



Research on the Application and Effectiveness of Social and Emotional Learning in Chinese Education

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Abstract. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained global prominence as a critical component of holistic education, yet its integration within China's historically exam-oriented system remains nascent. This study examines the current state of SEL implementation in Chinese education, focusing on policy frameworks, practical applications, and systemic challenges. While national reforms, such as the *National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010–2020)* and the *China Education Development Outline (2016–2020)*, have institutionalized SEL as a strategic priority, disparities persist between urban and rural regions. Urban schools in cities like Beijing and Shanghai have pioneered SEL through specialized courses, extracurricular activities, and psychological counseling, supported by OECD survey data highlighting Chinese primary students' strong SEL competencies. However, secondary students lag in emotional regulation, reflecting systemic issues such as resource gaps, insufficient teacher training, and persistent academic pressures that marginalize SEL. The study identifies limited program depth, underutilized counseling resources, and educators' misperceptions of SEL as moral indoctrination rather than skill development. To address these challenges, the paper proposes multi-level solutions: strengthening policy enforcement, integrating SEL into evaluation systems, enhancing teacher professionalism through targeted training, and fostering school-family-community collaboration. Findings underscore the urgency of balancing academic rigor with socio-emotional development to cultivate resilient, well-rounded learners, advocating for systemic reforms to ensure equitable SEL access across China's diverse educational landscape.

Keywords: SEL, mental health, Chinese education.

1 Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a crucial component of educational reform worldwide, with growing recognition of its importance in shaping well-rounded individuals who can manage emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. In China, the importance of SEL has gained significant attention in recent years, primarily driven by the shift from a performance-based education system to one that values comprehensive student development. Historically, the

Chinese educational system has placed an overwhelming emphasis on academic achievement, which has often come at the expense of students' emotional and social well-being. The increasing mental health challenges faced by adolescents have underscored the need for a more balanced approach that nurtures both academic and socio-emotional growth. The Chinese government has acknowledged this gap in its educational policies, and since the release of the *National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020)*, there has been a deliberate push to integrate SEL into the curriculum. The *China Education Development Outline (2016-2020)* further emphasizes the importance of fostering emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills [1].

Despite this growing recognition, the application of SEL in China remains in its nascent stages. While some urban schools in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai have begun to implement SEL-focused programs, rural schools and less-developed regions continue to face challenges in incorporating SEL due to resource limitations. Additionally, even in cities where resources are more readily available, academic pressures often overshadow SEL initiatives, leading to superficial engagement with emotional education. This paper explores the current state of SEL in Chinese education, examining both its practical applications and the challenges that hinder its effective integration. It will also discuss potential solutions to enhance the impact of SEL, focusing on policy, teacher training, and community collaboration.

2 The Current Application of Social and Emotional Learning in Chinese Education

Social and Emotional Learning, abbreviated as SEL, refers to the process through which students learn to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, build and maintain healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions. However, the prevailing education system in China has been criticized by many due to excessive emphasis on students' performance in main subjects, and the increasing rate of psychological problems among teenagers also calls for emphasis on SEL [2]. In recent years, with the updating of educational concepts and the promotion of quality education, the application of SEL in the Chinese education system has gradually gained attention.

2.1 Policy and Theoretical Support

Since the release of the *National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020)*, China has increasingly supported quality education which focuses more on the comprehensive development of students. Social and emotional learning has been incorporated into one of the strategic goals of educational reform, playing a key role in fostering students' overall development [3]. More recently, the *China Education Development Outline (2016-2020)* also emphasizes the importance of enhancing comprehensive student development, including emotional and social skills [1]. These policy supports provide a strong foundation for the implementation of SEL.

2.2 Practical Application

The good news is, nowadays, many schools have begun to incorporate SEL into daily educational activities, especially in large and medium-sized cities. SEL is increasingly becoming an integral part of students' overall education. Some schools in Beijing and Shanghai have introduced special emotional education courses, organized extracurricular activities, and collaborated with psychological experts to improve students' interpersonal and emotional regulation skills [4]. Some normal practices in China are Ideology and Morality course in primary school, and Morality and Rule of Law course in secondary school. There are also many schools set psychological counseling room for students who suffer from mental problems. Additionally, some schools have worked with professionals in psychology to design and implement emotional learning workshops, helping students enhance key skills such as emotional regulation and empathy [5].

In the context of Chinese education, the cultural environment of a school and the social networks within it play an essential role in students' emotional and social development, in addition to their academic achievements. With the continuous reform of education, the focus has gradually shifted from purely academic performance to fostering students' overall well-being, which includes SEL. In most schools in China, all the classes are required to post blackboard newspaper monthly according to a certain topic. Many schools also emphasize collective values and teamwork. Schools often organize a variety of cultural activities, such as sports events, art performances, and community service projects, to foster a sense of belonging and team spirit. This type of cultural environment not only helps students develop good social habits but also contributes to their emotional well-being.

