



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN CHINESE BASIC EDUCATION: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF POLICIES, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

APRENDIZAJE SOCIOEMOCIONAL EN LA EDUCACIÓN BÁSICA CHINA: REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA SOBRE POLÍTICAS, IMPLEMENTACIÓN Y RESULTADOS EDUCATIVOS

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ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become one of the most influential approaches for promoting holistic student development in primary and secondary education over the past three decades. In China, the progressive implementation of the quality education policy (*suzhi jiaoyu*) has strengthened the integration of students' social, emotional, and moral development as a complementary component of academic achievement. This systematic review examines empirical studies, educational policy documents, and theoretical research published between 2000 and 2024 on the development of social-emotional competencies in Chinese primary and secondary schools. The evidence is organized into four thematic areas: (1) the theoretical foundations and conceptual evolution of social-emotional learning; (2) school implementation strategies and curricular models; (3) effects on academic achievement, behavior, and mental health; and (4) challenges related to educational equity and the broader sociopolitical context. The findings indicate that the national Core Competencies for Student Development framework has become the primary policy reference for integrating social-emotional learning objectives into basic education. Furthermore, evidence-based intervention programs implemented with high quality consistently improve students' academic achievement, prosocial behavior, and psychological

well-being. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain regarding the standardization of assessment instruments, the cultural adaptation of interventions, and the establishment of sustainable policies to support their long-term implementation. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies, the examination of causal mechanisms, and the development of culturally responsive social-emotional learning models that promote educational equity across the diverse educational contexts of China.

Keywords:

Social-emotional learning, Academic achievement, Educational equity, Quality education, Mental health education.

RESUMEN

El aprendizaje socioemocional (ASE) se ha consolidado como uno de los enfoques más influyentes para promover el desarrollo integral en la educación primaria y secundaria durante las últimas tres décadas. En China, la progresiva implementación de la política de educación de calidad (*suzhi jiaoyu*) ha fortalecido la incorporación del desarrollo emocional, social y moral del estudiantado como un componente complementario del rendimiento académico. Esta revisión sistemática analiza investigaciones empíricas, documentos de política educativa y



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estudios teóricos publicados entre 2000 y 2024 sobre el desarrollo de competencias socioemocionales en las escuelas primarias y secundarias chinas. La evidencia se organiza en cuatro ejes temáticos: (1) fundamentos teóricos y evolución conceptual del aprendizaje socioemocional; (2) estrategias de implementación escolar y modelos curriculares; (3) efectos sobre el rendimiento académico, el comportamiento y la salud mental; y (4) desafíos relacionados con la equidad educativa y el contexto sociopolítico. Los hallazgos muestran que el marco nacional de Competencias Centrales para el Desarrollo del Estudiante se ha consolidado como la principal referencia para integrar objetivos afines al aprendizaje socioemocional en la educación básica. Asimismo, los programas de intervención implementados con criterios de calidad y respaldados por evidencia científica producen mejoras consistentes en el rendimiento académico, las conductas prosociales y el bienestar psicológico de los estudiantes. No obstante, persisten importantes desafíos relacionados con la estandarización de los instrumentos de evaluación, la adaptación cultural de las intervenciones y la consolidación de políticas sostenibles para su implementación. Se concluye que las investigaciones futuras deberían priorizar estudios longitudinales, el análisis de mecanismos causales y el diseño de modelos de aprendizaje socioemocional culturalmente pertinentes y orientados a fortalecer la equidad en los diversos contextos educativos de China.

Palabras clave:

Aprendizaje socioemocional, Rendimiento académico, Equidad educativa, Educación de calidad, Educación en salud mental.

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as one of the most influential educational paradigms of the twenty-first century because it promotes the comprehensive development of students by integrating cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal competencies. Beyond improving academic performance, SEL seeks to strengthen emotional regulation, empathy, resilience, responsible decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving, thereby preparing students to navigate increasingly complex social, cultural, and technological environments. International organizations and educational systems worldwide have progressively recognized that educational quality cannot be assessed exclusively through standardized academic achievement but must also encompass students' psychological well-being, social adjustment, and capacity to participate constructively in society.

