

Social-Emotional Learning in China and the United States: A Comparative Analysis of Themes and Patterns

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Abstract. This essay examines the differences and commonalities in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) approaches between China and the United States through a systematic literature review. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the research systematically analyses 28 studies from the COVIDENCE database, and we identify three key themes—cultural tools, SEL dimensions, and intervention types across China and the United States, shaping distinct patterns in SEL dimensions and intervention strategies. This study examines how digital (e.g., AI-driven apps) and manual tools (e.g., face-to-face role-playing), contrasting SEL patterns (individualism vs. collectivism), and distinct policy frameworks (centralized vs. decentralized) (Triandis, 2018) mediate the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) across China and the United States, shaping distinct patterns in SEL dimensions and intervention strategies. This study reviews how contrasting digital (e.g., AI-driven apps) and manual tools (e.g., face-to-face role-playing), SEL patterns (individualism vs. collectivism), and distinct policy frameworks (centralized vs. decentralized) mediate the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) across China and the United States, shaping distinct patterns in SEL dimensions and intervention strategies. Findings reveal that these factors mediate distinct national approaches to SEL. While Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is recognized globally as essential for student development, its implementation varies significantly between China and the United States due to cultural, pedagogical, and technological differences. This research highlights the necessity of culturally adaptive SEL strategies and provides insights for cross-national educational collaboration.

Keywords: China-U.S.education comparison, Social-emotional learning (SEL), Sociocultural theory, Cultural adaptation

1. Introduction

Around the world, many students also face issues such as emotional management, social skill deficiencies, and mental health problems beyond their learning scope. For example, traditional

education places too much emphasis on academic performance at the expense of students' social and emotional development.

The anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues among students are becoming increasingly severe, affecting their academic performance and interpersonal relationships. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a mature framework for addressing these issues, but its implementation faces obstacles. Just like many schools lack systematic SEL courses, this results in students lacking the ability to meet challenges. So we hope to conduct a comparative study of social-emotional learning models in China and the United States by analyzing the impact of SEL courses in different cultural contexts on students' academic performance and mental health outcomes, and based on an understanding of Sociocultural Theory[1].

For this reason, our research raises the following question:

1.To what extent and in what ways have researchers compared social emotional learning approaches in China to those in the United States?

2.What themes and patterns exist in the existing comparative research?

2. Theoretical framework

Our analysis draws on Sociocultural Theory. From this theoretical grounding, we know the role of social interaction, cultural tools, and mediated learning in cognitive and emotional development. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of holistic student development, emphasizing competencies like empathy, self-regulation, and responsible decision-making. While its benefits are well-documented globally, the implementation of SEL is deeply influenced by cultural contexts, requiring adaptations to ensure effectiveness across diverse settings. The theory emphasizes the critical role of social interaction, cultural tools, and mediated learning in cognitive and emotional development. Learning is not an isolated process but is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. Thus, individuals develop higher mental functions through interactions with others and the use of cultural tools, such as language, symbols, and technology. These tools act as mediators that shape how individuals perceive, interpret, and engage with the world.

We plan to use this theoretical foundation to explore how different tools, both digital and traditional, interact with the various dimensions and types of interventions in SEL to promote the growth of emotional and social competence. The skills covered by SEL, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship building, are essentially a social process. In short, we hope to analyze social-emotional learning through this theoretical framework and reveal how technology and traditional methods interact with social and cultural factors to promote the development of emotional and social competence.

In the United States, SEL is heavily integrated with digital tools, reflecting the country's emphasis on technological innovation. On digital platforms, tools such as Emotional ABCs, Classcraft, and Smiling Mind leverage gamification, interactive lessons, and mindfulness practices to teach emotional regulation and empathy. These platforms appeal to a tech-savvy generation and provide scalable solutions for diverse populations. Also, digital tools like Emotional ABCs, Classcraft, and Smiling Mind incorporate gamification and interactive lessons to teach skills such as emotional regulation and empathy, which are particularly beneficial for underfunded schools or rural areas [2]. Features like real-time analytics allow educators to monitor students' emotional progress effectively

In China, SEL is primarily implemented through traditional tools such as class meetings, group activities, and structured classroom discussions. This reflects the country's high-context cultural orientation and emphasis on collective values: Class Meetings and group discussions foster community-building and empathy among students [3]. Discussions can be classified as informal

exploration since China is still in the exploratory stage of integrating SEL into education. Programs introduced from abroad are adapted to fit local needs. Due to cultural impact, SEL interventions in China have shown significant improvements in social-emotional competencies (SEC) as shown in Table 1, often outperforming results in low-context cultures due to the lack of prior emotional education. These methods emphasize interpersonal relationships and collective well-being, aligning with China's cultural traditions. Mediated Learning and Social Interaction. This reflects the country's high-context cultural orientation and emphasis on collective values.

