Journal of Education and Educational Policy Studies Vol.3 Issue 3 EWA Publishing
Available Online: 29 September 2025 DOI: 10.54254/3049-7248/2025.27295

# Social-emotional learning competence: conceptual connotation, theoretical framework, and research implications

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**Abstract.** Social-emotional is one of the key abilities for individuals to achieve comprehensive development in the 21st century, playing a crucial role in students' academic performance, physical and mental health, and future development. This study clarifies the conceptual connotation and theoretical framework of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) from a global perspective, while reviewing relevant research progress. It aims to address practical issues such as the weak connection between SEL cultivation and actual teaching practice, and the ineffective development of competence. Ultimately, two research implications are proposed: strengthening cultivation awareness to construct an efficient and systematic SEL program system, and enhancing teacher development to promote the integration of SEL with subject teaching.

**Keywords:** social-emotional learning, domain review, child development

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has attracted significant attention, as it positively predicts various variables related to personal development—ranging from civic behavior, life satisfaction, employability, and physical and mental health to educational achievement, the development of learning abilities, and academic performance [1]. SEL influences both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of individuals, and this competence is particularly crucial for adolescents. On one hand, SEL can help students improve their academic performance, foster reasoning, critical thinking, and reflection, enabling them to adapt to global changes and acquire lifelong learning skills. On the other hand, students with SEL are better able to regulate their emotions effectively, revise inaccurate perceptions of others, express emotions in socially acceptable ways, improve their learning attitudes, skills, and behaviors, establish healthy and efficient cooperative relationships with peers and teachers, and avoid conflicts [2, 3]. SEL is a core ability for children to adapt to complex environments and social development, playing a vital role in their comprehensive development [3]. Recently, research using keywords such as "social-emotional," "social-emotional," and "social-emotional learning" has been emerging. However, the connection between SEL cultivation and actual teaching practice remains weak, and the effectiveness of competence development is unsatisfactory. This may be due to the disconnect between frontline educators' practical work and theoretical research on social-emotional competence. A clear review of global research progress on social-emotional will facilitate students' comprehensive development and is also an inevitable requirement for deepening educational reforms at all stages in China.

## 2. Conceptual definition and connotative characteristics of social-emotional learning

### 2.1. Conceptual classifications of social-emotional learning

(1) Many scholars regard SEL as a set of skills or abilities: SEL is described as the ability to accurately define and regulate one's own emotions, improve problem-solving skills, and establish good relationships with others [2]. Binkley defined it as "essential skills in 21st-century education and workplaces" [4]. These skills include empathy, respect, prosocial behavior, cooperation, emotional expression and regulation, self-control, goal-setting, critical thinking, and problem-solving processes [2, 3]. CASEL believes that social-emotional competence includes five dimensions: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making [5]. (2) Other scholars view it as a trait. For example, Li et al. argue that

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SEL refers to personal traits and behaviors that enable individuals to establish and maintain positive relationships with others, meet social environmental requirements, and achieve expected goals within groups [3]. Abrahams et al. provided a detailed explanation, stating that social-emotional skills are personal traits derived from biological tendencies and environmental factors, manifested as consistent patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. They are formed through formal and informal learning experiences and influence various outcomes throughout a person's life [6]. (3) Brackett et al. consider SEL as a process integrating thinking, emotions, and behaviors to understand oneself and others, manage one's own and others' behaviors, and take responsibility for one's decisions [7].

### 2.2. Connotative characteristics of social-emotional learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in the United States is a pioneer in social-emotional learning. CASEL (2003) posits that social-emotional learning includes five dimensions: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Among these, self-awareness refers to understanding one's own feelings, realistically evaluating one's abilities, and fostering self-reliance; social awareness refers to understanding others' emotions, respecting diverse opinions to comprehend others' perspectives, and interacting positively with others; self-management refers to controlling one's emotions to approach things calmly, persisting in achieving goals, and continuing efforts without losing motivation when facing difficulties; relationship management refers to using emotions for effective communication, maintaining such communication in healthy and cooperative ways, resisting negative social pressure, attempting to solve problems, and seeking help when needed; responsible decision-making refers to considering all possible factors when making decisions, deriving appropriate decisions by weighing different perspectives, and taking responsibility for the decisions made [8].

In 2013, the Southeast Asia Community of Practice for Social and Emotional Learning (SACEL) published Effective Social-Emotional Learning Guidelines (Preschool and Primary School Versions), defining SEL as a process in which children and adults acquire and effectively apply necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions [9]. In 2021, SACEL updated its definition of SEL: it is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and demonstrate empathy for others, build and sustain mutually supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions [10].

In 2013, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released the report Toward Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn, identifying SEL as one of the seven core domains in the global learning framework for adolescents and children. It proposed subdimensions of the social-emotional domain in primary education, including community and social values, civic values, and mental health and well-being [11] (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Subdimensions of the social-emotional domain in primary education

| Subdimension | Description |
|---|---|
| Community and social values | Involves life skills that need to be understood and applied, including communication, decision-making, self-confidence, peer resistance, self-awareness, negotiation, friendship, self-esteem, advocacy for inclusion and non-discrimination, and emotional intelligence. |
| Civic values | Involves awareness and understanding of social and political concepts such as democracy, justice, and equality. It also includes the ability to defend and respect rules and norms, and to propose revisions based on specific contexts in schools, families, and communities. |
| Mental health and well-being | Children develop positive coping mechanisms to deal with trauma and other negative environmental factors. |

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), through its Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES), defines SEL as "abilities related to how people manage their emotions, perceive themselves, and interact with others."

