

Integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into Chinese High School Policy Frameworks to Reduce Student Stress: A Multi-Level Approach

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Abstract: This paper examines the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into Chinese high school policy frameworks as a strategy to reduce student stress arising from academic competition and family expectations. The paper argues that China's exam-oriented educational culture has limited the development of systematic SEL programs despite growing concerns about adolescent mental health. Focusing on self-management as a core SEL competency, the study proposes a multi-level policy framework involving government agencies, schools, teachers, students, and families. Key policy recommendations include integrating SEL into the national curriculum framework, establishing a National SEL Awareness Advocacy Day, developing teacher social-emotional competence standards and training systems, and strengthening school-based mental health support services. The paper emphasizes that effective implementation requires collaboration among stakeholders and adaptation to local educational contexts. By institutionalizing SEL within educational policy, the proposed framework aims to enhance students' emotional well-being, self-regulation, academic motivation, and overall development while alleviating psychological pressure in Chinese high schools.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) ; Student Stress ; Self-Management ; Educational Policy ; Chinese High Schools

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1.The Rationale for the Importance of This Policy in Chinese High Schools

In the Chinese educational system, academic achievement and family stress has been considered to be the central factors in determining the distinctive of the education whereas the emergence of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has not been particularly fast. Policymakers frequently allocate resources to academic development rather than SEL development (Jiang et al., 2024), reflecting an education system that has long been exam-oriented and outcome-focused. This mindset exists in the Chinese family environment, where parents attach greater importance to their children's academic performance. Moreover, the emotional support among peers is frequently supplanted by competitive motivation (Li & Liu, 2025). This pressure focus has led to lack of systematic SEL curriculum and teacher training programs in schools and even SEL programs that do exist in China tend to have a relatively short life span. Although there are a series of pilot projects on SEL that have been previously adopted in China, due to the absence of emotional education in general, as well as the small scale and limited scope of research conducted by most, the implementation has not yet led to the factual and significant changes (Chen & Yu, 2022). Learning environment indicates the comparatively low integration of SEL into the trends of the existing system design of school education. As such, one direction to improving the quality of education is leading a change in the paradigms of education at the level of policy.

Due to the growing popularity of the problems of mental health and pressure of students, there is a strong necessity to structure the acquisition of self-management skills into educational policy as the important channel of enhancing the learning flexibility of students, as well as their well-being in general. The studies show that SEL competence is strictly and tightly associated with the capacity of a person to understand and utilize social and emotional experiences (Jiang et al., 2024). Based on this premise, one of the five main domains of SEL, self-management is positively correlated with academic motivation, self-efficacy and mental health to a significantly positive degree. Fantuzzo and Polite (1990) found out that there was a significant positive correlation that existed between degree of student self-management with intervention effectiveness which is a representative of the increased

autonomy of the students and involvement in behavioral change. In the Chinese educational setting, SEL integration is the sign of innovation in the pedagogies and the impact of the long-standing moral and collectivist values. China being a socialist nation, moral education has always placed collectivist values. As the SEL has been promoted, the self-management of the people has become more in line with the social awareness promoted in the moral education (Yu & Jiang, 2017).

At the policy level, this orientation has also been reflected in government policy. In 2021, the Ministry of Education published the Notice on Strengthening the Management of Mental Health of Students, which requires primary and secondary schools to include mental health education in their school-based curriculum (Wei & Jiang, 2023). However, addressing adolescent mental health issues requires cooperation among different stakeholders, including the government, education system, schools, and families (Qu et al., 2024). This suggests that context-based SEL models are needed, with self-management included as a competency to support students' overall well-being.

2. Policy Objectives and Multi-Level Implementation Goals

The emphasis of the SEL policies is to improve student self-management through well-designed, sustainable educational methods. The objective of SEL determines how institutions incorporate it into their institutional development strategy. The concept must be applied to the entire school premises to make the setting safe and comfortable for students (Mahoney et al. 2021). Such an approach enhances the student motivation and positive attitude towards study. Research has proven that when such an integration of self-management worked effectively at the levels of the teacher, the group and school level, the establishment can be said to possess a permanent capacity for development and the ability to respond quickly to changes in its environment (Cheong Chen & Ming Cheung 2003). Therefore, the aim of such implementation process is to include self-management into the institutional development plan, creating an adequate environment for the efficient implementation of SEL for both teachers and learners. Although educators are pivotal in applying SEL, the enhancement of their own social-emotional knowledge is not encouraged enough. It has been found that there is a direct relationship between the amount of training teachers receive and the number of positive outcomes experienced by students, both in terms of learning in social-emotional matters and academic performance (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Furthermore, students are able to benefit from the learning process, particularly in case they have an opportunity to help others achieve something bigger than themselves, as this creates a connection between the process of education and future career choice (Malin, 2025). Consequently, the idea is that the policy aims to institutionalize self-management as a collective skill of every participant of education.

3. Policies for Institutional Implementation

3.1 Integrating SEL into the National Curriculum Framework

The main initiative for the overall development of students is to systematically incorporate SEL into the national curriculum framework and allow for local adaptations to regional contexts. Research findings show that the incorporation of SEL curricula enriches the educational system of China, which has traditionally focused on academic performance, and gives opportunities for comprehensive and balanced development of students (Jiang et al., 2024). Additionally, the integration of SEL curricula with other subjects during teaching can promote the general dissemination of SEL skills and their systematic support in a multidisciplinary instructional context (Mahoney et al., 2021). This idea provides institutional justification for the revision of the curriculum standards highlighting that academic performance cannot be separated from emotional well-being. The implementation of SEL policies requires the development of a top-down collaborative system. The Ministry of Education sets the institutional framework and standard guidelines, while provincial departments supervise the implementation of curricula and development of teachers. At the same time, schools are in charge of curriculum implementation and assurance of quality, thus ensuring the efficient implementation of the policies. However, excessive focus on SEL, or the lack of focus on the context and individual differences may lead to the loss of educational effectiveness. Moreover, it is important to

consider regional characteristics when implementing policies. Granting autonomy and flexibility to local authorities is the key to successful implementation of the policies and creating a ground for ongoing professional development of teachers and better support of mental health system in schools.

