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Hotspots and Trends in Social-Emotional Learning Research in China: A Visual Analysis Based on CiteSpace

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A R T I C L E I N F O   A B S T R A C T

Based on the CiteSpace visualization analysis method, this study systematically examines the research status, key issues, and development trends in the field of social-emotional learning (SEL) in China from 2012 to 2024. The study finds that SEL research in China has shown a trend of continuous growth and has gradually expanded to different school-age groups, including primary school students, preschool children, adolescents, and middle school students. The research hotspots mainly focus on topics such as emotional intelligence, school bullying, and teacher-student relationships, reflecting the important role of SEL in improving students' mental health and promoting positive social behavior. In addition, this study reveals the current situation of cooperation among SEL research teams in China and finds that there is limited cross-regional and cross-institutional academic cooperation. Through quantitative analysis of the evolution of SEL research in China, this study provides a systematic review and offers valuable references for scholars, educational practitioners, and policy makers to promote the localization of SEL in China. In the future, further strengthening academic cooperation, optimizing the SEL curriculum system, and combining successful international experiences will help improve the effectiveness of SEL in China's education system and promote students' all-round development and social adaptability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. It aims to help young people and adults develop a positive identity, learn to manage their emotions, achieve individual and collective goals, and feel and express empathy for others. Also, SEL fosters the ability to build and

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maintain supportive relationships, and to make responsible and caring decisions (Wang et al., 2024, pp. 95).

In 2012, Professor Mao Yaqing of Beijing Normal University officially launched the SEL project in China (officially named "Social-Emotional Learning and School Management Improvement") with the support of the Ministry of Education of China and UNICEF. The project, based on relevant experience from the University of Northampton in the UK, was adapted to fit China's national conditions. Its main goal was to develop a series of teaching resources for primary school educators. Some other scholars have also conducted pilot projects in Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou and other regions achieving significant results (Ailing, 2019, p.81). Under the leadership of the Department of Teacher Affairs of the Ministry of Education, the SEL project has invited researchers from more than ten provinces and cities including Shandong, Hubei, and Chongqing, to conduct top-down pilot projects and research, yielding considerable outcomes (Yaqing, 2019, p. 27). The UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action, releasead in 2015, pointed out that education should pay attention not only to the development of the children's cognitive abilities but also their social-emotional skills such as identifying and managing emotions, caring for others, making responsible decisions, building positive interpersonal relationships, and coping effectively with challenging situations. From the perspective of China's social development, to promote the improvement of people's quality of life through high-quality education, it is necessary to promote the comprehensive, full and coordinated development of students, and focus on the development of students' emotional well-being, personality traits and mental health. Starting from the development of students themselves, from a short-term perspective, strong social-emotional skills can enhance children's sense of belonging and engagement at school, improve their behavioral performance at school, and boost academic performance. From a long-term perspective, the impact on students' lifelong development and well-being is far more important than test scores (Yuan & Yaqing, 2018, p.43). It can be seen that the study of social-emotional abilities is of great significance. Chinese researchers have conducted a large number of fruitful studies on social-emotional development (Shutao & Yaqing 2015, p. 115), but a comprehensive review of these findings has not been reported. Therefore, in the light of the national and societal emphasis on social-emotional abilities, this paper aims to systematically review the overall situation, kea areas of focus, and developmental trends in social-emotional research in China, with the goal of providing insights and inspiration for future research in this field.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Using the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (www.cnki.net) as the search platform, studies between January 1, 2012, and October 14, 2024, on the

topics of "social-emotional learning," "social-emotional ability" (including synonyms such as "social-emotional training," "social-emotional competence") were explored using the advanced search mode.

In terms of the overall number of studies on social-emotional learning in China, research in this field began in 2012 and has increased dramatically over the years. According to the development trend, the study can be divided into three growth stages: 2012-2016, 2017-2019, and 2020-2023. Among them, it reached the highest value in its history in 2023, with explosive growth and more than 100 publications in that year alone.

An analysis of the top five institutions shows that Shanghai Normal University has the largest number of publications, with a total of 39 articles, followed by East China Normal University with 34 articles, and Beijing Normal University with 28 articles. Both Central China Normal University and Nanning Normal University have published 10 articles each. From the perspective of the institutional nature of the top 10 organizations conducting research on social-emotional ability, majority are normal universities, accounting for 80 % of the total number.