This shift reflects broader transformations in educational philosophy, where the traditional emphasis on knowledge

transmission has gradually expanded toward competency-based education that values the holistic development of learners. Contemporary educational systems increasingly acknowledge that emotional competencies are not merely complementary to academic learning but constitute essential conditions for effective learning processes, positive classroom climates, and lifelong personal development. Consequently, schools have become responsible not only for intellectual instruction but also for cultivating the emotional and social capacities that enable students to succeed academically while maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being.

The growing international interest in SEL has been supported by an extensive body of empirical evidence demonstrating its educational effectiveness. Numerous studies have shown that well-designed SEL interventions contribute to improvements in academic achievement, emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, school engagement, and mental health while simultaneously reducing behavioral problems and emotional distress. These findings have encouraged governments, policymakers, and educational institutions to incorporate social and emotional competencies into national curricula, educational standards, and teacher training programs, positioning SEL as an essential component of educational reform rather than an optional complement to traditional instruction.

Recent educational research has further expanded the conceptualization of SEL by emphasizing the dynamic interaction between emotional development, digital learning environments, collaborative pedagogies, and students' adaptive capacities. In particular, emotional competencies are increasingly understood as developmental processes shaped by instructional practices, classroom interactions, institutional cultures, and technological contexts. This broader perspective recognizes that effective emotional education requires learning environments capable of fostering reflection, communication, empathy, and meaningful social participation rather than isolated interventions focused exclusively on individual behavior.

Within this evolving landscape, emotional intelligence continues to provide one of the principal theoretical foundations for SEL. Emotional intelligence describes the ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and appropriately express emotions while using emotional information to facilitate thinking, learning, and interpersonal interaction. Rather than representing an innate characteristic, emotional competencies are widely recognized as learnable skills that can be systematically developed through educational experiences designed to encourage self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and cooperative learning. This perspective has considerably influenced curriculum design and classroom practice across different educational systems.

Recent contributions have reinforced this developmental perspective by demonstrating innovative approaches for strengthening emotional competencies through active learning methodologies. Lugo-Martínez (2025), for example, showed that simulation-based learning significantly enhances emotional intelligence among primary school students by promoting experiential learning, emotional reflection, collaborative interaction, and problem-solving in authentic educational situations. These findings support the growing consensus that emotionally meaningful learning experiences facilitate both cognitive development and emotional competence, strengthening the integration between academic instruction and social-emotional growth.

Similarly, the rapid digital transformation of education has introduced new opportunities and challenges for emotional development. Although digital environments facilitate access to information, collaborative learning, and technological innovation, they also require students to develop emotional regulation, digital empathy, resilience, and responsible online behavior. Addressing these challenges, Montañez-Huancaya de Salinas et al. (2025) propose the concept of emotional ecology, emphasizing that emotional learning within digital educational environments depends upon the continuous interaction between individual competencies, technological resources, institutional practices, and social relationships. Their work highlights that emotional well-being has become an indispensable dimension of educational quality within contemporary digital ecosystems.

These developments have encouraged researchers to move beyond viewing SEL as a collection of isolated psychological skills toward understanding it as a multi-dimensional educational framework that integrates cognitive, emotional, ethical, cultural, and social dimensions of learning. Consequently, current research increasingly examines how educational policies, institutional cultures, pedagogical strategies, and sociocultural contexts collectively shape the implementation and effectiveness of SEL initiatives.

China provides a particularly compelling context for examining these developments because its educational system reflects the coexistence of longstanding cultural traditions and contemporary educational reforms. For decades, Chinese basic education has been characterized by a strong emphasis on academic excellence, high-stakes examinations, and meritocratic competition, particularly through the National College Entrance Examination (gaokao). This examination-oriented system has historically prioritized measurable academic outcomes, generating remarkable educational achievements while simultaneously raising concerns regarding excessive academic pressure, psychological stress, and the limited attention

traditionally devoted to students' emotional and social development.

Nevertheless, Chinese educational philosophy has never regarded intellectual achievement as the sole purpose of schooling. Rooted in Confucian educational thought, Chinese education has consistently emphasized the cultivation of moral character, harmonious interpersonal relationships, collective responsibility, and ethical self-improvement. Values such as benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), and propriety (li) have historically framed education as a lifelong process of personal cultivation in which emotional maturity, moral responsibility, and social harmony are inseparable from intellectual development. Consequently, many contemporary scholars argue that SEL does not represent an entirely foreign educational model but rather resonates with deeply embedded Chinese educational traditions.

