

# *Research on Social and Emotional Learning and Educational Equity*

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**Abstract:** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) entails acquiring and applying fundamental knowledge and skills to comprehend and manage emotions, establish positive goals, demonstrate empathy, nurture relationships, and make responsible decisions. Recent advancements in SEL research propose different SEL approaches, drawing insights from social justice, anti-bias education, cultural responsiveness, and sustaining pedagogies. Varied SEL initiatives aim for impartial learning experiences, contributing to the growth of each student. In China, the commitment to equitable education stands as a crucial national policy. This paper consolidates global research on how SEL addresses educational equity, scrutinizes culturally responsive and transformative SEL to give the definition of equitable SEL, and offers recommendations for introducing equitable SEL in China. Integrating SEL into schools, families, communities, and society can cultivate comprehensive student development, fostering inclusivity and harmony in societal structures. Lastly, this paper advocates for increased scholarly focus on SEL development in China, encouraging more research and practical initiatives.

**Keywords:** social and emotional learning, educational equity, China's education

## **1. Introduction**

Social and Emotional learning (SEL) encompasses the acquisition and practical application of essential knowledge and skills to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate empathy, cultivate positive relationships, and make responsible decisions [1]. Originating in the United States during the 1990s, SEL has gained global recognition and development through the efforts of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) [2]. In 2020, CASEL updated the definition and competencies of SEL, accentuating its commitment to educational equity and underscoring the crucial connections between schools, families, and communities in pursuing educational equity [2]. Recent advancements in SEL research propose equitable design and implementation approaches, drawing from the experiences of scholars in social justice, anti-bias education, cultural responsiveness, and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Diverse SEL initiatives are dedicated to providing more equitable learning experiences and outcomes for students in various environments, and achieving educational equity can contribute to the growth of each student, reciprocally impacting SEL development [3].

Educational equity is a longstanding international discourse. In China, it has become a foundational characteristic of the contemporary education landscape. Emphasized during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the commitment to providing every child with equitable and high-quality education solidifies educational equity as a fundamental national policy [4]. This study aims to enhance the understanding and implementation of educational equity within SEL practices by synthesizing current research on how SEL

addresses educational equity. It seeks to integrate China's specific national conditions, offering insights and recommendations for practical application.

## 2. Understanding Educational Equity

Educational equity lacks a universally precise or operational definition [5] and is frequently interchanged with educational equality in current academic discourse [3]. Equality pertains to fairness for the group, emphasizing equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of specific needs. Conversely, equity seeks to identify and address the specific needs of individuals within a group, emphasizing fair treatment for each person [6]. Addressing prevalent ethnic and racial disparities within the U.S. education system has become a primary focus in discussions on educational equity [7]. Research from the 1990s highlighted that when educators fail to address children's development comprehensively, the impact is most pronounced on children of color and those from marginalized communities [8], widening the gap between socially marginalized children and their peers. Insufficient cultural competence and a lack of developmental understanding have left many American teachers struggling to effectively communicate with students from diverse cultural backgrounds [4]. In recent years, heightened attention to racial issues has prompted a closer examination of inequality within American schools, leading educators—mainly white educators—to acknowledge the need to change certain practices [3]. A study pointed out that many SEL programs aimed at Black and Brown students are predominantly led by white educators, with educators from different cultural backgrounds finding it challenging to facilitate the genuine development of students of color [9]. Thus, if SEL programs solely pursue the completion of implementation goals without understanding and addressing the social-emotional needs of students from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, it is likely to hinder the proper development of SEL initiatives. Some scholars propose the need for the fair design and implementation of SEL methods [3], a concept that will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters.

In China, it is worth noting that the concepts of educational equity, educational democratization, educational equality, equal educational opportunities, educational justice, and educational fairness, while exhibiting subtle differences, are often used interchangeably in practice [4]. Educational equity in this paper is defined as a conscious effort to oppose systemic and institutionalized inequalities (e.g., disparity in access to educational resources due to school enrollment policies) and biases and promote the construction of an inclusive, multicultural learning environment to support the well-being of students undergoing inequality and injustice. This paper focuses not on providing recommendations to address systemic and institutionalized inequalities but on highlighting actionable SEL practices that individual schools and other educational institutions can adopt to create more equitable learning environments for all students.