The search included academic journals, reviews, and academic articles, and resulting in the identification of 544 sources. Each abstract of these sources was carefully investigated, and 111 sources were excluded due to irrelavance. Thus, a total of 433 main articles were considered suitable for this study. The visual analysis software CiteSpace V 6.3.R1, developed by Chen Chaomei of Drexel University in the United States, was used for metrological and knowledge map analysis (Haibin et al., 2020, p.104).

2. RESULTS

Distribution of Authors of Chinese SEL Research

After arranging the top 10 authors in terms of the number of publications in descending order (as shown in Table 1), it can be seen that Mao Yaqing has the highest number of publications, with 14 articles. He is followed by Cao Jianhong with 5 publications; Zhi Ailing, Liu Zhengxian, and Yang Chuanli each with 4; and the remaining authors with 3 publications each.

Further analysis of the author colaboration network (as shown in Figure 1) reveals 240 nodes, 82 links, and a network density of 0.0029. The nodes are scattered with only a few connected to one other in a weak relationship, indicating that there are not many scholars in the field of SEL in China in strong cooperation.

Mao Yaqing from Beijing Normal University, Yang Chuanli from Nanning Normal University, Du Yuan from Beijing Institute of Educational Sciences, etc. have formed a relatively stable small research team. Their work primarily focus

on analyzing international trends, influencing factors, system frameworks, the value od SEL cultivation, and teachers' social-emotional learning competencies. Additionally, Lu Liu, Du Yuan, Zhu Anan, etc. have also formed a corresponding author cooperation group. Mao Yaqing is a central figure in the author's co-linear map that occupies a dominant position and has greater academic influence. As the initiator of SEL research in China, he has developed relevant courses and teaching materials for the promotion of SEL projects, and conducted relevant empirical research, making positive contributions to the localization of SEL in China.

Table 1. The Leading Researchers in the Field of SEL

Number of Publications	Year of First Institutional Publication	Author
14	2016	Mao Yaqing
5	2015	Cao Janhong
4	2019	Zhi Ailing
4	2022	Liu Zhengxian
4	2017	Yang Chuanli
3	2015	Yang Yuankui
3	2014	Lu Liu
3	2018	Du Yuan
3	2019	Kou Xiyue
3	2012	Zhu Anan

Hotspot Analysis of Social-Emotional Learning Research in China

In order to investigate the research hotspots in the field of social-emotional learning in China, CiteSpace software was used to conduct both keyword frequency analysis and high-frequency keyword clustering.

Keyword Frequency Analysis: As shown in Table 2, it can be seen that after excluding keywords related to the search topic (such as "social-emotional learning" and "social-emotional ability"), the top five keywords are "elementary school students" (18), "elementary and middle school students" (12), "the United States" (11), "junior high school students" (9), and "school bullying and teacher-student relationship" (8). These high-frequency keywords indicate that current research focuses on content related to student groups, especially students at different stages (elementary and junior high school students). This suggests that when researchers explore social-emotional learning, they tend to focus on the psychological development and social behavior of students at different ages. The keyword "United States" ranks third, highlighting that many related studies are based on the American educational context. This may be related to the relatively

mature policies and implementation strategies in the field of social-emotional learning in the United States, such as the adoption of the CASEL framework, which allows researchers to refer to or explore the experience of the United States in this field. The high-frequency keywords "school bullying" and "teacher-student relationship" show that researchers are concerned about psychological and behavioral problems in the education system, especially how to intervene and improve these problems through means such as SEL. This shows that social interactions in schools, especially bullying behavior and its impact on students' psychology, are among the most prominent topics in social-emotional learning research.

In summery, the keyword frequency analysis reveals that the current research hotspots in the field of social-emotional learning are mainly concentrated on student populations, school behaviorial issues, and the educational practices and frameworks established in the United States.

