The Implementation of Social-Emotional Learning in Contemporary High School Education: Challenges, Strategies and Future Directions

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Abstract. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the process by which individuals develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills and responsible decision-making abilities at the cognitive, emotional and behavioral levels. As China's high school education matures, SEL has emerged as a significant topic within the educational landscape, driven by the diversification of educational goals and an increased focus on students' mental health. This paper aims to systematically examine SEL theory in the context of the high school educational system, analyze the challenges it may face in contemporary implementation, and propose targeted solutions to provide theoretical support and solutions for the further promotion and practice of SEL teaching in Chinese high schools. The findings reveal that the practicality of SEL has been widely recognized, part reason of this circumstance is because according to relevant studies, SEL can not only improve academic performance, but also significantly improve their mental health and social adaptability.

Keywords: social emotional learning, high school education, cultural conflict, training system, mental health

1. Introduction

Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Originally developed by Daniel Goleman, Linda Lantieri and others, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [1]. As an interdisciplinary field, SEL integrates developmental psychology, applied psychology, and pedagogy, making it one of the more systematic emotional intelligence education programs internationally. SEL encompasses 5 core elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-skills, and responsible decision-making. To be more specific, Self-awareness involves recognizing and understanding one's own emotions, values, and goals. Self-management refers to an individual's ability to regulate emotions, set goals and manage stress. Social awareness is the capacity to understand the emotions, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of others; Interpersonal skills pertain to an individual's ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships. Responsible decision-making involves making constructive choices based on consideration of ethical standards

and social norms [2]. All core elements interact to promote the mental health and integrated development of the individual.

On the one hand, SEL significantly improves individual task performance. In traditional China's high school, students often experience high academic pressure, leading to issues like exam anxiety and time management difficulties. SEL courses can equip students with emotional regulation skills, helping them relieve exam anxiety through mindfulness exercises. On the other hand, SEL has remarkable effect on improving students' mental health through emotional management and mental health education, fostering a positive mental state that is crucial in high school. Moreover, the benefits of SEL extend beyond the high school years, contributing to lifelong personal development. Greenberg discussed the long-term value of SEL in promoting students' all-round development, he believed that SEL can lay the foundation for students' future social life and career development [3].

This paper explores SEL theory within the framework of the high school educational system, identifies contemporary implementation challenges, and suggests targeted solutions. This research is crucial for enhancing the educational landscape in China by promoting a more balanced and comprehensive approach to student development, prepareing them not only for academic success but also for personal growth and future societal participation.

2. Current situation

With the wide recognition of SEL, the Chinese government has paid more attention to the promotion of SEL teaching in recent years. In the 2012, the Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Outline of Mental Health Education for Primary and Secondary Schools, which clearly proposed that mental health education should be included in the school curriculum system, which provided policy support for the promotion of SEL. This policy encourages schools to carry out various forms of mental health education activities.

In the year 2021, the Ministry of Education further issued a notice on Strengthening the Management of students' Mental health. It emphasized the promotion of students' emotional ability and social skills through the curriculum and required schools to establish policies related to mental health education and include mental health education in the school's annual work plan. For example, a meta-analysis of 37 randomized SEL programs involving 8,736 students in China showed that compared with the control group, SEL participants significantly improved in social and emotional competencies (SEC), including SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, and emotional distress reduction [4].

In fact, there are many schools had already begin to try to incorporate SEL into the formal curriculum system especially in developed cities like Beijing, Shanghai. According to the 2023 curriculum report of the Second Experimental Primary School in Beijing's Haidian District, third-grade students are required to take three 40-minute emotional management classes per week and actively participate in extracurricular activities. SEL has also been added to many school-based teaching materials, and has achieved good results.

3. Difficulties and potential challenges

3.1. Cultural conflict

There are some conflicts between traditional Chinese cultural values and modern SEL concepts, and cultural inadaptability may become the main obstacle to the popularization of SEL in China. Chen

and Yu's article also pointed out that the implementation of SEL in China needs to take cultural adaptability into consideration [5].

