guides and resources. These comprise the practical, tangible tools which operationalise national curricula which are forward-thinking and enlightened enough to include Social and Emotional Learning in their Early Years education standards. Think Equal works with governments to embed SEL generally and the TE programme particularly, sustainably in their national early years curriculum. Its first step in this partnership is to undertake comprehensive mapping of its programme against each country's existing Early Years framework, identifying strong alignments with early learning goals, standards and outcomes, and highlighting clear parallels across the learning themes and competencies sought. This mapping exercise serves to operationalise the existing curriculum framework, and complement and concretise, rather than add to, the work already required of early years practitioners. Think Equal directly addresses ten of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and promotes and answers the dictate of Article 29 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (that "education shall direct itself to the whole personality of the child") the most widely ratified human rights treaty, adopted by 196 countries across the world.

By working in partnership with adopting countries, Think Equal supports

the development of a commitment within education communities to embed comprehensive, tangible, and structured social-emotional learning within a values-based education framework. It endows the next generation with 21st Century Skills which the OECD and other recognised think tanks consider as essential for a successful labour force in the current century and aims to be an integrated subject within the national early years curriculum alongside numeracy and literacy. This approach helps ensure the success of the programme (Women Educational Researchers of Kenya [WERK], 2015) and its sustainability.

According to Irina Bokova, the former Director-General of UNESCO: 'Changes in the world call for the development of a new humanism that is not only theoretical but practical, that is not only focused on the search for values, but oriented towards the implementation of concrete programmes that have tangible results' (Bokova, 2010). Think Equal further believes that in a world of increasing violence, war, gender-based abuse, overcrowded prison populations, high suicide rates and mental health disorders, merely reacting to the fallout is no longer enough; we must put concrete effort into **prevention** and **mindset change**, which can only be achieved effectively through education during the critical early years of brain development, while foundational neural pathways are being built.

PROGRAMME AIMS

The implementation of Think Equal in the early years (3-6) aims to enhance children's prosocial learning experiences from the very beginning, while attitudes, mindset, and behaviour are taking root, and equip them with the tools and strategies to positively shape these throughout their school life and beyond. Think Equal aims to 'endow individuals with the necessary insights, skills, and responsive strategies that will offer a bridge to the understanding of their own culture' (Falik, 2013), as well as the readiness to embrace global citizenship and celebrate diverse cultures.

Think Equal also aims to correct narratives which may have been distorted due to prejudice, replacing these deviations with the internal logic of positive narratives focused on human dignity, diversity, inclusion, gender equality, justice, empathy and compassion.

At policy level Think Equal aims to:

1. Promote awareness of prevention through the modifiability of prosocial attitudes and behaviours through closely monitored implementation and the sharing of findings.
2. 2. Implement the Think Equal Programme on a global scale, capacitating government personnel to continue sustainably with the programme as government-run and government-led year on year.
3. Embed Think Equal into pre-service and in-service training systems to ensure high quality training of master trainers and teachers, and ongoing high quality implementation of the programme.
4. Integrate Think Equal into educational structures through a top-down senior leadership approach, while simultaneously recognising the importance of bottom-up, grassroots adoption of the programme, and drawing upon educators' expertise to take ownership of implementation, and actively engaging parents as partners in the process.
5. Adapt, refine, and expand the programme and its resources to respond to evolving needs and emerging outcomes (Adapted from Falik, 2013).

PROGRAMME PRINCIPLES

The Think Equal Programme reveres the child as a powerful being, endowed with full human rights as per Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Think Equal adheres to the full terms of the convention with particular emphasis on the following : That the education of the child shall be directed to:

- The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- The development of respect for the child's parents, their own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which they may originate, and for nationalities, and cultures different from their own;
- The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, acceptance, equality, inclusion and celebration of diversity, respect and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups, and persons of indigenous

origin;

CORE OBJECTIVES OF THE THINK EQUAL PROGRAMME

Children's ability to develop and apply SEL skills depends most critically on the dynamic, reciprocal relationships between themselves, the adults around them, and the environments they inhabit. The Think Equal programme's core objectives are therefore organised under three subheadings to reflect this vital interconnection.

THE EDUCATOR

The Think Equal programme recognises and values the expertise and experience that educators bring to their practice, particularly during these foundational early years.

Building on this, the programme supports them in developing the skills, awareness, and language needed to serve as intentional role models, guides, and partners in learning who shape and co-construct learning cultures through warm attitudes, inclusive language, and positive interactions that model respect and empathy.

Think Equal integrates evidence-based teaching strategies, offering a rich variety of activities, including discussion, storytelling, drawing, creative arts, poster-making, songs, role-play, games, poems, mindfulness, movement, focus and relaxation exercises, to foster social and emotional learning (Jones, Brush, et al., 2017).

Specifically, educators are supported to:

- Model appropriate behaviour based on the fundamental principles of the Montessori philosophy to foster grace, courtesy, and mutual respect.
- Co-construct the language of global diversity and human rights, embedding values of equity in relation to gender, ethnicity, religion, race and ability.
- Use positive, accurate, and inclusive language to support children's development of self-esteem, self-confidence, and resilience.
- Create safe emotional spaces through emotional validation and co-regulation, helping children overcome barriers such as anxiety and dysregulation.
- Support children's ability to focus and sustain attention through structured, purposeful learning strategies that are both emotionally and sensorily attuned.

- Celebrate the uniqueness of each child, empowering them with a sense of value, purpose, and belonging.

THE CHILD

The Think Equal programme takes a holistic approach to early childhood development, integrating cognitive, social, and emotional learning to support the whole child. This includes not only developing core skills and competencies but also nurturing what Jones et al. (2024) describe as a “*belief ecology*” – the values, primary belief system, attitudes, perspectives, and identities that shape how children see themselves and understand the world around them. Think Equal supports children in becoming empathetic, self-aware, loving and socially responsible individuals. It recognises children as capable, curious and empowered individuals and offers learning experiences that help them grow confidently, explore widely, understand themselves and their place in the world, have agency, and take responsibility for their actions and behaviours.