Table 2. Frequencies of keywords that used in research articles

№	Frequency	Centrality	Keywords
1	18	0.18	Elementary school students
2	12	0.11	Elementary and middle school students
3	11	0.1	United States
4	9	0.1	Junior high school students
5	8	0.11	School bullying
6	8	0.01	Teacher-student relationship
7	7	0.01	College students
8	6	0.02	Emotional intelligence
9	6	0.02	Social emotions
10	6	0.02	Adolescents

This points out the direction for future research, particularly regarding how to adapt and extend these research findings to different educational systems in the context of globalization. After removing the keywords related to the search topic (such as "social-emotional learning" and "social-emotional ability", etc.), the top five keywords by centrality are "elementary school students" (0.18), "elementary and middle school students" (0.11), "school bullying" (0.11), "the United States" (0.10) and "junior high school students" (0.10). The higher the intermediary centrality, the greater the role a keyword plays in linking different areas within the knowledge graph. By analyzing the centrality data, it can be seen that the research hotspots in this field mainly focus on the development of social-emotional abilities of primary and junior high school students, intervention strategies for behavioral issues such as school bullying, and the implementation of social-emotional learning practices in the United States. The high centrality of these keywords reflects their important role in connecting

related research, and reveals the current academic community's emphasis on improving students' mental health, reducing school bullying, and promoting the social and emotional atmosphere of schools through SEL.

The high-frequency keyword map (as shown in Figure 2) intuitively presents these findings-the larger the circle, the higher the keyword frequency. Notably, there is little difference between the high-frequency and high-centrality keywords, indicating that research hotspots are largely consistent across both dimensions.
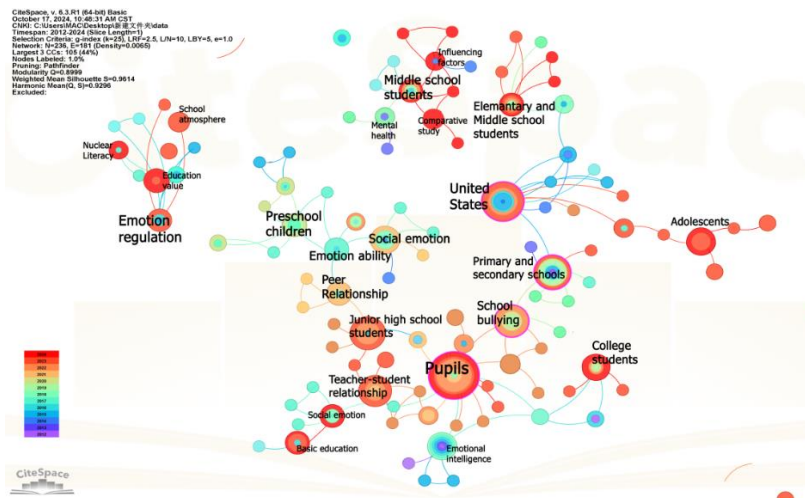

Figure 2. The Network of Keywords in Chinese SEL Research Area

Cluster Analysis of High-Frequency Keywords: In order to further explore the research hotspots in this field, a cluster analysis of high-frequency keywords was conducted (as shown in Figure 3). The results show that the template value (Q value) is 0.8977 and the average profile value (S value) is 0.9788. According to the standard that an S value greater than 0.3 indicates a significant clustering result (Chen, 2017, p.1-40), the clustering analysis results of research on social-emotional ability Chinese can be considered both significant and high-quality. Figure 4 vividly illustrates the key issues in this research field, which are explained in detail below.
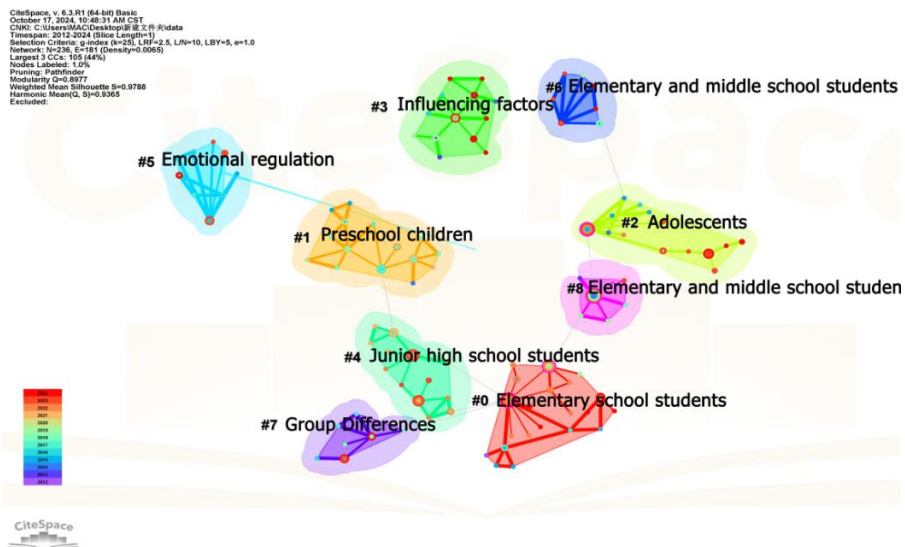
Cluster #0 is the largest category, consisting of 21 documents, with an S value of 1, including keywords such as "primary school students", "emotional intelligence", "school bullying", "intervention research", and "college students". Emotional intelligence is a core content of social-emotional learning. Particularly in primary school population, the development of emotional intelligence is closely related to their social interaction, academic performance, and emotional well-being.