The convergence between traditional educational philosophy and contemporary educational reform has become increasingly visible during the past decade. Recognizing the need to prepare students for the social and economic demands of the twenty-first century, Chinese educational authorities have progressively expanded the objectives of compulsory education beyond academic excellence to include students' emotional well-being, psychological resilience, moral responsibility, creativity, and social participation. This evolution reflects a broader transition from content-oriented instruction toward competency-based education that seeks to cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of adapting to rapidly changing social realities.

A major milestone in this transformation was the publication of the Chinese Student Development Core Competencies Framework by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2016). The framework established a comprehensive vision of student development organized around three overarching dimensions—Cultural Foundation, Autonomous Development, and Social Participation—which together encompass multiple competencies related to healthy living, responsibility, innovation, lifelong learning, and civic engagement. Although the framework does not explicitly employ the terminology of social-emotional learning as commonly used in Western educational literature, many of its competencies correspond directly to internationally recognized SEL domains, including self-awareness, emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, responsible decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving.

The institutionalization of these competencies has stimulated a growing body of research examining how SEL-related principles can be integrated into classroom instruction, teacher education, school leadership, and educational policy. Chinese scholars have increasingly

investigated the effectiveness of instructional approaches that combine emotional development with active learning, moral education, cooperative activities, psychological support services, and interdisciplinary teaching strategies. Rather than treating emotional education as a separate curricular component, recent research emphasizes its integration across multiple subject areas and everyday educational practices.

Simultaneously, concerns regarding student mental health have become increasingly prominent within Chinese educational discourse. Rapid socioeconomic transformation, intense academic competition, urbanization, family structure changes, and the educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, academic stress, emotional exhaustion, and psychological vulnerability among children and adolescents. These challenges have reinforced the perception that schools must provide learning environments capable of supporting not only academic success but also emotional resilience, psychological well-being, and healthy social relationships.

In response, national educational policies have progressively strengthened the role of mental health education, psychological counseling, and moral development within compulsory education. Schools have expanded counseling services, teacher training initiatives, and preventive programs designed to improve students' emotional adjustment while reducing behavioral and psychological risks. Consequently, SEL has become closely associated with broader educational goals related to healthy development, educational equity, and sustainable human development.

Despite these significant advances, the implementation of SEL within the Chinese educational system remains characterized by important challenges and unresolved tensions. Perhaps the most significant derives from the enduring influence of the examination-oriented culture centered on the gaokao. Although educational reforms increasingly advocate holistic student development, academic performance continues to dominate school evaluation systems, parental expectations, and institutional priorities. As a result, teachers frequently encounter competing demands between preparing students for high-stakes examinations and dedicating instructional time to activities that foster emotional competence, interpersonal skills, and psychological well-being.

Additional challenges concern the cultural adaptation of SEL frameworks originally developed in Western contexts. Although substantial conceptual overlap exists between international SEL models and traditional Chinese educational values, scholars continue to debate how emotional competencies should be interpreted, measured, and

implemented within China's unique cultural, political, and institutional environment. Questions remain regarding the extent to which imported theoretical models adequately capture Chinese conceptions of morality, collective responsibility, social harmony, and civic identity. These debates underscore the importance of developing culturally responsive approaches that respect indigenous educational traditions while incorporating internationally recognized evidence-based practices.

Methodological limitations further complicate the existing body of literature. Previous studies have employed diverse conceptual definitions, heterogeneous measurement instruments, varying intervention designs, and inconsistent evaluation procedures, making direct comparisons across studies difficult. Moreover, much of the available research has concentrated on evaluating specific interventions or localized educational experiences, whereas fewer studies have synthesized the broader policy landscape, theoretical evolution, implementation strategies, and emerging research trends that collectively shape SEL development in China. This fragmentation limits the ability of researchers, educators, and policymakers to identify areas of consensus, unresolved controversies, and priorities for future investigation.