Additionally, with the widespread use of social media and digital platforms, the school's social network has become increasingly important. In China, tools like WeChat and QQ are commonly used by students for daily communication. These platforms offer students broader avenues for socializing and expanding their social circles. However, they also expose students to potential risks such as online bullying and misinformation. Guiding students to maintain positive online behaviors and healthy relationships in these digital environments has become a critical task for educators. Some primary and secondary schools also have home visit tasks for teachers in order to keep in touch with parents and ensure that the home education doesn't go wrong.

In 2019, the OECD carried out the first Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES), an evaluation project targeting on SES of teenagers worldwide, and Suzhou had participated in the project on behalf of China. According to the data published by the OECD in 2021, primary school students in China perform surprisingly well. Among 15 items of the five dimensions (Task Competence, Emotional Regulation Skills, Collaboration Skills, Openness Skills and Interpersonal Skills), primary school students in China rank the first in 10 items, and rank in the first half in the other 5 items. Among secondary and high school students, Chinese students' performance was not as well as their counterparts in other countries especially for anti-pressure ability [6, 7].

3 Problems in the Application of Social and Emotional Learning in Chinese Education

Despite the initial application of SEL in China, there are still some challenges that hinder its wider and deeper implementation. Based on most Chinese students' personal experience, they lack emotional care and SEL in most of their school life, especially when they go up into middle and high school. Meanwhile, junior and high schools that have good reputations in their enrollment seem to be more likely to have severe ignorance of the social and emotional abilities of students.

3.1 Limited Scope and Depth of Application

The scope and depth of SEL in China remain limited. In some underdeveloped areas, many schools have not introduced such courses and lack the necessary resources to implement this educational content. In some rural schools in western areas of China, due to a lack of educational resources, SEL is often not included in the curriculum or is only offered in a superficial, optional form [8]. In urban areas, though there are more abundant resources and infrastructures, the situation is not any better than in rural areas or even worse as school, family and even students themselves regard the score on their paper as the most significant thing and rarely pay attention to Social Emotional Skills. Therefore, in cities where SEL courses are available, these programs are often limited to surface-level activities and lack systematic course design and in-depth practical activities. A normal phenomenon is that most of the psychological counselling rooms in schools are left unused, what's worse, only very few of the students are aware that they have such a place in the school. This can be reasonable as professional psychologists are rather expensive to hire, and after all, students with mental issues are only a minor group. Managers may regard the counselling room as something unworthy. Furthermore, due to the extreme priority of scores, it's common in Chinese schools that teachers of main subjects occupy SEL classes like Ideology and Morality and use make supernumerary exercises for students. As a result, students' social-emotional skills are not fully developed.

3.2 Insufficient Teacher Professionalism and Resources

The lack of teacher professionalism and insufficient resources for SEL are also significant problems. Many teachers in China currently have not received systematic training in SEL, lacking the theoretical foundation and practical experience required to implement SEL effectively. Research shows that teachers have varying levels of understanding and awareness of emotional education, with many viewing it as a form of moral education rather than a systematic and scientific educational model [5]. Most of them only focus on expertise in their teaching subjects, and totally drop the responsibility of teaching students how to get along well with themselves and others. Or even worse, some teachers have never been aware that students need to be listened to and understood, and teachers are responsible for respect, care and trust. They themselves have

bad performance in Social and Emotional Skills and may convey negative effects on their students, this can be a great harm and lead to serious consequences. Moreover, in some schools, schedules are terribly organized and students are put in a highly tense environment, making it difficult to effectively implement SEL in students' daily learning.

4 Feasible Solutions

In order to further promote the development of SEL in Chinese education, a series of targeted measures need to be taken to address the existing problems. Based on the existing efforts of promoting SEL in China and current challenges, the adjustments should fall on the following three aspects: Institutional measures, selection and training of teachers, and the collaboration of the whole society.

4.1 Policy and Institutional Measures

The government should further improve policies related to SEL and incorporate SEL into the education evaluation system. The Ministry of Education could issue specific guidelines that outline the standards, methods, and evaluation mechanisms for SEL [4]. Additionally, more local governments and schools should be encouraged to explore and implement SEL in educational reform, developing replicable and scalable models. The key for the government to play a role is to strengthen supervision and guarantee that all the policies are carried out completely and not only ideas on paper. The foundation of all is that the government must be aware of the importance of SEL and the urgency of caring for students' mental health. Policy supports and financial allocations could be used to encourage primary and secondary schools to organize more SEL activities both inside and outside the classroom.