The cluster analysis of this largest category shows that the research focuses on the improvement of emotional intelligence and its application in primary school students and school bullying. It also involves intervention research, exploring the improvement of students' emotional intelligence and social interaction through educational intervention.

In addition, although the college student population does not dominate this category, related studies still point out the importance of emotional intelligence in college students' emotional regulation.

Cluster #1 is the second-largest category consisting of 15 documents with an S value of 0.967. It includes keywords such as "preschool children", "enlightenment", "emotional ability", "social emotion", and "case study". This cluster mainly involves the emotional ability and social-emotional development of preschool children, and explores the intervention methods and experiences in actual teaching through case studies. The findings in this cluster offer valuable insights for educators, helping them better understand and support preschool

children's social-emotional learning. Research in this direction also highlights the importance of cultivating social-emotional abilities in early childhood education as a foundation for children's future development.

Cluster #2 is the third-largest category, which consists of 14 documents with an S value of 1. It includes keywords such as "adolescents", "social learning", "relationship research", "emotional learning", and "parents looking down". The research focus of this cluster is the social and emotional development of adolescents, especially the enhancement of emotional ability through social learning, parent-child relationships, etc. The keyword "parents looking down" indicates that changes in the family environment in modern society, especially parents' dependence on electronic devices, may have an adverse effect on adolescents' emotional development and parent-child relationships. This type of research emphasizes strengthening the collaboration between families and schools to jointly promote the healthy development of adolescents through social learning and emotional education.

Cluster #3 is the fourth category, consisting of 13 articles with an S value of 1. It includes keywords such as "influencing factors", "middle school students", "validity", and "comparative studies". This cluster focuses on the social-emotional learning of middle school students, explores the different influencing factors that affect the emotional development of this group, and evaluates the effectiveness of SEL projects and tools through validity and comparative studies. This cluster shows the importance of cross-cultural and cross-regional comparisons in understanding the effectiveness of SEL implementation in different contexts, and also provides a scientific basis for the design and evaluation of educational interventions.

Cluster #4 is the fifth category, which consists of 13 articles with an S value of 0.953. It includes keywords such as "junior high school students", "peer relationships", "teacher-student relationships", and "symbiotic theory". The cluster analysis of category #4 shows that the research focus is on the social and emotional development of junior high school students in peer relationships and teacher-student relationships, especially understanding the role of these interactions in emotional learning within the framework of symbiotic theory. Research shows that by establishing positive peer relationships and teacher-student interactions, junior high school students can better develop emotional abilities, improve social skills, and improve academic performance. This cluster reflects the focus on interpersonal relationships in SEL projects and emphasizes the importance of healthy interpersonal interactions in promoting emotional and social learning.

Cluster #5 is the sixth category, consisting of 9 articles with an S value of 1. It includes keywords such as "emotional regulation", "educational value", "social skills", and "emotional understanding". This cluster analysis emphasizes the core role of emotional regulation in social-emotional learning, especially in improving students' social skills and understanding other people's emotions. Research shows that the educational value of SEL is not only reflected in academic performance, but also in cultivating students' emotional and social skills, thus laying the foundation for their all-round development. This type of research provides educators with effective strategies and methods to help students succeed in emotional management and social skills.