Given the rapid expansion of research during recent years, there is an increasing need for comprehensive reviews capable of integrating findings across educational policy, psychological theory, curriculum development, mental health promotion, classroom practice, and cultural adaptation. Such syntheses are particularly valuable for understanding how China has progressively incorporated social-emotional competencies into its educational system while negotiating the complex interaction between longstanding cultural traditions, contemporary educational reforms, technological transformation, and persistent academic pressures.

Accordingly, the present review aims to synthesize the contemporary literature on social-emotional learning in Chinese basic education by examining its theoretical foundations, policy development, implementation strategies, educational outcomes, and ongoing challenges. Specifically, the review seeks to analyze how SEL has evolved within the Chinese educational context, identify the principal factors influencing its implementation, evaluate the evidence regarding its effectiveness, and highlight existing research gaps that may guide future investigations and educational policymaking. By providing a comprehensive and critically informed overview of current scholarship, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of how social-emotional learning is being reinterpreted and implemented within one of the world's largest and most influential educational systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review to synthesize the current state of knowledge on social-emotional learning (SEL) in Chinese primary and secondary education. The review followed internationally accepted principles for systematic evidence synthesis and focused on empirical studies, educational policy documents, theoretical publications, and review articles published between 2000 and 2025. Literature searches were conducted in the Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) databases using combinations of the keywords “social-emotional learning,” “social and emotional competence,” “China,” “Chinese education,” “primary education,” “secondary education,” “mental health education,” “quality education,” “suzhi jiaoyu,” and “core competencies.” Studies published in English or Chinese were considered eligible when they examined SEL or closely related constructs within Chinese basic education and presented empirical findings, theoretical analyses, educational policy discussions, or systematic reviews.

Publications focused exclusively on preschool or higher education, clinical psychiatric interventions unrelated to educational settings, conference abstracts, editorials, or studies lacking sufficient methodological information were excluded. After duplicate records were removed, titles and abstracts were screened according to the predefined eligibility criteria, followed by full-text assessment of potentially relevant publications. Information extracted from each study included publication year, research design, educational level, participant characteristics, theoretical framework, intervention or policy characteristics, implementation strategies, outcome measures, principal findings, and reported limitations.

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic synthesis, allowing the evidence to be organized into four major analytical domains: the theoretical foundations and conceptual evolution of SEL, implementation strategies within Chinese schools, educational outcomes related to academic achievement, behavior, and mental health, and the principal challenges concerning educational equity, cultural adaptation, and policy implementation. This qualitative synthesis facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, areas of consensus, methodological limitations, and priorities for future research regarding the development of social-emotional learning in China’s basic education system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most extensively studied implementation modality involves stand-alone SEL-adjacent curricula delivered during dedicated instructional time, including mental health

education classes, homeroom (ban hui) periods, or comprehensive practice activity (zonghe shijian huodong) courses. Durlak et al. (2011) SAFE framework, identifying Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit program design as the key features associated with positive outcomes, has gained traction in Chinese intervention research as a quality benchmark for curriculum developers and evaluators, though its application requires adaptation to Chinese instructional norms that often privilege whole-class direct instruction over active discovery learning.

Among the most extensively evaluated domestic programs, three warrant particular attention. First, the Positive Psychological Qualities Cultivation curriculum, developed at Beijing Normal University under the leadership of Meng Wanjin and disseminated across multiple provinces, uses emotion recognition activities, problem-solving instruction, and character-strength identification as its core components. This program represents one of the most prominent domestically developed SEL initiatives in China and has been implemented across diverse educational settings as part of broader efforts to promote students’ psychological well-being and socioemotional development.

Second, the UNICEF-Ministry of Education Social-Emotional Learning Program for rural and left-behind children, implemented in Guangxi, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces between 2015 and 2018, targeted the emotion recognition, help-seeking behavior, and psychological resilience of the approximately 6.7 million children living apart from both parents; a quasi-experimental evaluation found significant intervention effects on emotional competencies and mental health indicators at six-month follow-up. Third, Shanghai’s local Mental Health Education curriculum, as the most systematically implemented school-based SEL program at the municipal level, represents the most complete regional experience of institutionalizing SEL within the compulsory education framework; it has undergone multiple curriculum standard revisions and developed a relatively mature teacher training infrastructure.