## 3. Grounding Social and Emotional Learning in the Focus of Educational Equity

An equitable learning environment not only provides students with access to resources, opportunities, and experiences, yielding positive outcomes unrelated to students' demographic characteristics, but also systematically identifies and eradicates manifestations of entrenched systemic oppressive structures [10], providing a conducive environment for the development and advancement of SEL. On the other hand, although SEL cannot redress the enduring and deeply rooted educational disparities, its systematic implementation can foster an equitable and inclusive learning backdrop. SEL encapsulates the cultivation of five interconnected cognitive, emotional, and behavioral competencies: "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" [2]. These competencies demonstrably ensure that students' unique attributes—such as individual interests, talents, social identities, cultural values, and backgrounds—are esteemed, valued, and recognized instead of being biased, leading to different treatment and inequality. Additionally, through SEL, students develop positive social behavior, mitigate challenges, and alleviate emotional distress, contributing to a more inclusive learning environment [3, 9]. Despite the effectiveness of SEL programs in exhibiting components supportive of educational equity practices, current research underscores the importance of explicitly and intentionally considering how culture and power structures influence the development of social and emotional skills. Neglecting this aspect poses the risk of unintentionally coercing students to conform to predominant cultural norms that may clash with their cultural identity or stifle their nuanced experiences and perceptions of the world [11, 12]. This, in turn, begets adversity,

circumscribed development, and engenders educational injustice. Thus, SEL implementation demands a steadfast commitment to the explicit objective of fostering educational equity. In recent years, SEL researchers have proposed methods for grounding the design and implementation of SEL with an emphasis on educational equity. This section will elucidate two widely recognized approaches that integrate equity into SEL practice - culturally responsive SEL and transformative SEL - and analyze the common principles embodied in them.

### 3.1. Culturally Responsive Social and Emotional Learning

Despite incorporating themes related to cultural diversity and inclusivity in many SEL practices, their guidance typically extends only to encouraging students not to judge cultural differences based on personal preferences and to accept diversity, instead of enabling them to recognize cultural diversity as a valuable asset [11]. Consequently, students may hesitate to bring their unique strengths, values, and cultural backgrounds into the learning environment, potentially leading to feelings of marginalization [12, 13]. To foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment, it is crucial for all students to contribute their distinct attributes, meeting diverse growth needs and promoting educational equity. To deepen the understanding and appreciation of individual and community assets, scholars advocate for a perspective of cultural sustainability in SEL, giving rise to the concept of culturally responsive SEL [3, 14]. This approach uses diverse teaching strategies, such as personal narratives and ethnic music sharing, to foster a deep understanding of the connections between cultural assets and references [12]. While traditional SEL also aids students in enhancing self-awareness and social consciousness, culturally responsive SEL emphasizes comprehending diverse cultures. It advocates for fair treatment for oppressed groups, encouraging students to leverage life experiences in supporting their learning and self-awareness. Additionally, it urges students to utilize family and societal cultural assets to enrich the curriculum [13]. Adopting a cultural sustainability perspective for SEL enhances students' self-awareness, social consciousness, and relationship skills—particularly their ability to build communication and friendships across cultural backgrounds—and potentially contributes to establishing a fair and inclusive teaching environment. Furthermore, it can be inferred that culturally responsive SEL may help students grappling with psychological issues resulting from racism, stereotypes, and community violence alleviate their negative emotions, celebrate and develop their social-cultural identity, and guide them in addressing issues arising from historical trauma and social oppression.

### 3.2. Transformative Social and Emotional Learning

SEL often centers on cultivating individual responsible citizenship, yet the active engagement of citizens is deemed crucial for the vitality of democratic societies [12]. To position SEL as equitable, it must actively foster resistance to oppression and directly address power and privilege issues [15], necessitating a revised framework for SEL programs. Transformative SEL integrates social justice education and culturally responsive pedagogies into a unified approach, emphasizing culture, social and political identity, agency, positivity, belonging, and civic engagement [3, 11]. In 2020, CASEL claimed to periodically align SEL tools and resources with transformative SEL, emphasizing educational equity in program implementation [16].

Transformative SEL employs two critical strategies for promoting educational equity: providing additional learning opportunities for children lacking access to suitable conditions, creating a more equitable learning environment [13], and fostering the ability of all students to critically examine and collaboratively resolve issues related to power, privilege, bias, and discrimination, preparing them as critical citizens [12]. This approach connects SEL content and skills with students' existing knowledge, offering opportunities for understanding diverse cultures, encouraging reflection on personal and societal aspects, and grasping current and historical power structures [3]. Beyond conventional learning of concepts like “social justice” and “diversity,” it explicitly addresses how these themes relate to identity, power, and structure, nurturing empathy, moral perspectives, conflict resolution skills, and more. Integrating existing practices promoting social equity education into transformative SEL, including guiding students in discovering unique and interconnected characteristics, demonstrating action against injustices, maintaining high expectations, and encouraging ideas for advancing social equity, enriches the approach [17]. Strategies incorporating youth voices, participation, collaborative problem-solving, and decision-making into SEL, such as project-based learning and youth

participatory action research, empower students as advocates for self-holistic development and social change for education equity [3, 18].