In particular, children receive support to:

- Develop emotional intelligence through activities that build emotional literacy and strategies for self-regulation.
- Strengthen social cognition through stories and experiences that enhance understanding of others and interpersonal problem-solving.
- Encourage critical and creative thinking through activities that promote logic, imagination, evidence-based reasoning, and opportunities for reflection.
- Foster empathy, kindness, and perspective-taking through engagement with characters’ journeys and storytelling.
- Equip themselves not only with the what, why, and how of social and emotional learning (SEL), but also the when — enabling real-life application (Zieher et al., 2024).
- Build the confidence and self-esteem to be themselves and explore their identities freely within a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment.
- Become prosocial and productive members of communities, including caring about and acting upon a concern for justice, fairness, and the welfare of others.
- Develop resilience by adopting positive perspectives, the ability to reframe challenges as manageable, and/or opportunities for growth.
- Cultivate a growth mindset by helping them to feel confident in their ability to learn, grow, and overcome obstacles, enabling them to manage frustration, persevere through challenges, and build positive relationships (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

THE ENVIRONMENT AND LEARNING CULTURE

The Think Equal programme recognises the learning environment – both physical and relational – as a vital partner in education, often described as the ‘third teacher’ (Montesori, 2006). Learning environments that are safe, secure, enriching, and characterised by positive relationships are more likely to promote skill development and buffer against the effects of stress and trauma (Osher et al., 2020). Think Equal promotes the creation of responsive, inclusive, equitable and emotionally safe spaces that nurture the whole child. Through the implementation of Think Equal, learning cultures that encourage exploration, creativity, and respect are naturally shaped, helping children develop empathy, agency, and a strong sense of belonging and community.

Specifically, the environment is shaped to:

- **Provide varied learning experiences grounded in narrative** – including the creation, experience, and analysis of stories – linked to broader curriculum areas. These experiences foster experimentation, discovery, metacognition, emotional engagement, and social skills such as collaboration and empathy.
- **Offer meaningful embodied learning opportunities** that incorporate movement, sensory experience, and hands-on exploration to deepen understanding.
- **Support the development of positive relationships** through respectful communication and cooperative interactions among children and between children and educators.
- **Promote imagination, role play, and creativity** as essential foundations for empathy and social learning.
- **Ensure the learning environment reflects values of inclusion, respect, and diversity** – supporting children’s agency, voice, and sense of belonging.
- **Ensure equitable and inclusive education** by providing adaptations and support that make learning accessible and relevant for all children, including English Language Learners, students with special needs, and those who have experienced trauma (Jones et al., 2024).

INTERSECTION: THE EDUCATOR, THE CHILD, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- In the Think Equal programme, the educator, the child, and the environment are deeply interconnected, forming a holistic and values-driven learning community. Each element supports and strengthens the others in fostering inclusive, meaningful, and transformative learning experiences. A respectful learning

culture nurtures educators as role models and supports children's internalisation of core values. Through guided play and time for reflection, children have hands-on, meaningful opportunities to explore and embody key concepts.

Think Equal begins with the child and acknowledges the dispositions, culture, customs, knowledge, and experience the child brings to the learning environment. New Think Equal learning occurs in the context of acknowledgement and respect for the child's experiential, cultural and educational background.

PROGRAMME METHODOLOGY



Figure 1 - The 25 Think Equal Competencies and Skills (Lumgair & Udwin 2016)

Social-Emotional Learning Outcomes

At the core of the Think Equal programme are 25 key social-emotional learning competencies and skills, which are interwoven into and form the bedrock of every learning session, story, and activity, to nurture the whole child. These are:

*Empathy;
collaboration;
self-awareness;
resilience;
emotional literacy;
perspective taking;
self-esteem;
relationship-building
skills;
self-regulation;*

*inclusion;
self-confidence;
kindness;
gender equality;
being an advocate for
others;
problem-solving;
moral and ethical
values;
communication skills;*

*global citizenship;
critical thinking;
peaceful
conflict-resolution;
mindfulness;
environmental
awareness;
creativity;
celebration of diversity;
goal setting*

The Importance of Narrative

The Think Equal Programme is constructed around narrative, harnessing the power of the story as a central catalyst for learning through empathy and relational understanding. Think Equal believes that narrative is a fertile and all-encompassing foundation to effect positive change in the lives of children – on an individual level, and as a result of these individual changes, on a collective level, effecting social cohesion. Stories reflect the child's own culture, and celebrate the diversity of the culture of others. They offer a safe world, which prepares the child to navigate and assimilate the complexities of the real world, and to learn safely about relationships, creating an environment where empathy, critical thinking, perspective-taking, compassion, creativity, inclusion and empowerment can flourish.