A growing scholarly consensus holds that program-level implementation, however well-designed, is insufficient to produce lasting change if it is not embedded in a supportive school-wide culture. In the Chinese context, school-wide SEL implementation typically proceeds through four overlapping channels. The homeroom teacher (ban zhu ren) system, a structural feature of Chinese schools in which one teacher assumes comprehensive responsibility for a class’s moral formation, academic guidance, and emotional welfare, positions the homeroom teacher as the most proximal determinant of the social-emotional climate experienced by students. The national school psychological counseling service system, mandated by the 2012 Mental Health Education Guidelines and requiring all

primary and secondary schools to establish counseling rooms and maintain part- or full-time psychological teachers, provides a structural scaffold for individual and group SEL-related interventions. The moral education system, through Daode yu Fazhi and related homeroom activities, formally integrates social-emotional learning goals. And active school climate development, increasingly informed by restorative education practices, seeks to replace punitive discipline with relationship-repair and skill-building responses to behavioral difficulties.

Systemic implementation faces significant organizational barriers. Alnoaim's (2022) analysis of sociocultural and social cognitive theories emphasizes that effective social and emotional development depends on learning environments that foster meaningful social interaction, guided participation, and supportive teacher–student relationships. These conditions contrast with highly competitive educational settings where performance pressures may constrain opportunities for collaborative learning, emotional development, and the acquisition of adaptive behavioral competencies. Domitrovich et al. (2017) internationally documented pattern, namely stable leadership, adequate resources, and a culture of continuous improvement as necessary conditions for sustained SEL implementation, precisely the conditions most difficult to maintain in under-resourced schools, applies with particular force to rural and migrant-serving Chinese schools, which face the highest concentrations of student need alongside the most constrained professional development infrastructure (Tan, 2017).

Research consistently identifies teacher social-emotional competence as the single most proximal determinant of SEL implementation quality. Teachers' own capacities for emotion regulation, empathy, and relationship-building create the relational conditions, characterized by warmth, structure, and emotional attunement, that amplify or attenuate the effects of any SEL curriculum. A teacher who is chronically overwhelmed, emotionally dysregulated, or who models authoritarian conflict resolution will undermine even the most carefully designed program.

Survey data underscore the gap between this theoretical imperative and current practice. Systematic implementation of SEL programs in Chinese teacher education remains rare: most pre-service teacher education courses concentrate heavily on subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, with minimal attention to emotional regulation or social-emotional competence development (Wu & Qin, 2025). Where in-service professional development does exist, it is typically structured as one-off lectures rather than sustained communities of practice, leaving teachers underprepared to model and facilitate the relational conditions that effective SEL requires. Zheng et al. (2006) identified the heterogeneous professional preparation of

school psychological counseling teachers as a fundamental bottleneck constraining nationwide implementation, a diagnosis repeatedly confirmed by subsequent national surveys. Mindfulness-based teacher professional development programs have demonstrated initial evidence of improvements in teacher occupational health and classroom interaction quality, but how to achieve scale within existing timetable and budget constraints remains a formidable unsolved implementation challenge.

The evidence base for SEL has been substantially shaped by a series of increasingly sophisticated meta-analyses conducted both internationally and within China. The landmark international study by Durlak et al. (2011), analyzing 213 school-based universal SEL interventions involving approximately 270,000 students in kindergarten through high school, found that SEL participants showed significantly greater gains in social-emotional skills (effect size $d = 0.57$), attitudes about self and others ($d = 0.23$), pro-social behavior ($d = 0.24$), and academic achievement ($d = 0.27$), while exhibiting lower rates of conduct problems ($d = -0.22$) and emotional distress ($d = -0.24$). Programs adhering to SAFE design principles showed effects approximately twice as large as those that did not.