The conflict is mainly reflected in two aspects: collectivism and individual development, as well as Confucianism and emotional expression. First of all, as a collectivist country, collectivism emphasizes the individual's obedience to and integration into the group and requires the individual's emotional expression and behavior decision-making to always maintain the harmony of the group as the premise, while SEL focuses on cultivating the individual's independent emotional cognition ability and social interaction skills [6]. This contradiction leads students to face identity tearing when developing self-awareness. For example, when asked to "express their true feelings", students often fall into the anxiety that sharing their personal thoughts may destroy the harmony of the class. As a result, they tend to adopt the group expression of "the majority view" for the individual view. The deeper effect is that collectivist habits undermine the ability of individuals to make their own decisions. When encountering conflicts, most students prefer to "report to the teacher" instead of trying to solve them by themselves. Next, the "ritual system" in Confucian culture conflicts with SEL's principle of equal interaction. The traditional ethical system of "hierarchy and order" permeates the educational scene, shaping the solidified interactive mode: in classroom discussion and teaching, teachers often occupy the absolute authority of discourse. Consequently, communication is typically one-sided: the teacher poses questions and the students provided answers. The dialogue between teachers and students stays in the one-way transmission of "question-answer" rather than the two-way equal dialogue required by SEL.

Moreover, the traditional Chinese emphasis on emotional restraint also clashes with SEL's focus on emotional expression. Confucian culture often encourages individuals to suppress their emotions to maintain social harmony, while SEL promotes the recognition and expression of emotions as a way to foster healthy social interactions. This difference can lead to discomfort among students when they are asked to openly discuss their feelings, as it may seem to contradict the cultural norm of emotional restraint.

3.2. Lack of standardized training

On the one hand, the content of teacher training lacks systematicness. Many teachers only come into contact with the basic concepts of SEL through short-term training or school-based training. However, these trainings often remain at the theoretical level and lack specific guidance on the implementation of SEL and analysis of practical cases. For instance, due to lack of experience, even though teachers may understand the importance of SEL, they lack a clear idea on how to integrate SEL strategies into daily teaching, such as emotion management, cooperative learning, and the cultivation of social responsibility [7]. In this way, its implementation effect may not be satisfactory. On the other hand, the imbalance in the allocation of resources for teacher training is mainly reflected in the gap between urban schools and rural schools. Due to the limitations of economic conditions, schools in these remote rural areas have difficulty bearing the cost of large-scale training, resulting in fewer opportunities for teachers to receive SEL training [8]. Unbalanced resources will exacerbate the gap, which may result in SEL being much less popular in rural middle schools than in urban ones. All in all, the non-standard nature of teacher training has severely restricted the popularization of SEL in secondary education in China. Problems such as the lack of systematicness and unbalanced resource allocation have jointly led to the insufficient ability of teachers in the implementation of SEL, thereby affecting the overall effect and promotion process of SEL in secondary education.

3.3. The constraints of the social environment

The implementation of SEL is not only influenced by factors of the education system, but also restricted by the social environment. The social environment includes various reasons such as family, social culture, and social competitive pressure.

In the traditional educational philosophy of China, families generally have high expectations for their children's education, especially focusing on academic performance and the rate of students advancing to higher education. Parents generally believe that the primary task for students is to get high scores in exams and be admitted to good schools, thereby securing a bright future. Given this situation, many parents will arrange a large number of after-school tutorial classes for their children to improve their academic performance. However, they are skeptical about SEL-related activities, such as emotion management and interpersonal relationship skills development, believing that these activities will distract children's attention and affect their academic performance. Many parents believe that only through excellent academic performance can they obtain better educational resources and future opportunities. Therefore, they are more willing to support after-school tutoring related to academic performance rather than SEL-related activities.

Furthermore, society's definition of "outstanding students" is also relatively simple, mainly based on academic performance [8]. This value system puts schools under considerable pressure when implementing SEL, as they need to ensure that students achieve good grades in subject exams within a limited time. In this case, the implementation of SEL is often marginalized and difficult to receive sufficient attention and support.

4. Solution strategies

4.1. Strengthening social publicity

As previously article mentioned , the social environment has a profound impact on the implementation of SEL. Therefore, changing social concepts is the key to promoting the development of SEL. The government and the education department should do so through various channels, such as media promotion, community activities, parent schools and so on. Strengthen the publicity and education of SEL, enhance parents' and society's understanding of the value of SEL, and attempt to change social concepts. On the one hand, the significance of SEL can be scientifically expounded by promoting its importance to students' personal growth, mental health and future social development. On the other hand, regular parent lectures on SEL themes can be held, inviting educational experts to introduce the concepts and methods of SEL to parents and share the positive impact of SEL on students' academic performance and comprehensive quality improvement.