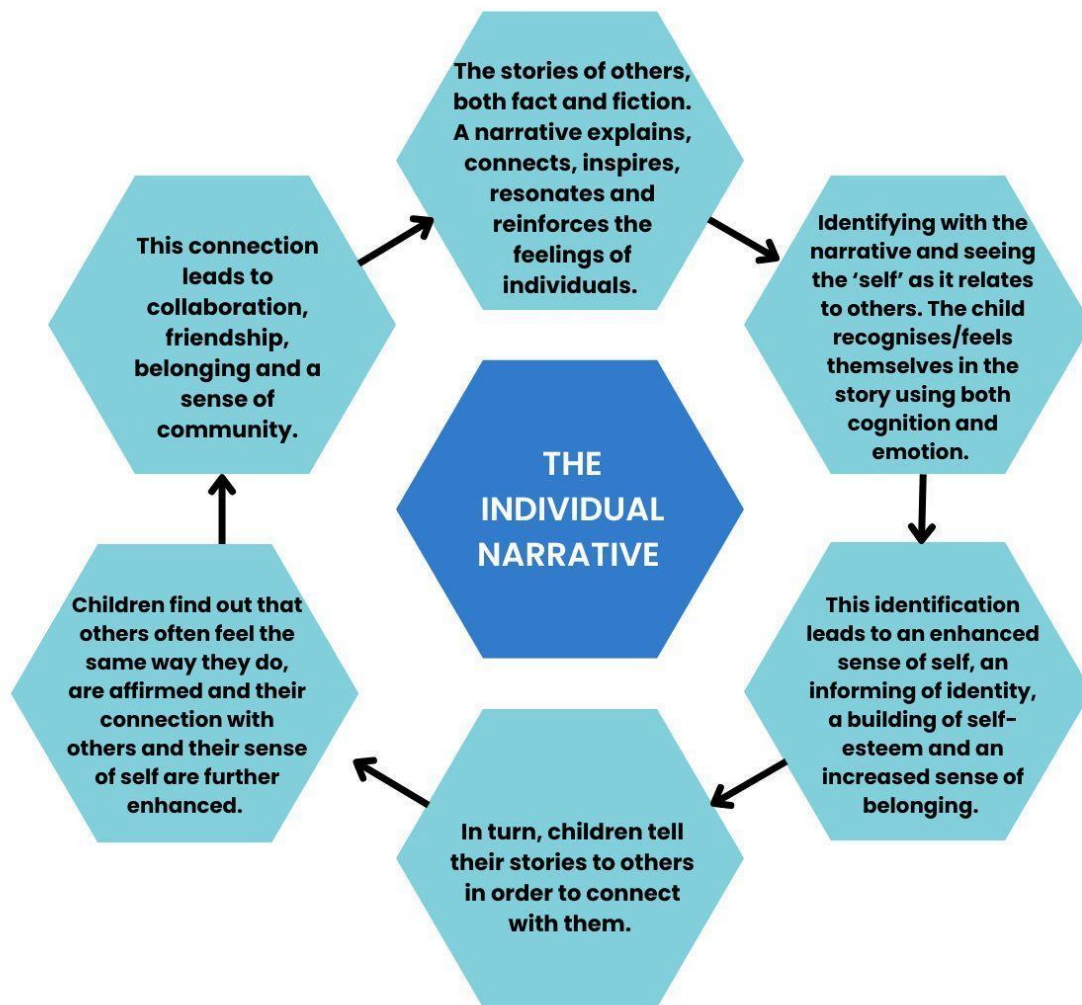


Figure 2 – The Individual Narrative Model (Lovegreen & Lumgair 2016)

The goal of the Think Equal Programme is to meet and embrace children where they are, at the point of their Individual Narratives and, through the competencies and skills they learn and through hopeful new stories, to establish a positive new Collective Narrative within the group (classroom /setting).

The Individual Narrative Model begins with the child and their own story: The Collective Narrative Model reflects Think Equal's aims in microcosm (a new, inclusive, compassionate and responsible society), through story and collaborative learning, to cultivate a positive and hopeful narrative that is shared class-wide and community-wide.

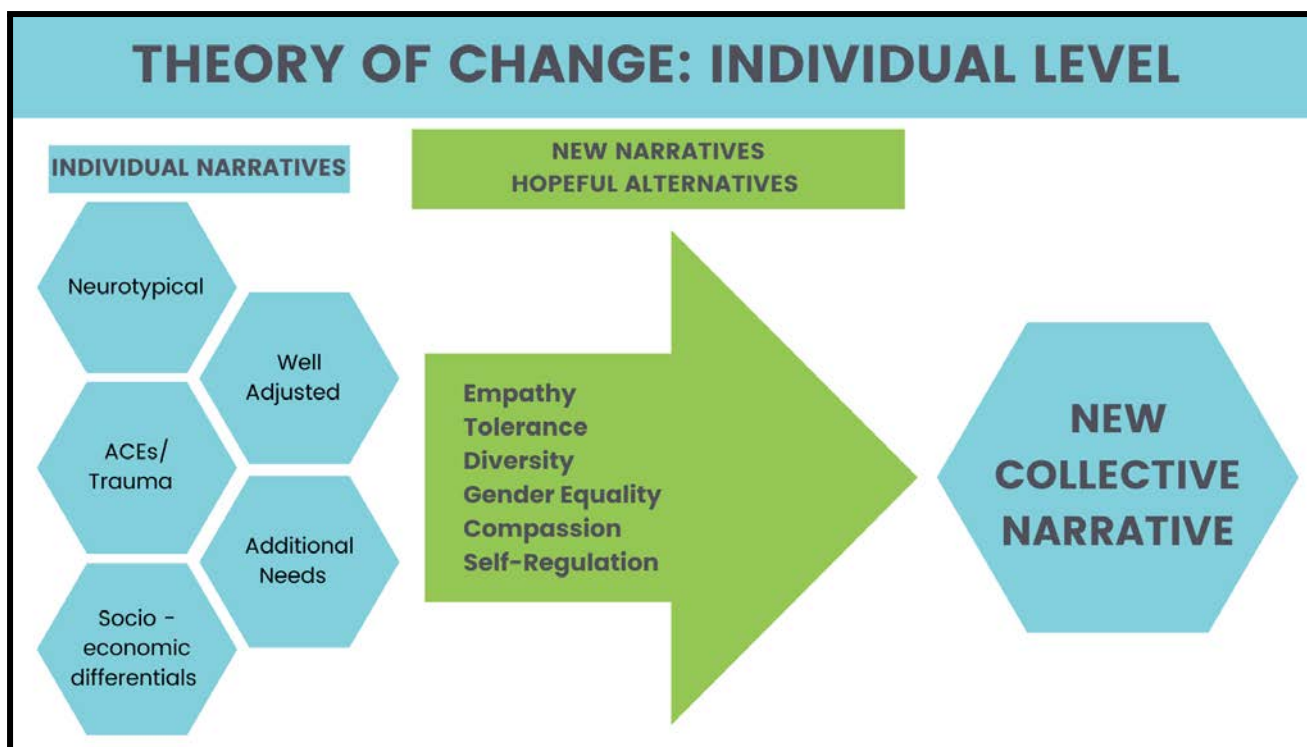


Figure 3 – The Search for a New Collective Narrative – A Model
(Lovegreen Lumgair and Udwin 2016)