Cluster #6 is the 7th category, consisting of 7 articles with an S value of 0.899. It includes keywords such as "elementary and middle school students", "cultivation system", "content analysis", "China", and "Canada". It mainly discusses the similarities and differences between China and Canada in the cultivation system of primary and secondary school students through content analysis, focusing on the differences in cultivation goals, curriculum settings, teaching methods, etc., reflecting the different emphases of the two countries in cultural background, education policies and practices. The study not only shows the characteristics of the two education systems, but also provides a useful reference for how to integrate advantages and optimize the education system of the country.

Cluster #7 is the eighth category, consisting of 7 articles with an S value of 0.952. It includes keywords such as "group differences", "basic education", "literature review", "application significance", and "social emotion". This cluster mainly explores the application of social-emotional learning in basic education, focusing on the differences in SEL cultivation among different groups (such as students of different ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds), and analyzing the practical significance of its educational application. These studies summarize the positive role of SEL in promoting students' emotional management, social skills, and learning motivation through literature review, and provides theoretical support and practical guidance for implementing SEL more effectively in basic education.

Cluster #8 is the 9th category, which consists of 6 documents with an S value of 0.988. It includes keywords such as "Elementary and middle school students", "social emotional curriculum", "family education", "countermeasures", and "safeguards". This cluster mainly focuses on the strategies and safeguards for implementing social-emotional curriculum in primary and secondary schools and emphasizes the important role of family education in social-emotional

learning. By exploring ways to promote students' emotional development and social adaptability through collaboration between families and schools, these documents put forward a series of effective measures, such as home-school cooperation, teacher training, and policy support- to ensure the smooth implementation and increased effectiveness of social-emotional curriculum.

Analysis of China's SEL Research Trends

Analysis of Salient Words in SEL Research: There are 10 prominent keywords in social-emotional learning research in China between 2012 and 2024. The chart reflects the research hotspots in education and emotion-related topics across different time periods.

In the early period (2012-2018), the research focused on "emotional intelligence", "emotional ability" and "primary and secondary school" education, reflecting initial attention to students' emotional development. During the subsequent period (2017-2020), the research focus shifted toward the social and emotional development of "preschool children" and "infants and young children", highlighting the growing importance of early childhood education. In recent years (2019-2024), topics such as "school bullying", "teacher-student relationship" and "junior high school students" have become the focus, indicating that as students grow older, the impact of school environment and teacher-student interactions on social-emotional learning has gradually become a key concern.

These evolving trends demonstrate the progressive deepening and broadening of social-emotional education across different age groups.

A Time Series Analysis of Research on SEL in China: Figure 4 shows nine major topic categories (#0 to #8), such as "primary school students", "preschool children", "youth", etc., representing research focuses in different age groups and educational environments. The larger the node, the greater the research intensity of the topic during a given time period. The color changes from cold (blue) to warm (red) to reflect the change from earlier to more recent times.

The detailed analysis is as follows:

First, regarding the change in the focus of research by age group- "Primary school students" (#0) and "primary and secondary school students" (#6): Since 2012, research on primary school students and primary and secondary school students has continued to receive attention. In particular, the topic of "primary school students" has shown a larger node after 2020, indicating that the research on social-emotional learning in the primary school stage has continued to rise.