Domestic meta-analytic evidence, though more limited in scope, is converging on comparable conclusions. A meta-analysis of 86 randomized SEL intervention programs in China involving 8,736 students found significant positive effects on social-emotional competence, including SEL skills, attitudes, prosocial behavior, and emotional distress reduction, with effect sizes notably larger than those reported in low-context cultural settings (Chen & Yu, 2022). A complementary scoping review of 77 school-based mental health intervention studies conducted in mainland China between 2000 and 2024 confirmed these positive trends while identifying persistent implementation gaps, including regional disparities and the absence of integrated screening-to-intervention pathways. The Positive Psychological Qualities Cultivation program has been implemented in Chinese schools to strengthen students' psychological well-being through structured activities focused on emotion recognition, problem-solving, and character strengths. As one of the most established domestically developed SEL initiatives, it illustrates China's growing emphasis on integrating positive psychology principles into school-based socioemotional education. Taylor et al. (2017) follow-up meta-analysis of 82 studies with assessments conducted an average of 3.5 years' post-intervention confirmed sustained positive effects, while Mahoney et al. (2021) documented SEL's resilience-promoting function during COVID-19 school disruptions.

The relationship between SEL and academic achievement is mediated, in part, by neurobiological processes. Negative affect, including anxiety, chronic stress, and

shame, activates the amygdala and suppresses prefrontal cortical functioning, impairing working memory, cognitive flexibility, and sustained attention. By building regulatory competencies that dampen threat responses and sustain positive engagement, SEL creates the internal conditions that cognitive learning requires. This neuroeducational account is consistent with the finding that executive function, itself a target of many SEL programs, mediates the relationship between early social-emotional competence and later academic outcomes.

Yang et al. (2023) longitudinal study tracked 3,995 fourth-grade students in China over two years and found reciprocal associations between social-emotional competence and academic achievements in reading, mathematics, and science, suggesting that these competencies are not merely correlates but active contributors to academic growth. Complementing this, Wang et al. (2019) demonstrated in a large-scale study of 7,106 primary students in western China that social-emotional competency positively predicted academic achievement across multiple subjects, with emotion regulation playing a key mediating role, as students with higher competency regulated academic stress more effectively, experiencing less anxiety and greater engagement. Emotion regulation, as a core SEL mechanism, reduces learning interference and enhances motivation among Chinese primary students (Chen-Bouck et al., 2024). These findings converge on a model in which social-emotional competencies function as enabling conditions for academic learning, rather than merely as correlated byproducts. Recent meta-analytic evidence from 52 Chinese school-based SEL interventions further corroborates this conclusion, revealing a robust positive effect on academic performance ($ES = 0.34$) and leading researchers to reframe SEL as a “scaffold” for mastering China’s rigorous curriculum with implications for the longstanding policy debate about whether attention to non-academic development “trades off” against academic preparation.

The evidence supporting SEL’s preventive effects on behavior problems and mental health difficulties is substantial and extends across diverse populations within China. The left-behind children (liushou ertong) population, estimated at approximately 6.7 million children living apart from both parents due to labor migration, provides a natural quasi-experimental context for studying social-emotional risk and protection. The UNICEF-MoE SEL program’s quasi-experimental evaluation found that structured social-emotional intervention significantly improved emotion recognition, help-seeking behavior, and psychological resilience in this population, with effects largely maintained at six-month follow-up.

Evidence addressing bullying and aggressive behavior is similarly encouraging. Drawing on sociocultural and social cognitive theories, Alnoaim (2022) argues that the

development of prosocial behaviors depends on social modeling, collaborative learning, and positive teacher–student interactions, which provide the theoretical foundation for SEL relationship-skills programming as a strategy to prevent bullying and improve peer relationships. Systematic evaluation of restorative practices programs found that schools integrating restorative circles with SEL instruction showed significant reductions in formal disciplinary incidents and serious conflict events, though effects were heterogeneous across schools with different resource contexts.

A compelling strand of research situates SEL within a human capital framework and quantifies its economic returns. Heckman’s (2006) landmark Science paper marshaled evidence that early investments in social and emotional skills yield annual returns of 7 to 12 percent, substantially higher than investments focused solely on cognitive skills, because social-emotional competencies accumulate over the life course, enhancing productivity, health, and civic participation while reducing crime and welfare dependency. Belfield et al. (2015) comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of 82 evidence-based SEL programs found average returns of approximately eleven dollars for every one dollar invested, with benefits accruing primarily through reduced crime, improved educational attainment, and enhanced labor market outcomes.