Think Equal harnesses the power of stories to:

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- Foster children's understanding of perspectives that differ from their own, and ability to imagine a story through the eyes of multiple characters within it
- Enable children to identify emotions and emotional themes in narratives
- Enable children to identify with the emotional and experiential journey of characters in the story and to empathise with them
- Encourage children to make global connections, honour differences and celebrate similarities
- Enable children to seek alternative endings through collaboration, critical thinking and discussion
- Enable children to reflect on the past, challenge the limitations imposed by it - gender bias, prejudice, racial and/or religious discrimination
- Equip children with newly constructed knowledge to create the future, by beginning to model modified behaviour in order to present an optimistic alternative to their wider community. Children are the agents of social change.

Think Equal proposes that it is through the use of these hopeful narratives which focus on a regulated self, the development of social and emotional learning, and a knowledge of and respect for equal rights, that the individual stories of children will change, and that these children will in turn begin to effect the stories of others in their world, ultimately leading to a positive and concrete change in the collective narrative and consciousness of society.

The Six Core Tenets

The design of the Think Equal curriculum is centred around six core pedagogical tenets, manifested in programme activities, which in turn lead to direct outcomes/competencies. The tenets are as follows:

1. The Child as an Empowered Being

Think Equal considers the child to be 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and children.' (Loris Malaguzzi cited by Penn, 1997).

2. An Active, Constructive Learning Environment

Think Equal considers learning environments as an essential part in the construction of new ideas, and proposes that learning through action and constructing ideas through play (both directed and free play) is an essential teaching tool.

3. The Use of Positive Language

Think Equal considers the use of positive and accurate language to be vital in the establishment of healthy, balanced self- and social-development

4. The Concept of Ubuntu

Think Equal considers humanity towards others and the concept of 'Ubuntu' ('I am the other you and you are the other me and we can only be human together') to be a precept which underpins all other learning, instruction and resources and which links them together.

5. The Process of Narrative

As detailed above, Think Equal considers the process of narrative as central to early years social-emotional learning and social cohesion.

6. Social Cognition

Think Equal ascribes to the idea that children learn in a social context,

and believes that the 'reciprocal relationship between the individual person and the social context' (Blades et al., 2003) as per Lev Vygotsky's model of cognition is the means by which the child 'acquires the 'tools' of thinking and learning.' Social Cognition involves recognising feelings, using humour as a positive tool, hypothesis formation and using empathy to expand on this and move into a more tangible implementation of the programme.

Think Equal's educational content is organised through six 'I Am' precepts, which begin with the child as an empowered being. These child-centred precepts are as follows:

- (1) I Have A Strong Sense Of Who I Am;
- (2) I Am Able To Look After Myself;
- (3) I Am Able To Look After Others;
- (4) I Am Able To Communicate;
- (5) I Am Able To Contribute;
- (6) I Am A Critical Thinker.

Further expanding on these 'I Am' concepts are the subcategories of learning, which can be found listed in each session guide where the concept is addressed.