"Preschool children" (#1): From 2015 to 2020, research on the social and emotional development of preschool children began to gain attention, reflecting a gradual increase in awareness of the importance of early emotional education.
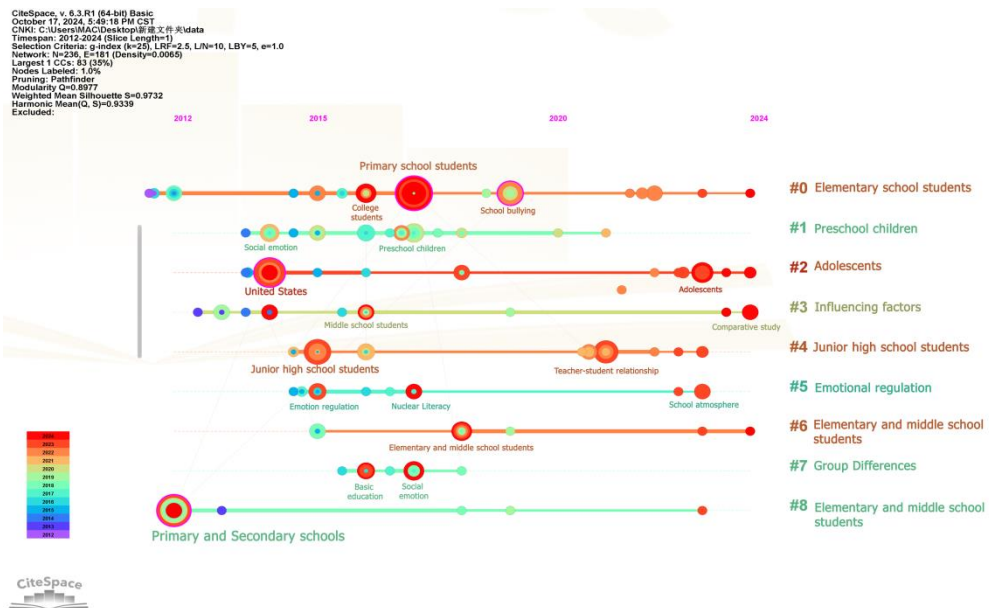
"Adolescents" (#2) and "junior high school students" (#4): The nodes for adolescents and junior high school students gradually increased after 2020, indicating that with the increase of age, the attention to the social and emotional development of adolescents and their manifestations at school (such as school bullying and teacher-student relationships) has gradually increased.

Secondly, regarding the refinement and diversification of research topics- "Emotional regulation" (#5) and "group differences" (#7): In recent years, the nodes for emotional regulation and group differences have increased, indicating that researchers are paying more attention to the variations in emotion management among different student groups and are exploring SEL methods suitable for these differences.

"Influencing factors" (#3): This topic likely involves how various external and internal factors affect students' social and emotional development, such as family environment, peer relationships, and school support systems.

Thirdly, regarding research trends and application significance: The map shows that since 2015, research topics have gradually become more refined and expanded to cover different age groups, emotion management skills, and influencing factors. This trend shows that the importance of social-emotional learning has been increasingly recognized and progressively applied across various stages of education.

The recent focus on "emotional regulation" and "group differences" also reflects the need for educators to personalize and differentiate teaching when implementing SEL. In general, the time-series map indicates that social-emotional learning research has undergone an evolution from holistic attention to more segmented and personalized approaches. It has gradually developed a variety of research topics for different age groups and students populations, offering valuable guidance for the future development of SEL-related education policies and practices.

CiteSpace, v. 6.3.R1 (64-bit) Basic
October 17, 2024, 5:49:18 PM CST
CNKI: C:\Users\MAC\Desktop\新建文件夹\data
Timespan: 2012-2024 (Slice Length=1)
Selection Criteria: g-index (k=25), LRF=2.5, L/N=10, LBY=5, e=1.0
Network: N=236, E=181 (Density=0.0065)
Largest 1 CCs: 83 (35%)
Nodes Labeled: 1.0%
Pruning: Pathfinder
Modularity Q=0.8977
Weighted Mean Silhouette S=0.9732
Harmonic Mean(Q, S)=0.9339
Excluded:

3. DISCUSSION

SEL Development Trends in China

The results of the study show that China's SEL research has gradually moved from the initial stage to systematic development, and the research focus has evolved from the initial exploration of emotional intelligence and basic education SEL courses to comprehensive research covering students of different age groups. In recent years, the academic community has paid more attention to SEL issues in social contexts such as "school bullying" and "teacher-student relationships", indicating that SEL is no longer limited to classroom teaching, but has extended to the construction of the overall school atmosphere.

From a global perspective, SEL research institutions in the United States, represented by CASEL, have formed a complete system in terms of SEL framework construction, policy formulation and implementation evaluation. For example, most American schools adopt systematic SEL courses, deeply integrate them with subject teaching, and ensure the long-term implementation of SEL through state and national policies (Ximeng & Xiaomin, 2023, p.109). Although China's SEL research started late, it has developed rapidly in terms of policy support and practical innovation. In particular, in recent years, under the background of the "double reduction" policy, SEL has gradually become an important part of education reform. In contrast, research in Europe and the

United States focuses more on the correlation between SEL and academic performance, while research in China emphasizes the synergy between mental health, family education, and school education.