Systematic economic analysis of Chinese SEL programs remains nascent, but policy-level attention to the issue is increasing. The 2020 China Human Capital Report recommended increased targeted investment in non-cognitive competency cultivation in rural areas, with initial estimates of potential contributions to China’s future labor force productivity. Researchers caution that economic return estimates rest on chains of assumptions, and that benefits materialize over decades while costs are borne immediately, considerations of particular weight given the scale and regional heterogeneity of the Chinese education system.

The most searching critique of mainstream SEL centers on its cultural particularity. Even the Chinese Student Development Core Competencies framework, while indigenously constructed, has been criticized for implicitly encoding urban, educated, Han-majority developmental norms. For students from rural communities where emotional restraint is culturally valued, from ethnic minority backgrounds where collectivist relational logics differ from Han-mainstream norms, or from migrant families whose social worlds involve fluid, disrupted, and multiply-embedded community memberships, standard SEL competency assessments may register cultural difference as developmental deficit.

Genuinely culturally appropriate Chinese SEL must engage substantively with indigenous conceptual resources, namely *ren*, *yi*, and *li*, rather than merely translating Western constructs into Chinese lexical containers. Empirical evidence on differential program effects across Chinese sociodemographic groups is mixed: some studies find that rural students and left-behind children benefit more than comparison groups from structured SEL instruction, suggesting these populations may derive disproportionate advantage from relational and emotional scaffolding otherwise absent in their environments. La adaptación cultural, más allá de una traducción superficial, requiere un compromiso profundo con los valores, las historias y las formas de conocimiento de la comunidad.

A troubling pattern in the Chinese SEL literature mirrors that documented internationally: the inverse relationship between the intensity of student need and the quality of available SEL resources. Schools serving high concentrations of rural, low-income, migrant, and ethnic-minority students face elevated teacher turnover, higher rates of student exposure to trauma and chronic stress, more demanding disciplinary environments, and more constrained budgets for professional development, precisely the conditions that most compromise SEL implementation fidelity. The students most likely to benefit from high-quality SEL are thus least likely to receive it.

Disciplinary policy represents another equity flashpoint. Gregory et al. (2017) documentation of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline maps onto Chinese educational contexts as urban-rural and socioeconomic disparities: students from rural, low-socioeconomic-status, and migrant families are disproportionately likely to face punitive responses to behavioral difficulties, rather than the relationship-repair and skill-building responses that SEL logic would prescribe. Physical punishment, while formally prohibited by Chinese law, persists in various forms in some school contexts, actively undermining the relational trust on which SEL depends.

Chinese SEL implementation faces a distinctive sociopolitical challenge with no direct American analog: the structural dominance of gaokao competition. In an institutional environment where academic performance functions as the primary mechanism of social mobility, and where this function is widely perceived as legitimate, any educational investment not directly legible as academic preparation faces chronic marginalization. The post-2021 “double reduction” (*shuang jian*) policy, aimed at reducing academic burden and creating space for whole-person development, has in implementation frequently generated the dynamic of “reduced burden without enhanced quality,” revealing how deeply examination culture is embedded in

family expectations and institutional incentives as well as school practices (Zhong, 2019).

Critical scholars have noted a structural irony: critiques of mainstream social-emotional learning (SEL) from different theoretical perspectives converge on the conclusion that SEL is inherently political. While some scholars argue that SEL competes with instructional time devoted to academic achievement within examination-oriented educational systems, others contend that mainstream SEL emphasizes self-management and individual responsibility without sufficiently addressing the broader social, cultural, and institutional conditions that shape educational inequality. This dual critique suggests that SEL's claims to political neutrality are themselves a form of political positioning that warrants critical scrutiny, particularly within the Chinese educational context, where educational policy, cultural traditions, and examination pressures intersect in complex ways. The field currently relies primarily on teacher rating scales, student self-report questionnaires, and records of behavioral incidents, each carrying well-documented limitations: teacher ratings are susceptible to halo effects and confirmation bias; student self-reports are vulnerable to social desirability and demonstrate limited predictive validity relative to behavioral performance measures; and disciplinary records reflect policy decisions as much as student behavior (Wu et al., 2017). Future research should prioritize the development of performance-based assessment tasks, ecological momentary assessment methods, and multi-informant composite indices that aggregate across reporters and settings, while attending carefully to the cultural validity assumptions embedded in measurement instruments developed primarily in Western contexts.