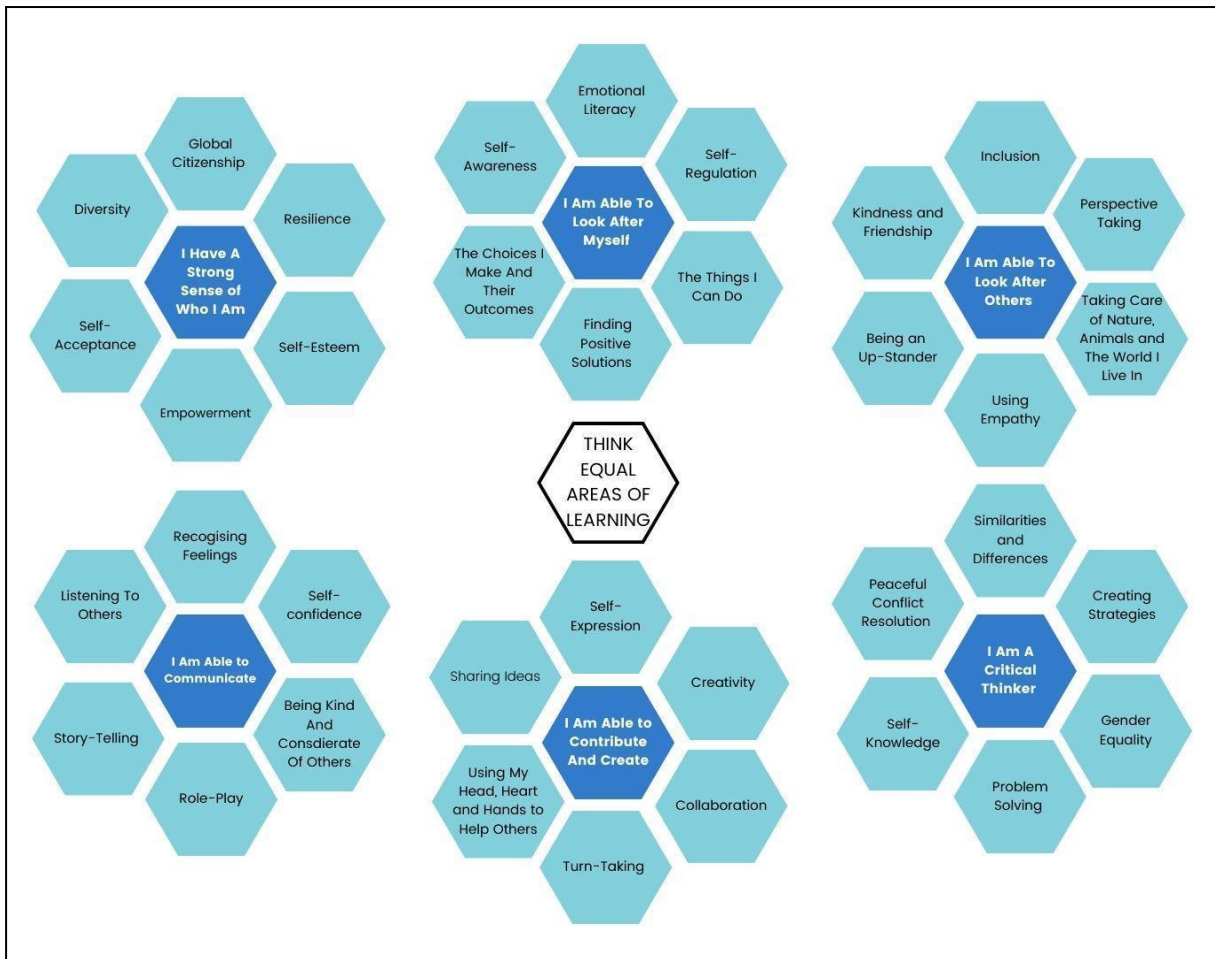


Figure 5 - Think Equal Areas of Learning (2018)

1. **I Have A Strong Sense Of Who I Am** – Global Citizenship – Self-Esteem – Resilience – Empowerment – Self-Acceptance – Diversity
2. **I Am Able To Look After Myself** – The Things I Can Do – Self-Regulation – Emotional Literacy – Self-Awareness – Finding Positive Solutions – The Choices I Make and Their Outcomes – Self Confidence
3. **I Am Able To Look After Others** – Kindness and Friendship – Inclusion – Perspective-Taking – Taking Care of Nature, Animals and the World I Live In (Environmental Stewardship) – Using Empathy – Being an Up-stander for others
4. **I Am Able To Contribute And Create** – Self-Expression – Creativity – Collaboration – Turn-Taking – Sharing Ideas – Using my Head, Heart and Hands to Help others – Environmental Stewardship
5. **I Am A Critical Thinker** – Creating Strategies – Problem-Solving – Self-Awareness – Similarities and Differences – Peaceful

6. **I Am Able To Communicate** – Recognising Feelings – Self-Confidence
– Listening to Others – Role-Play – Story Telling – Being Kind and Considerate of Others

CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Approach for Social and Emotional Learning

Think Equal recognises that education focusing solely on intellectual, academic, and procedural development without explicitly addressing social, emotional and relational growth is inadequate. For this reason, an integrated pedagogical approach accounting for all aspects of development is essential for effective implementation.

- **Collaborative and Cooperative Learning**

Through collaborative and cooperative learning, the social dimensions of education are emphasised and children are encouraged to co-construct knowledge and skills while strengthening relationships and a sense of community. **Collaborative learning** highlights the importance of social interaction and cultural context, offering fluid, learner-directed experiences that foster shared inquiry and the co-construction of understanding.

Cooperative learning, on the other hand, involves more structured roles and interdependence through clearly defined tasks and outcomes (Gillies, 2016). Both approaches offer meaningful opportunities for participation, fostering critical thinking, empathy, communication, and problem-solving (OECD, 2024, Paik et al., 2024).

- **Community-Based Learning**

Community-based learning often fills gaps in formal education by involving communities in the development and delivery of education, fostering empowerment through active participation (Bottiani et al., 2024; Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024; Paik et al., 2024)

- **Contemplative Learning**

Contemplative learning integrates diverse educational traditions, including mindfulness and reflective practices, helping students deepen self-awareness and engage constructively and peacefully with others (Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Roeser, 2016, Weare, 2019).

Think Equal promotes the development and creation of a whole-school ethos to support the success of social-emotional learning and values-based education. This model places the learner at the centre and acknowledges the vital role of all stakeholders – from children, educators, senior leadership, and parents to policy-makers – in shaping and sustaining a child-centred educational environment. Research underscores that such an ethos requires coordinated efforts across all levels of the school community, including leadership, educators, families, and community partners, to create inclusive practices and supportive cultures that extend beyond individual classrooms (Cipriano, Strambler, Naples, et al., 2023, Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024, WERK, 2015)..

Think Equal encourages teaching staff to embody and model key principles that foster a respectful, empowering, and connected learning environment, including:

- **Honour and respect for all** – Honouring and Respecting Ourselves and Others
- **Autonomy and personal power** – Understanding and exercising our own rights and responsibilities, while recognising those of others.
- **Reciprocity and trust** – A collaboration between learning partners that is relational and reflective and that utilises positive factual language and attitudes which empower and encourage the learners – focused on connectedness and sustained, shared thinking.
- **Application** – The constant application of learning to life beyond the classroom through making links to other areas of learning and life

Session Guides

The effectiveness of the programme depends on a well-structured, intentional learning framework delivered through a reliably replicated and consistent format, with session elements carefully designed and aligned to meet the goals of the training.

Each LEVEL of the Think Equal programme learning consists of 90 x 30-minute sessions, designed to be implemented three times per week over the course of a school year (for 30 weeks). Educators are

encouraged to use the session guide as a detailed instructional resource guide for all exercises and activities. The session guides represent the minimum requirements to mediate the desired outcomes to the learner, and to provide the learning even-handedly to all.

Educators who are well trained, confident and comfortable doing so, are encouraged to make the session guides their own by using them as a 'basis' for their own style, extension, and embellishment.

The Think Equal session guide is structured as follows:

- Outcomes
- Resources
- Vocabulary
- Action

Caretakers as Partners

The Think Equal Programme recognises and respects the diversity of family structures, referring to those responsible for the care of the child as caregivers or caretakers, rather than assuming a two-parent household model. Think Equal encourages teachers to work in positive partnerships with caretaker communities, employing open lines of communication and willingness to share and explain any/all teaching strategies, resources and outcomes. Caretakers are acknowledged as the child's first educators and are encouraged to engage collaboratively with the Think Equal programme to support their child's development and learning at home. In doing so, Think Equal promotes cultural reciprocity—valuing the unique knowledge, values, and practices that families bring, and fostering mutual respect between home and school contexts.