Exploration of SEL Localization Practices in China

Although SEL originated in the Western education system, researchers in China have gradually recognized the importance of localized implementation during its promotion. Compared with international SEL framework, Chinese SEL research is exploring ways to adapt to local culture and social needs, mainly in the following aspects:

Integration of Traditional Culture: Many studies have attempted to integrate the Confucian concept of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, and governing the country" with the core competencies of SEL (such as self-awareness, self-management, social skills). For example, some schools have introduced Chinese classics and helped students understand the value of responsibility, empathy and interpersonal communication by reciting texts such as "The Analects of Confucius" and "The Great Learning" (Jia & Yunpeng, 2024, p.19; Yun, 2022, p.38).

Synergy Between Family and School: Unlike Western societies which emphasize school-led SEL instruction (Junmin & Yu, 2024, p.18), Chinese SEL research pays more attention to the influence of family factors. In recent years, some scholars have proposed the "home-school co-education" model, which is to enhance the support role of parents in children's SEL development through parent training, parent-child interaction courses, and similar initiatives (Chuanli & Lizhen, 2017, p.143; Linyan et al., 2024, p. 55).

Construction of Socialized Learning Environment: In addition to classroom instruction, campus culture development, mental health education, and community activities have also become important channels for promoting SEL. For example, some schools in Beijing, Shanghai and other places have begun to implement "emotion regulation" courses and, in combination with psychological assessment tools, are providing targeted SEL intervention measures (Jianhong, 2018, p.8; Juan et al., 2023, p.59).

Future Directions for SEL in China

As SEL continues to be promoted in China, its future development can be advanced in the following areas:

Policy Support and Curriculum Systematization: At present, China has not yet established a unified national curriculum standard for SEL. In the future, it is necessary to learn from frameworks such as CASEL in the United States, adapt them with the characteristics of Chinese education, and develop a systematic SEL teaching guide. This guide should be incorporated into the primary and

secondary school curriculum system to make SEL education more standardized and systematic.

Interdisciplinary Research and International Cooperation: At present, the academic network of SEL research in China is relatively scattered, lacking in-depth cooperation across institutions and disciplines. In the future, it is necessary to strengthen interdisciplinary research in psychology, education, sociology and other disciplines, and introduce mature SEL assessment tools and curriculum design concepts through international cooperation to promote the improvement of research quality.

Technology Empowers SEL Education: With the development of technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data analysis, technological means such as smart classrooms, emotion recognition software, and virtual reality (VR) can be used for SEL teaching and assessment. For example, foreign studies have used AI algorithms to analyze students' emotional states and provide personalized emotion regulation suggestions. China's SEL research can also explore digital intervention programs, such as developing an AI-based SEL learning platform to improve the interactivity and personalization of SEL education.

Improvement of Social and Emotional Assessment System: Currently, China's SEL assessment system is still in the initial exploration stage, and scientific and operational assessment standards need to be established in the future. There is a need to learn from advanced international practices, while taking into account the learning characteristics and socio-cultural background of Chinese students. Developing SEL assessment tools suitable for different age groups will help ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of SEL instruction.

In short, as public recognition of SEL continues to grow, future research and practice should further promote the deep integration of SEL into China's education system to achieve the all-round development of students and promote the improvement of the overall well-being of society.

Conclusion: In conclusion, this study systematically analyzes the research in the field of social-emotional learning (SEL) in China from 2012 to 2024, and summarizes the research hotspots and trends in this field. Our study found that SEL has gradually developed into a diversified topic covering different age groups and school behavioral issues in China. The research focus has gradually expanded from emotional intelligence and primary school education to preschool education, adolescent emotional development, and the influence of school environment factors. In recent years, topics such as school bullying, teacher-student relationships, emotional regulation, and group differences have received widespread attention, reflecting the application potential of SEL in improving students' mental health and school atmosphere. Chinese SEL research is still facing challenges in localization and promotion, especially in terms of

adaptability of culture and education system. In the future, promoting extensive cooperation and interdisciplinary integration in the academic community will help improve the quality and influence of research. In addition, by adopting international successful practices and combining the characteristics of Chinese education, gradually building a SEL curriculum system suitable for Chinese students will lay the foundation for students' emotional health and all-round development, and provide strong support for education reform and high-quality education goals in the new era.

However, due to potential omissions in literature retrieval and the limited compatibility of CiteSpace with the Web of Science and other English-language databases, this study did not include English-language literature, which presents certain limitations.

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