3. Methods

3.1. Literature search

The systematic literature review was conducted through a search in the EBSCO database. A strategic combination of keywords and topic titles related to the scope of the study was adopted, with specific standards requiring terms in Table 1, such as “social emotional learning,” “USA,” and “China” to appear in the title or abstract, as shown in Table 1. We use the Boolean operator “OR” to link Associated Search Terms and “AND” to link different search categories to find as much relevant literature in academia as possible. Our search included literature published from 1st July 2010 until 2025 with identifying 341 relevant studies. All identified records are subsequently imported into the system review management platform Covidence for deduplication, filtering, and data extraction.

Table 1. Search strategy for literature review on SEL in China and the U.S.

Search Cate gories	Search Terms	Where did these search terms need to be: Abstract? Full text? Keywords?
SEL	“social-emotional competency*” OR “social and emotional skill*” OR “emotional intelligence*” OR “social skills development*” OR “soft skill*” OR “life skills education*” OR “non-cognitive skill*” OR “resilience building*” OR “competency-based education*” OR “affective education*” OR “character education*” OR “psychological development*”	abstract
acade mic perfor mance	“how well students do in their studies*” OR “quiz grade*” OR “test score*” OR “written paper*” OR “attendance*” OR “enthusiasm*” OR “continue learning*” OR “communication*” OR “class participation*” OR “ability of individual work*” OR “cooperate ability*” OR “presentation skills*” OR “proficiency in knowledge*” OR “respect others*” OR “overall achievement*”	abstract
China	Chin*	full text
US	US* OR America*	full text

3.2. Literature screening

In our screening phase, three coders screened the remaining 341 studies by examining their titles and abstracts excluding articles using following exclusion criteria:

1. Must focus on higher education students in China and the US.
2. Must be focused on students’ experience (studies of teachers or parents are excluded)
3. The implementation or effectiveness of SEL on students' academic performance and personal development must be compared.

4. It must be written in English or Chinese.

5. The article should ideally respond to a certain trend and be representative.

All disagreements among coders were resolved through discussion, and our initial screening process resulted in 288 articles being excluded, with the remaining 53 articles undergoing full-text evaluation, as shown in our PRISMA flowchart (see Figure 1). The full text was retrieved from various databases and filtered by the same two coders, who then discussed all conflicts again and resolved the differences. Due to inconsistencies with our standards (for example, incorrect language, incorrect population, or incorrect age group), an additional xx studies were excluded. Ultimately, we determined that xx items are suitable for in-depth analysis and further exploration.