4.2 Teacher Training and Selection

To address the issue of insufficient teacher expertise, education authorities should formulate stricter and more comprehensive criteria of selecting teachers and enhance teacher training Ideology and Morality in SEL. This could include organizing regular training sessions, workshops, and academic seminars to improve teachers' knowledge and skills in emotional education. Teachers should also be encouraged to participate in research and academic exchanges in the field of SEL, which will foster their professional growth [5].

Additionally, teacher selection should not only focus on the expertise and knowledge of certain subjects. As adults who students spend most of their time with except their parents, teachers' personalities will undoubtedly have some influences on students' campus life. As the saying goes, "Students learn more from who you are than what you teach." A teacher who really cares and with a healthy and strong personality can not only impart knowledge in classes, but also play as a role model to tell students how to

deal with problems other than science or arts in their life. It is of great significance for teachers to pay more attention to their role of guiding students in their early years.

4.3 Collaboration Between Schools and Families, and Social Support

Collaboration between schools and families is crucial for the successful implementation of SEL. Emotional support and involvement of parents play a protective role in the mental health of adolescents, and the family atmosphere has a gigantic impact on children's mental health [9]. Schools should organize parent education activities such as parent schools and open house events to raise parents' awareness of SEL and its importance. Parents can not only provide emotional support at home but also collaborate with schools to organize SEL activities [8]. With the syncretic model of coordination among school, family and community, students' attitude of active learning and behavior can be easier to cultivated, and in addition, the monitor role of parents and the community can lighten the burden of teacher by giving genuine and reliable feedback of condition about whether students have developed well mentally [10]. Furthermore, social organizations and enterprises should be actively involved in supporting SEL, contributing resources such as donations and educational materials.

5 Conclusion

The integration of SEL into Chinese education represents a significant step toward addressing the emotional and psychological needs of students. As the Chinese education system transitions from an academic-centric approach to one that values holistic development, SEL has the potential to play a pivotal role in fostering emotional well-being and social competence among students. The implementation of SEL is in its early stages, but the positive momentum generated by educational reforms such as the *National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020)* provides a strong foundation for future growth. The incorporation of SEL into national policy has encouraged many schools, especially in large cities, to begin integrating SEL principles into their daily activities. Urban schools, such as those in Beijing and Shanghai, have made notable strides by incorporating special emotional education courses, extracurricular activities, and collaborations with psychological experts.

However, there are significant barriers to the widespread and in-depth implementation of SEL, particularly in rural areas and under-resourced schools. In many cases, SEL remains a peripheral concern, with schools focusing more on academic performance than on emotional and social development. Even in urban areas with more resources, SEL programs are often limited to surface-level activities that lack systematic course design or meaningful engagement. One of the key challenges identified in this study is the insufficient training and professionalism of teachers in the area of SEL. Many educators lack the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement SEL, which limits the potential impact of these programs. This issue is exacerbated by the

fact that many teachers view SEL as a form of moral education rather than a scientifically grounded, systematic approach to student development.

Moreover, the intense pressure to perform academically, coupled with a lack of awareness regarding the importance of social-emotional skills, often leads to neglect of SEL initiatives. The lack of comprehensive and sustained support for SEL programs further weakens their impact. Psychological counseling services, for instance, are often underutilized, and SEL classes are sometimes used as supplementary academic sessions rather than as spaces for emotional growth. To address these challenges, this paper proposes several solutions, including policy improvements, more rigorous teacher training, and increased collaboration between schools, families, and the broader community.

Policy and institutional measures are crucial in providing a supportive framework for the expansion of SEL programs. The Chinese government must ensure that SEL is not only a concept enshrined in national guidelines but also a practice that is rigorously implemented in schools across the country. Providing financial support, resources, and supervision will be essential for ensuring that SEL programs are carried out effectively and sustainably. Teacher training and professional development must also be prioritized to equip educators with the skills needed to teach SEL. This training should be integrated into teacher education programs and should include both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies for fostering social-emotional skills in students. Additionally, teacher selection should prioritize not only academic expertise but also qualities such as empathy, communication, and emotional intelligence, which are essential for nurturing students' socio-emotional growth.

Finally, collaboration between schools, families, and social organizations is critical to creating a supportive environment for SEL. Parents play a crucial role in reinforcing the social-emotional skills learned at school, and their involvement in SEL activities can provide a strong foundation for students' emotional development. Schools should actively engage with parents through educational activities and workshops to raise awareness about the importance of SEL. Moreover, the involvement of social organizations and businesses can help provide the necessary resources and support for SEL initiatives.

In conclusion, while the application of Social and Emotional Learning in China has made some progress, there is still much work to be done to ensure that all students, regardless of their geographic location or socio-economic background, have access to quality SEL programs. The challenges identified in this paper must be addressed through comprehensive policy reforms, teacher training, and community collaboration. By doing so, China can build a more balanced educational system that fosters not only academic excellence but also emotional well-being, ultimately contributing to the development of well-rounded, resilient individuals capable of thriving in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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