Think Equal recognises that caretakers have a significant impact on young children's development. To support this, a range of 10 minute activities and connection and relationship-building exercises have been developed aligned with the weekly classroom learning. Designed to strengthen relationships and reinforce key social and emotional learning themes in the home and wider community environments, Home Kits are shared with the home at the start of each week for caregivers and children to engage in together. There are 5 x 10 minute activities each week based in the classroom learning. Home Kit activities include role-playing, rhymes, singing, creative arts, and play-based learning—all of which have been linked to improvements in children's cognitive, social, and behavioural development

(Baker, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Melhuish, & Taggart, 2014, Li, Tang, & Zheng, 2023, Tetik, Buhl, & Anders, 2021). "Parental engagement has a positive impact on an average of 4 months' additional progress," highlighting the importance of actively involving all caregivers in children's learning (Education Endowment Foundation, July 2021).

Psychosocial Support and Mental Health

Social and Emotional Learning in the Early Years, when deployed using effective evidence-based tools, provides a unique opportunity to shape mindsets (Aksoy & Gresham, 2024, Lawson et al., 2019) and to achieve prevention. It is widely recognised that the brain is 90% developed by the age of five, and that the absorbent brain's neuroplasticity and extreme developmental momentum before the age of 6, is the ideal window of opportunity to co-create mentally healthy neural pathways and establish sustainable and positive thought patterns to prevent mental ill health (as well as other serious psychosocial and societal problems).

Think Equal provides children with a broad choice of tools which enable habits of mind of, or propensity towards, anxiety, anger, aggression, withdrawal, sadness. Each child is thus enabled to choose and 'own' a technique or strategy that best suits them and thereby to prevent the particular challenging habit of mind from becoming a mental health disorder.

Think Equal focuses on teaching positive attitudes, behaviors, and emotional literacy in the Early Years. As Denham (2019) highlights, kindergarten prosocial behavior, including understanding and regulating emotions, is strongly associated with young adult success across education, employment, mental health, and reduced risk of crime and substance use, independent of child, family, and contextual factors. Such early social-emotional competence helps children become more emotionally positive, fosters positive and supportive relationships with peers and teachers, encourages active participation, and supports higher academic achievement throughout early schooling.

A substantial body of scientific research has demonstrated the positive impact of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) on students' mental health (Aksoy & Gresham, 2024, Durlak et al., 2011, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). Cefai, Bartolo, Cavioni, and Downes (2018) found that effective SEL "is related to reduced mental health difficulties in children and young people, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and

antisocial behaviour" (p. 7). Complementing this, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang's neuroscience research underscores that emotion and cognition are deeply intertwined processes in the brain, meaning emotional experiences fundamentally shape learning and memory formation (Immordino-Yang, 2016). This neural integration supports the critical role of SEL in early childhood for developing competencies that lead to healthier cognitive and social outcomes..

Central to this is the **Think Equal programme's core principle** of teaching children how to love, to love themselves and others, as a foundation for emotional wellbeing, empathy, prosocial behaviour and positive life outcomes. This principle recognises the critical early years as a key developmental window to foster kindness, emotional literacy, self-esteem and resilience before harmful patterns become established.

These findings are especially significant given evidence that low self-esteem in childhood can be a strong predictor of serious mental health challenges in adolescence and beyond. For example, McGee and Williams (2000) found that self-esteem levels significantly predicted issues such as problem eating, suicidal thoughts, and multiple health-compromising behaviours. This is particularly concerning in light of current statistics, with suicide being the leading cause of death for men under 50 (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022), and eating disorders causing more loss of life than any other mental health condition. Early, school-based SEL interventions help to develop the self-worth, emotional regulation, and resilience needed to buffer against these outcomes.

Supporting this approach, a Cambridge University study by Zhao and Gibson (2022) shows that children who play well with peers by age three are more likely to enjoy better mental health later in childhood. Gibson explained, "We think this connection exists because through playing with others, children acquire the skills to build strong friendships as they get older. Even if they are at risk of poor mental health, those friendship networks will often get them through" (Zhao & Gibson, 2022).

Through Social and Emotional learning intervention during the early years, mental health disorders are tackled directly in a preventative approach by Think Equal's programme which provides the tools to teach children how to deal reflexively with stress, anger, aggression, anxiety, *depression and other overwhelming negative feelings. Comprehensive and effective tools for children ensure that when these feelings emerge they are controlled and not allowed to develop into negative habits of mind or patterns of emotional behaviour. Self-esteem is also an incredibly important*

health-related competency, not only for the mental health but also the physical wellbeing of children.

Physical Health

There is convincing and mounting evidence highlighting the physical health benefits of SEL, centred around stress related health conditions. The cumulative and lifelong impacts of early experiences of stress, anxiety, aggression, anger, and emotion dysregulation on a child's development and future health, are profound.

While some level of stress is an inevitability in modern life, "toxic stress", a term coined by Jack P. Shonkoff to describe, 'the result of strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive relationship' (Shonkoff, Slopen, & Williams, 2021:116) can have serious long-term health consequences if individuals lack the tools and techniques to process and mitigate it effectively. By addressing and reducing toxic stress, as Shonkoff (2012) emphasized, we can lessen its detrimental health impacts over time, ultimately improving public health outcomes and reducing related healthcare costs.

Jack Shonkoff, Professor of Child Health and Development at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, also stated that many adult diseases 'should be viewed as developmental disorders that begin early in life' (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Just as we know that childhood experiences heavily impact adult mental health, childhood stressors can both cement poor patterns of behaviour and predict physical health conditions associated both with the behavioural results of stress, and stress itself. Tawakol et al (2017) further state that: "Psychosocial stress is ... an important precipitant of morbidity".