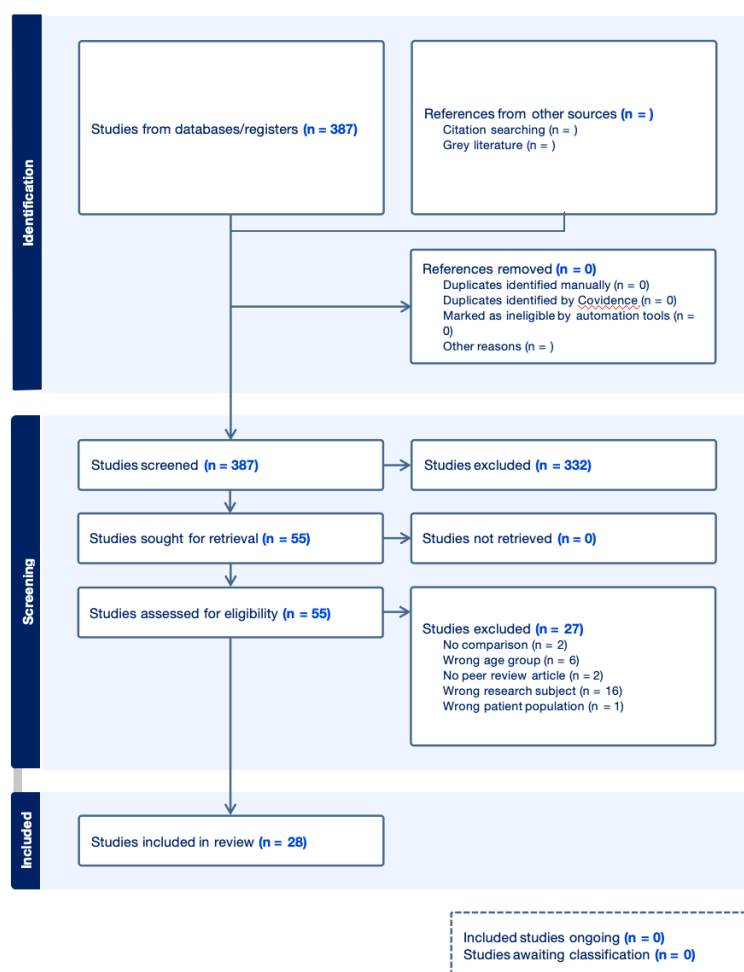


Figure 1. PRISMA for diagram

Hypothesis:

1. SEL involves a range of disciplines, including psychology, education, and sociology. However, many studies tend to examine it from a singular perspective, potentially restricting our grasp of its multifaceted impact.

2. In the study of SEL methods in China and the United States, focusing more on implementation processes and actual outcomes than on differences in policy and course frameworks allows us to better understand the impact of SEL in different cultural contexts.

3. Much of the research on SEL focuses on how it can improve academic performance. However, less attention is given to its social and emotional outcomes, which might mean we are missing out

on understanding how SEL can help students grow in a more well-rounded way.

4. Findings

Our research aimed to compare the former researchers engaging with SEL through the lens of social-cultural theory. After reviewing 387 studies and applying relevant exclusion criteria, 28 studies were retained for further analysis. It witnessed several notable patterns from 2010 to 2025 in the research of imbalance and thematic tendencies in current scholarship in three dimensions: disciplinary diversity, policy implications, academic outcome, and holistic development. We then manually coded all included studies ($n = 28$) into the themes of their primary analysis through the software Covidence. After checking title content, intervention type, and reported outcomes, we assigned each study to one mutually exclusive category (Academic-Focused SEL, Social and Emotional Development, Policy/Interdisciplinary or Not Directly Related to SEL). This coding, though manual, allowed for clearer thematic distribution of the reviewed literature.

First of all, our reviewers are curious about the dominance of educational frameworks in examining SEL. Nearly half of the 28 studies primarily framed SEL through an educational perspective, and they mentioned several relevant words in the title, like learning and teaching. 7 of the studies appear in a psychological framework and 3 studies are based on the sociological pattern. Barely five of the studies include the multi-disciplinary approaches, which are less than the single disciplinary lenses. This shows the lack of research in multi-dimensions rather than single studies, with most of the studies emphasizing educational and cognitive learning instead of broader psychological and sociological dimensions. Surprisingly, through the second extracting code (policy implementation), our dataset showed an extreme skew towards the political implementation. Only 7.14% of the studies mentioned the policy in their titles, such as Song and Wu [4,5]. None of the titles explicitly mentioned words like intervention or adaptation, terms associated with the policy-making process. In our data collection, the conclusion we can make is the limits of studies of political interventions with SEL, although this result can be influenced by explicitness in the terminology within study titles. These findings indicate a significant gap in the explicit analysis of the two nations' policy-making and cultural influence. A clear trend is supported by the data on the academic outcome, 64.3% of the study emphasizes the outcome relevant to the academic outcome as their test score and class behavior [1,6,7]. Only a quarter of studies relevant to social-emotional learning, such as holistic development, study empathy, emotional regulation, and other soft skills. Eight of the studies explore their research relevant to SEL with other combinations of academic outcomes. The measurable academic results occupied most of the attention in academia, it also shows the prevailing bias in educational research. More comprehensive development is overshadowed by the measurable outcome.

The distribution of studies across these categories is summarized in Table 2, which illustrates the predominant focus on academic outcomes within the reviewed literature.

Table 2. Categorization and distribution of the reviewed literature

Category of analysis	Definition	Example	Distribution of articles
Investigating Interdisciplinary/ Policy Research	These studies integrate perspectives from multiple disciplines including psychology, education, and sociology to deeply explore the impact of SEL on students' mental health. None identified policy-level analysis as their primary research focus.	—(Theme observed secondarily but not coded as primary for any study)	0% of articles
Academic-Focused SEL	These studies examine SEL primarily through its impact on students' academic outcomes, such as test scores, classroom behavior.	Yip (2012) examines how learning strategies and self-efficacy predict academic success; Zhang (2010) analyzes the role of feedback and performance outcomes.	53.37% of articles
Research on Social and Emotional Outcomes	These studies focus on the impact of SEL on students' social and emotional development, how to enhance academic performance, and explore its role in promoting all-round student development.	Wei (2022) investigates how students' social emotional competence and academic emotions are related, considering cognitive, but not academic, involvement.	39.29% of articles
Not directly related to SEL	These studies deal with educational or behavioural problems, but do not explicitly address SEL or related emotional/social construction.	Li (2023) addresses the innovation of digital teaching methods in the history courses with SEL or emotional or social constructs of a similar nature.	7.14% of articles