While Taylor et al. (2017) meta-analysis provided encouraging evidence of sustained effects at an average of 3.5-year follow-up, rigorous longitudinal data extending into adulthood remain scarce in both the Chinese and international literature. Building the infrastructure for long-term tracking, including linked administrative data systems connecting school records to adult outcomes such as educational attainment, labor market participation, health, and civic engagement, is a high-priority investment for the Chinese field. The specification of causal mechanisms is an equally urgent agenda: through precisely which neurological, cognitive, and social-relational pathways does emotion regulation influence academic achievement? Do these mechanisms operate differently in the highly competitive, examination-oriented social ecology of Chinese classrooms compared to contexts where intrinsic motivation is more strongly cultivated?

The rapid expansion of educational technology in China, which operates at a scale and with infrastructure

investment unmatched in most other national contexts, has generated significant interest in digitally delivered SEL programs offering scalability, personalization, and real-time feedback unavailable in conventional curricula. Early evidence on game-based SEL platforms and computer-mediated social skill training is modestly promising, with effect sizes generally smaller than in-person programs but potentially cost-effective at scale. Artificial intelligence applications, including facial expression analysis, sentiment detection in student writing, and adaptive content sequencing, raise additional possibilities and additional risks. Algorithmic systems trained on non-representative data may systematically misclassify the emotional expressions of students from ethnic minority communities or rural cultural contexts, amplifying rather than reducing inequity. Research in this area must prioritize algorithmic fairness, data privacy, and the irreplaceable role of human relationship in social-emotional development.

Achieving sustainable, system-wide SEL implementation requires embedding SEL within the institutional fabric of Chinese schooling rather than treating it as a supplementary program dependent on external funding or individual school leadership. Sustainable implementation requires integrating social-emotional competencies into teacher preparation and professional development, incorporating SEL indicators into school evaluation frameworks alongside academic outcomes, and aligning educational planning, curriculum design, and resource allocation with long-term social-emotional development goals. Such an institutional approach is particularly relevant in the Chinese educational system, where centralized policy frameworks have historically facilitated the large-scale implementation of educational reforms across different regions and school contexts. The post-"double reduction" policy space, combined with the Five-Ministry Special Action Plan for Student Mental Health (2023–2025), offers an unprecedented window for precisely such institutional embedding. Systematic research identifying which provinces and districts have successfully institutionalized SEL and what distinguishes durable from ephemeral adoption is an urgently needed contribution to this policy agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

Social-emotional learning, as a field of research and practice, has traveled a remarkable distance in Chinese basic education over three decades: from scattered therapeutic and character education programs to an increasingly institutionalized framework aligned with national Core Competencies standards, supported by international organizations, and backed by the highest-level policy commitments in Chinese educational history. The evidence supporting well-implemented SEL is among the most

consistent in educational intervention research: multiple large-scale meta-analyses converge on the conclusion that high-quality SEL programs improve academic achievement, promote prosocial behavior, reduce conduct problems, and enhance psychological well-being, with effects that persist years after program completion.

Yet the field's maturation has not resolved its foundational tensions. The relationship between individual skill development and structural change remains undertheorized and practically unresolved, nowhere more acutely than in a national context where the structural dominance of examination culture exerts systemic pressure against the values SEL seeks to cultivate. The cultural specificity of even indigenously constructed SEL frameworks poses genuine validity threats for programs serving the ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic diversity of Chinese students. Implementation quality varies dramatically across school contexts, with disparities that mirror the broader landscape of Chinese educational inequality.

The most productive path forward is neither to retreat into a defensive posture, emphasizing only the skill-development components of SEL that appear most compatible with examination preparation, nor to overextend into a comprehensive social transformation agenda that exceeds what schools can plausibly deliver within current institutional constraints. It is, rather, to pursue an honest accounting of what SEL can and cannot do: it can build competencies; it can improve relationships; it can create school environments more conducive to learning and well-being. It cannot, by itself, resolve the structural contradictions of an examination system that simultaneously demands and undermines whole-person development. Keeping that distinction clear, and designing research, policy, and practice accordingly, is the field's central challenge for the coming decade.

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