3.2 Establishing a National SEL Awareness Advocacy Day

The aim of organizing a National SEL Awareness Day is to raise the social awareness regarding the role of SEL, social consensus, and to promote cooperation of different spheres of activity in order to facilitate the introduction of SEL into education on a wider societal basis.

On the same direction as a similar policy initiative, R U OK? campaign in Australia is a substantial campaign of promoting public health. It has been found out that the introduction of this day of mental health awareness has been successful in raising awareness among the population about the existence of mental health problems, which leads to the expression of emotions and seeking help in the face of challenges (Ross & Bassilios, 2019). The results of such advocacy campaigns have created awareness of mental health in Australia on a nationwide level with heavy implications on the social engagement and policy-making. At the same time, the studies indicate that SEL offers an effective avenue towards facilitating individual mental wellbeing and socio-emotional growth in high-context cultural settings (Chen & Yu, 2022). The Ministry of Education and the National Health Commission should organize these activities together to develop a cross-departmental collaborative mechanism. Schools and communities are supposed to be very active in organizing the participation of teachers and students as well as conducting the extended activities like lectures and peer-support groups.

In the meantime, social-emotional provision should be effectively spread by means of multi-level media campaigns and social outreach. Social support has a substantial positive impact on the academic performance of adolescents and this influence is partially mediated by the self-efficacy mechanism (Zhang & Qian, 2024). Although the evidence is still preliminary, group activities could prove to be more efficient than classroom-based ones in terms of improving the perceived social support of the adolescents. It can mean that within Chinese culture, the focus is usually on teamwork and not the individual one (Johnson et al., 2024). In addition to institutional policy systems, the real efficiency of policies also depends on the active involvement of teachers and the active engagement of students and thus provides national strategies to educational practice.

4. Policies for Teacher Implementation

The establishment of professional competency standards of the Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) of educators and the enhancement of corresponding training in pre-service education are the first steps on the way to making the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) an inseparable part of teacher training and continuous professional growth.

Professional learning practices can be arranged in such a way that they assist teachers to enhance their knowledge on teaching concepts, hence enhancing their effective use in the teaching practice (Gu & Wang, 2006). In a different viewpoint, sustainable curriculum reform cannot be separated with the increase in the professional competencies of the teachers and re-inventing their professional identity (Gu & Wang, 2006), which are both important preconditions of deepening educational reform. It has been found that not only academic performance of students is connected to SEC, but also the relationships between students (Wang et al., 2019). Being a crucial interpersonal relationship in the school setting, teacher-student relationship not only has a significant influence on the teaching and learning processes but also acts as one of the most important avenues of improving the well-being of teachers (Tian et al., 2022). The positive outcome of the improvement of teacher SEC has direct and mutually beneficial effects on teachers and students. The Chinese normal university and the teacher qualification center ought to work together in coming up with assessment structures of SEL modules so that institutions of higher learning can come up with curriculum with common standards. At the same time, a teacher SEC assessment system must be developed at high school setting hence providing a functional system that can easily combine training, assessment

and practice. Empirical studies have found high levels of intrinsic motivation can lead to the professional development of teachers to a considerable extent. Besides, heterogeneous educational paradigms lead to the long-term growth of the professionalism of teachers (Yang, 2021). The development of teachers in terms of collective SEC and educational capacity offers a viable basis of attaining effectiveness in operations. Thus, this policy must be implemented by establishing collaborative educational communities of teachers, enhancing professional development in terms of continuous training and reflection on practice.

5. Policies for Student Implementation

Develop a multi-tiered in school mental health support system so as to provide students with ongoing and accessible psychological counseling and intervention.

The education sector in China has since the 1980s come to realize the need to have school mental health services (Zhang & Du, 2018). Nevertheless, the government has not developed a unified system, which makes it restrictive in terms of the scope and breadth of the intervention in the school mental health services (Qu et al., 2024). Moreover, the school level has not had an integrated system of textbooks and other learning resources, and clear curriculum standards and implementation plans have also limited the development of school mental health education (Wei & Jiang, 2023). The above gaps are quite challenging to practice early mental health education. In addition, it is now even harder to effectively deal with the increased family and school demands on the students. The Ministry of Education should organize the implementation of this policy to develop a national standard of psychological counseling at the same time offering multi-dimensional support at the school level. On the one hand, physical and mental health is the precondition of the students learning and gaining skills (Wei & Jiang, 2023).

However, being one of the most imperative stages of identity formation and higher education's preparation, the high school stage must be particularly concerned with the psychological condition of students (Malin, 2025). Hence, to enhance the comprehensive growth of students and integrate the idea of educational success, school-based mental health services must be enhanced with the help of a multi-tiered model equity.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this policy aims to alleviate the psychological burden on high school students arising from academic and family pressures by establishing practical and implementable support mechanisms. However, during implementation, it is essential to avoid addressing complex issues through overly generalized approaches. Instead, context-specific analysis and adaptive strategies should be adopted; otherwise, the policy's original intent may be undermined, and its expected supportive outcomes may not be effectively achieved.

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