To conclude, these extracting codes show a clear framework from the educational perspective, SEL's interdisciplinary and comprehensive nature is narrowed by the education with political implementation and academic outcome-biased approaches. In the following part, we will discuss the implications and critiques.

5. Discussion

Our findings related to the comparative SEL research of China versus the U.S. contribute much to current literature and ongoing scholarly discussions, as they point to areas of imbalance within the existing comparative SEL research between the two countries. The majority of both approaches are characterized by single-disciplinary, educationally oriented studies that suffer from a pronounced lack of attention to psychological, sociological, and cultural frameworks. What the existing research overwhelmingly does is focus on quantifiable academic outcomes like test scores or classroom behaviors at the expense of qualitative analysis related to emotional, social, and cultural impacts. Especially in this context, emphasis on rationality creates a hierarchy of knowledge in which SEL turns out to be systematically devalued knowledge, compared to its broader potential benefits, ranging from emotional resilience to social competence and cross-cultural understanding. Thus, as shown in Table 2, the current emphasis on processes of implementation, rather than policy and structural determinants, tends to trigger shallow responses that are aimed at immediate problems facing the education system, even while the fundamental reasons for these issues go unaddressed. Therefore, future research should seek interdisciplinary approaches incorporating various theoretical

perspectives to critically explore policy structures with diverse cultural nuances and systemic determinants that influence SEL.

The full effectiveness and global applicability of SEL remain uncertain until such research is undertaken. This research encourages scholars and educators to reflect critically on existing paradigms that underpin SEL by advocating for approaches to knowledge that are broader than the reductionist discourses that tend to dominate the debate. Sadly, our findings appear to be simply reflective of the contemporary SEL research inadvertently contradicting itself, by mirroring what it is meant to oppose, attempting to shape an outcome-based, educated culture, and prioritizing quantifiable results over the meaningful, process-oriented meaning of education as a whole.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, these extracting codes show a clear framework from the educational perspective, SEL's interdisciplinary and comprehensive nature is narrowed by the education with political implementation and academic outcome-biased approaches. We reveal the profound differences in the practice paths and theoretical frameworks of SEL in China and the United States through the perspective of sociocultural theory, highlighting how cultural tools, policy orientations, and technology applications shape different SEL models in the two countries. The implementation of SEL in the United States is characterized by a technology-driven and individualistic orientation, emphasizing the scalability of digital tools and the development of individual capabilities, while China tends to integrate SEL into the construction of community relations through collective interaction and high-context cultural practices. This division not only reflects the structural differences between centralized and decentralized policy frameworks in the education system but also reveals the deep-seated conflict of cultural values - the differentiated impact of collectivism and individualism on the definition of emotional capabilities.

It is worth noting that the academic discourse dominated by a single disciplinary perspective, the excessive focus on quantifiable academic results, and the neglect of policy and cultural structure analysis have jointly led SEL research into the dilemma of instrumental rationality. This limitation makes it difficult for transnational educational cooperation to break through the superficial experience reference and even hinders the development of truly culturally adaptable SEL strategies. To this end, future theories and practices need to turn to three key directions: first, establish an interdisciplinary research paradigm, integrate theoretical tools from education, psychology, and cultural studies, and analyze the dynamic practice of SEL from a multidimensional perspective; second, reconstruct the assessment framework, balance the qualitative dimensions of academic indicators and social-emotional abilities, and pay special attention to the non-cognitive development needs of marginalized groups; third, promote policy dialogue, and explore the possibility of collaborative innovation between technological tools and cultural traditions in SEL through a systematic comparison of the two countries' education governance models. Only through this critical reflection and cross-cultural collaboration can we achieve a paradigm shift in social-emotional learning from "standardized solutions" to "contextualized practices" and provide more inclusive solutions for global educational equity and the all-around development of people. In the following part, we will discuss the implications and critiques.

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Jingqian Luo, Xinyue Qu, and Yiwen Zhang contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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