### 3.3. Equitable Social and Emotional Learning

The two SEL approaches mentioned above, aimed at advancing educational equity, underscore two crucial aspects: 1) Guiding students to comprehend and appreciate diverse social and cultural identities, along with recognizing their own cultural assets; and 2) Assisting students in understanding the harms caused by social biases and issues of inequality and actively engaging in efforts to eliminate these problems. Thus, an equitable SEL should encompass these focal points.

## 4. Recommendations for Implementing Equitable Social and Emotional Learning in China

In China, a nation characterized by rich cultural diversity and diverse communities, the integration of equitable SEL is paramount for fostering the comprehensive development of students. This section provides recommendations for promoting equitable SEL across schools, families and community.

### 4.1. School

A thriving and harmonious school environment lays the foundation for fostering the social and emotional development of students. The successful implementation of equitable SEL practices hinges significantly on whether educators are equipped with the tools to enhance self-awareness and social-awareness, as well as understand the underlying roots of historical oppression and cultural bias within the school environment—essential factors for designing or adjusting SEL courses to attract and value the diverse experiences students bring to the classroom [9]. Hence, in crafting SEL courses, educators must undergo training to elevate their cultural responsiveness, thereby enhancing their ability to meet the diverse needs of students. This approach ensures the delivery of lessons that consider students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and assets while acknowledging and addressing the challenges they face regarding social injustice, inequality, bias, and exclusion. This imperative extends beyond SEL teachers to encompass all educators. Infusing SEL concepts into non-SEL academic courses, such as history, arts, literature, etc., can propel a more positive and inclusive school culture. Furthermore, educators who enhance their own social-emotional competencies are better positioned to understand student needs and cultivate positive relationships, thereby reducing student disengagement. This nurtures a compassionate learning community, advancing the cause of educational equity. Moreover, active participation in diverse campus activities is indispensable. Engaging in events like cultural appreciation fosters students' comprehension of diversity, creating an environment where students from various backgrounds feel valued and respected.

### 4.2. Family

Parents are the primary educators for their children, and the initiation of a student's SEL takes root in the home. Consequently, parents play a pivotal role in shaping the development of students' social-emotional competencies (SEC) [19]. Elevating SEC within the family setting contributes significantly to cultivating a positive environment for students' growth, thereby mitigating the impact of variations in family socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds on students' developmental trajectories. As schools and families constitute the two fundamental environments in a child's life, establishing a robust partnership between these entities is paramount. SEL advocates for a collaborative paradigm wherein parents and school personnel mutually share educational objectives and responsibilities, ensuring the delivery of coherent and systematically reinforced SEC across diverse contexts [20]. For instance, schools can regularly offer SEL learning opportunities for families, including activities such as cultural sensitivity training, workshops addressing social biases, and informative parent meetings. Clarifying the active role of parents as engaged collaborators and participants in SEL activities enhances the synergy between home and school [17], affording parents opportunities to contribute to the planning, decision-making, and implementation of SEL programs. Within such a collaborative framework, students gain the agency to select suitable and systematic approaches for developing their SEC,

thereby diminishing disparities among students from varied family backgrounds and fostering equitable educational advancement.

### 4.3. Community

In the United States, families and communities directly impact SEL implementation, influenced by government policies, technology, and funding, while schools in China face challenges in building strong relationships among families, schools, and communities, resulting in a lack of cooperation [21]. China needs a more precise definition of the community concept, historically overlooking its development. Schools in China struggle to collaborate locally, hindering the availability of community-based SEL resources. To address this, education departments should deepen their understanding of SEL, guiding its implementation and providing support to foster collaboration among families, schools, and communities. Community-based equitable SEL practices can include initiating public awareness activities emphasizing SEL's role in fostering a harmonious and equitable society, and encouraging local businesses and institutions to engage with the community, adopting inclusive recruitment practices that demonstrate a commitment to diversity and equity.

## 5. Conclusion

In China, achieving educational equity requires a coordinated approach to address students' socio-emotional needs across various interconnected realms. By seamlessly integrating SEL into schools, families, communities, and society, China can establish a comprehensive framework fostering students' holistic development. This integrated approach not only catalyzes individual growth but also contributes to the construction of a more inclusive and harmonious societal fabric. As China advances, investing in equitable SEL practices becomes an investment in the well-being and prosperity of future generations. Therefore, this paper advocates for increased scholarly attention to SEL development in China, encouraging further research and practical initiatives.

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