Under this background, gradually change the single utilitarian concept of education in society, make parents and society realize that SEL is equally important as subject education, thereby creating a favorable supportive social atmosphere for the implementation of SEL and making the implementation easier.

4.2. Standardized teacher training system

It is crucial to establish a standardized teacher training system. First of all, a unified training standard should be formulated to encompass the core concepts, teaching methods and assessment techniques of SEL. For instance, the "Initial TESOL Pre-K-12 Teacher Preparation Programs" standard of the United States provides detailed guidance for teacher training, including aspects such

as language knowledge, teaching implementation, assessment and professional qualities. These standards can serve as a valuable framework for SEL teacher training.

Secondly, the content and form of the training should be diversified to enhance teachers' practical participation, such as on-site observation and situational experience. CASEL's SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook comprehensively contains various on-site examples and templates of SEL teaching practice samples, which can be instrumetal in helping teachers integrate SEL into their daily teaching.

Finally, the evaluation of training effects should be prioritized, with the training program optimized based on the evaluation results. Some state education departments in the United States, such as Massachusetts and Minnesota, have provided specific methods for evaluating and improving the effectiveness of training [9]. These measures have been proven to effectively enhance teachers' SEL teaching ability, ensuring the smooth implementation of SEL in schools [10].

4.3. Promoting the integration of SEL with tradition

Promoting the integration of SEL with local traditional culture is one of the key strategies to solve cultural conflicts and improve the implementation effect of SEL. SEL originated from the Western education system, and its concepts and methods need to be adjusted in combination with the local Chinese culture. In the formulation of the curriculum, we need to be aware that traditional Chinese culture contains rich elements of social and emotional education, such as the Confucian idea of "benevolence" and the Taoist idea of "conforming to nature". Integrating these traditional concepts into the SEL course content can make some concepts of SEL easier to understand. For example, when presenting some concepts, the idea of "benevolence" can be combined with the cultivation of empathy in SEL. By telling ancient Chinese stories of benevolence, students can be guided to understand the importance of empathy [8].

Next, from the perspective of teaching methods, the implementation of SEL requires contextualized design in combination with the characteristics of the Chinese educational environment. As mentioned earlier, Chinese education has traditionally emphasized collectivism and group authority. Therefore, the SEL teaching method should attempt to cultivate students' social and emotional abilities in a collective environment. For instance, through methods such as group discussions and cooperative learning, students can be guided to learn emotional expression and interpersonal relationship skills in collective interactions.

Additionally, it is essential to incorporate successful localized practice when implementing SEL, as these can provide valuable reference experiences to enhance the effectiveness of the approach.

5. Conclusion

This paper underscores the critical role of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in fostering the comprehensive development, academic success, and mental well-being of students in Chinese high schools. Despite increasing policy support and recognition of its benefits, the implementation of SEL in China encounters significant challenges, including cultural clashes with traditional values, a lack of standardized teacher training, and societal pressures that prioritize academic achievement over social-emotional skills. To overcome these obstacles, the paper proposes strategic solutions such as integrating SEL with traditional Chinese values to enhance its relevance and effectiveness, establishing comprehensive teacher training programs to equip educators with the necessary skills, and raising societal awareness through campaigns and educational initiatives.

However, there are still some limitations and room for improvement in the research. On the one hand, this research may lack a broad comparative analysis of the implementation of SEL in different regions and school types; to be more specific, the depth of field research and case studies is insufficient, and the direct data collection on the acceptance and feedback of SEL may not be adequate. Future research can be conducted in depth through multiple case studies, field investigations, long-term follow-up studies, interdisciplinary research, technology application research, and policy impact assessment, among other directions. On the other hand, for future direction for this relevant topic, researchers can focus on exploration of intersection of SEL with other educational initiatives such as character education, mindfulness practices, and positive psychology. Investigating how these approaches can complement and enhance each other could provide a more integrated and holistic framework for student development. Although this article offers valuable insights and strategies for integrating SEL into contemporary high school education, there is still much to learn and explore in this rapidly evolving field.

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