Subsequent research by Nelson et al. (2020) has further illustrated how early-life adversity contributes to long-term health outcomes, reinforcing the view that adult diseases often have their origins in childhood conditions. They highlight how factors such as food insecurity and unsafe housing contribute not only to early undernutrition or toxic exposure but also to behavioural and psychological vulnerabilities. These early adversities can lead to the adoption of health-damaging behaviours with long-lasting effects throughout the lifespan.

As Robinson et al. (2017) emphasise, 'Stressors in early childhood can disrupt neurologic, metabolic, and immunologic systems, leading to poorer developmental outcomes'. They argue that consistent, responsive caregiving and integrated, relationship-based interventions during early childhood, when the brain is developing most rapidly, are critical for shaping optimal developmental trajectories and addressing health disparities. Complementing this, longitudinal studies have shown that children who accessed quality early years education have significantly better health in their mid-30s, including lower blood pressure, higher levels of "good" HDL cholesterol, lower body mass indexes and lower chances of obesity and hypertension. Further supporting the case for early intervention, a Duke University study by Richmond-Rakerd et al., (2021) found that social and emotional learning (SEL) in the early years, specifically the development of self-regulation skills around thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, can slow biological ageing. More than four decades later, those who received early SEL showed healthier, biologically younger brains and bodies.

The approach to involve education as a form of preventative healthcare is not simply reserved for mental health but extends to physical well-being as well. According to the Mental Health Foundation, approximately **30% of people with long-term physical health conditions** also have mental health disorders, and individuals with chronic physical illnesses are **two to three times more likely** to experience mental health challenges than the general population (Mental Health Foundation, n.d., Naylor et al., 2012)

Spending on mental health services has risen. In 2021/22, the National Health Service in the UK spent £12 billion on mental health in England - about 8% of its total budget. Most funding went to community and inpatient care, with 8% supporting children and young people. (National Audit Office, UK, 2023). Moreover, the aforementioned expert evidence has shown us the positive impacts of SEL on physical health outcomes, thus reducing public spending, yet this opportunity to prevent ill-health is so often missed.

As confirmed by the British Heart Foundation (2023), people with mental health disorders are at increased risk of heart disease and circulatory problems. This means that tackling mental health preventatively rather than reactively can reduce these risks. The links between stress and cardiovascular disease are significant; Tawakol et al., (2017), describe this risk as having, 'an attributable risk that is on par with that of other major cardiovascular risk factors'. Dimsdale (2008:1244) supports this, describing

stress and stressors as having ‘adverse effects on the heart’, also citing chronic diabetes and even cancer as stress related diseases.

Type 2 Diabetes is also a great strain on national health budgets. Research has linked high levels of stress hormones to impaired insulin production in the pancreas, thereby connecting stress with the onset of Type 2 diabetes. Additionally, dietary behaviour is strongly influenced by stress and emotional dysregulation, with the resulting weight gain *which further contributes to the development* of Type 2 diabetes (Dimsdale, 2008, Tawakol et al., 2017).

Research consistently links Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to long-term health consequences, including significantly increased risks of **diabetes**, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic illnesses in adulthood. This is largely due to the biological disruptions caused by prolonged toxic stress (Felitti et al., 1998; Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Quality early childhood Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs that promote emotional regulation and resilience act as protective buffers. They reduce the physiological impacts of stress, helping to prevent heart disease and other chronic physical conditions later in life, while also supporting mental health. This approach is seldom matched by other interventions (Jones et al., 2020; Center on the Developing Child, 2016).

Evidence of the Impact of the Think Equal Programme

Randomised Control Trials conducted by Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence in Botswana (2018) and Australia (2021), alongside a study by the Inter-American Development Bank in Colombia (2023), demonstrated that children participating in the Think Equal programme showed significantly improved emotional regulation, reduced emotional dysregulation, lower levels of anxiety and withdrawal, greater effortful control, increased sociability, and decreased negative affect. “These effects were reported as extremely large and are further supported by educators’ anecdotal observations”, according to Dr Craig Bailey of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, highlighting the programme’s strong impact on children’s socioemotional development.

By establishing skills such as emotion regulation, self-esteem and empathy, the Think Equal programme provides children with the foundations for healthy and pro-social thought patterns and habits of mind, positive relationships, regulated emotions, and strong self-confidence and self-esteem. All of these are essential tools for individuals to process emotions healthily, overcome negative thought patterns and self-harming or harmful behaviours and attitudes, and maintain good mental health. Further evaluations, including the IPA study of Think Equal in Colombia, and the Australian RCT conducted on Think Equal by Yale University and Federation University, have provided additional quantitative and qualitative evidence of improvements in self-esteem, emotion regulation, and other key socioemotional skills. Educator feedback from these studies also strongly supports the programme's positive impact.

We recommend that the preventive Think Equal intervention be prioritised as a key opportunity to reduce ill-health, social costs and public spending. By giving teachers the necessary tools and training to deliver effective SEL, children's long-term health outcomes will improve and the quality of education and continuing professional development will also be enhanced.

The Early Years represent the key window to establish the long-lasting strategies and behaviours needed for individuals to process emotional, social, and physical stressors, and respond appropriately. By giving teachers the know-how along with the programmatic tools to deliver this essential, high-quality SEL to their cohorts of children, governments are both enabled and empowered to support key early years outcomes – such as promoting children's social-emotional development and fostering communication and language skills – goals that are central to national frameworks and resonate with international early childhood standards. Furthermore, as Nobel Laureate and economist James Heckman has shown, high-quality birth-to-five programmes for children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment through improved outcomes in education, health, social behaviours and employment (Heckman et al., 2017). Many government curriculum frameworks and national standards do recognise the importance of SEL in education, but without giving teachers the resources or training to deliver this essential learning, meaningful progress cannot occur.

Social Costs

A key area in which effective Early Years Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has major impacts, is in reducing costs relating to both health and social outcomes by helping to lessen discriminatory mindsets, anti social attitudes, emotional dysregulation, and lack of empathy – all of which are precursors to antisocial behaviour and violence, often leading to direct negative physical and mental health outcomes for victims. Discriminatory beliefs, often established through early lived experiences and / or passed down generationally and cyclically by parents, not only result in an individual's unequal treatment of others, but can also, in some cases, motivate acts of aggression and violence.

Recent research by Chetty et al. (2022) highlights the critical role of social capital, particularly economic connectedness, or friendships between people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as one of the strongest predictors of upward economic mobility. This study found that if children from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds were raised in areas with levels of cross-SES connectedness similar to their high-SES peers, their incomes in adulthood would increase by an average of 20%. Such findings underscore the societal value of interventions that cultivate inclusive, empathetic social networks from an early age.

Effective SEL in the early years directly contributes to this kind of social cohesion. Programmes that focus on empathy, peaceful conflict resolution, equality, global citizenship, gender, racial and social justice (such as Think Equal), can disrupt the development of discriminatory mindsets and replace negative outlooks towards certain groups with respect and empathy, visible in the classroom and beyond. These foundational skills help build the emotional and relational framework needed for inclusive communities, healthier interpersonal relationships, and ultimately more equitable societies.

Research consistently demonstrates that empathy plays a crucial role in reducing antisocial behaviors and aggression. Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) highlighted that individuals with greater empathic ability are less likely to engage in delinquent acts, emphasizing the protective role empathy plays against crime and violence. More recently, Ritchie et al. (2022) conducted a large meta-analysis examining youth aggression and confirmed these findings, showing that low empathy, especially when combined with 'callous-unemotional traits', strongly predicts aggressive and antisocial behavior. This underscores the importance of early Social and Emotional

Learning (SEL) programs that cultivate empathy and emotional regulation to prevent the development of violent and antisocial tendencies.

SEL also develops a child's emotional literacy, self-regulation and emotion awareness. Garofalo, Neumann, & Velotti (2020) found that difficulties in emotion regulation are strongly linked to aggressive and violent behavior. Their research highlights emotion dysregulation as a key factor underlying aggression. Consequently, interventions aimed at reducing violence should focus on improving emotional regulation skills.

Despite all of this, teachers do not receive the necessary training to effectively deliver classroom-based Social and Emotional Learning. Without the skills and resources, we cannot expect overstretched Early Years educators to deliver this essential learning effectively. By training educators and giving them the tools to establish competencies and skills including respect, empathy, emotion regulation, self-esteem, and awareness of racial, religious and gender equality in children, while the brain is still developing, SEL holds great power in preventing anti-social attitudes and criminal behaviour. Social and Emotional Learning thus holds a key opportunity to both prevent the damaging mental and physical impacts of crime upon individuals, and also, in turn, to reduce the costs associated with these crimes.

While policies supporting SEL have increased, Skoog-Hoffman et al. (2022) found that gaps remain in educators' access to training and resources necessary for effective implementation. Their nationwide survey in the U.S. highlights that, despite growing adoption of SEL curricula, many teachers and principals report challenges in delivering high-quality SEL instruction due to insufficient professional development, lack of resources, and inconsistent policy enforcement. These findings underscore the urgent need to equip Early Years educators with both the tools and training essential in order to maximise the impact of Social Emotional Learning in early childhood settings.

CONCLUSION

Enabling Positive Outcomes for Children In The 21st Century and Beyond

In conclusion, Think Equal proposes that we shift the focus of early childhood education towards nurturing character, empathy, and emotional intelligence –foundational skills that shape not only well-being, but also academic and life outcomes. As Nobel Laureate James Heckman has shown, investing in high-quality early years programmes yields substantial long-term returns across education, health, and social behaviour. Furthermore, as highlighted earlier with Immordino-Yang’s neuroscientific research, emotions are not obstacles to learning—they are integral to it. Children learn deeply through their feelings, relationships, and sense of belonging.

This speaks directly to the ethos of Think Equal, captured eloquently by Kuhn (1997):

‘The desire to share knowledge with another human being is a fundamental one. It is at heart a desire to make your thoughts known to the other and to learn whether they are understood, even shared– always with the chance that ‘I will mean more than I meant before because of the way the other has understood what I have said’. The process is one that truly works from both the inside out and the outside in, as we each become different persons through our interaction with one another’ (p. 258).

It is through fostering this understanding that meaningful, measurable gains will be made across the board across children’s well-being, their relationships, and their capacity to succeed academically and socially.

By training and equipping early years teachers – ***and providing them with the necessary resources*** – to deliver this vital learning, Think Equal changes lives. Through Social and Emotional Learning, children learn to value themselves and others, shaping their decisions, their futures, and the fabric of the societies they become part of.

For further information on studies supporting this, please refer to Think Equal (contact@thinkequal.org).

The Think Equal programme has been recognised by the UN Transforming Education Summit (2022) as a Best Practice in early childhood education. It has also received the WISE Education Award and the HundrED Innovation in Education Award, and was identified by ICBF (Colombia’s Early Childhood Department) as one of the most effective early childhood interventions in Colombia. In Australia, the Think Equal programme is one of only four top-rated programs in all four categories by Australia’s Beyond Blue programme (chaired by ex-PM Julia Gillard), offered to preschools throughout the country as programmes on which

they can use government grants. Also in Australia, the mental health and well-being initiative of the Australian government for Victoria has accepted think equal as best practice. In Lithuania Think Equal has been approved as a Prevention Programme which kindergartens can use government grants to access.

Think Equal's Founder, Leslee Udwin, has been awarded the Anna Lindh Human Rights Prize by the Swedish Parliament, the Gandhi Foundation International Peace Prize, the UN Association USA Global Citizen Award; the UN Women for Peace Activist Award and was named by the NY Times the second most impactful woman of 2016, after Hilary Clinton.

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