## 3. Frameworks and measurement of social-emotional learning

### 3.1. Frameworks of social-emotional learning

In 2017, CASEL addressed the question "What is SEL?" in a report, proposing a wheel-shaped framework for social-emotional competence. This framework includes five interconnected abilities: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management,

relationship management, and responsible decision-making. It also identifies three environmental factors influencing students' social-emotional competence: classroom, school, and family and community (see Figure 1). In 2020, CASEL updated its SEL framework on its website, expanding the 2017 version (see Figure 2). Compared to the 2017 version, the 2020 framework categorizes environments influencing children's SEL development into four types: classroom, learning environment, family, and society. In the classroom environment, students' SEL can be enhanced through various teaching methods: (1) directly teaching and practicing SEL-related skills and attitudes; (2) adopting instructional practices such as cooperative learning and project-based learning; (3) integrating social-emotional learning with academic subjects such as language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health, and performing arts. In the school environment, effective integration of SEL requires continuous planning, implementation, evaluation, and improvement by all members of the school community, as well as creating a campus atmosphere where all students and adults feel respected, supported, and actively engaged. When schools and families establish genuine partnerships, they can build strong connections to strengthen students' SEL development. Communities are often regarded as trusted partners by families and students, providing safe and developmentally valuable environments for growth. Understanding community needs and resource advantages is essential to provide additional support and services to schools and families.

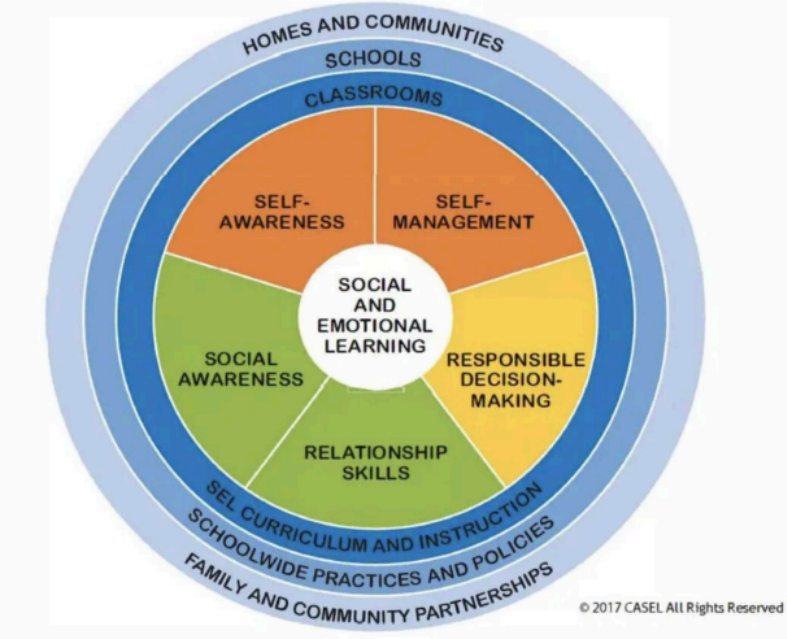



**Figure 1.** 2017 social-emotional learning framework




**Figure 2.** 2020 social-emotional learning framework

Hinerman integrated the above five abilities (see Table 2). He argued that despite diverse dimensional classifications in previous literature, SEL generally involves five interconnected cognitive, emotional, and behavioral abilities [8].

**Table 2.** Dimensional classifications of social-emotional learning

| Self-awareness | Social awareness | Responsible decision-making | Self-management | Relationship skills |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Recognizing and understanding emotions and thoughts 2. Accurate self-perception3. Recognizing strengths, limitations, and values4. Self-efficacy5. Strong self-confidence and optimism6. Spirituality | 1. Perspective-taking2. Empathy3. Appreciating diversity4. Respecting others5. Understanding social and moral norms6. Recognizing resources and support | 1. Problem identification and situation analysis 2. Making constructive and respectful choices 3. Problem-solving 4. Evaluation and reflection 5. Personal, moral, and ethical responsibility | 1. Regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors 2. Impulse control and stress management 3. Self-motivation and discipline 4. Goal-setting and organizational skills | 1. Communicating, socially participating, and building relationships 2. Establishing and maintaining relationships with diverse people 3. Resisting inappropriate social pressure 4. Collaborating 5. Negotiating, refusing, and managing conflicts 6. Seeking and providing help |

Based on a survey of SEL-related research in its member countries, the OECD (2021) summarized three key social-emotional competences: achieving goals, working with others, and managing emotions, which are highly consistent with the Big Five personality framework. Consequently, in the first round of the Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES), an SEL framework

was developed, including five competence categories: task performance, emotional regulation, collaboration, open-mindedness, and engaging with others. Each category is further refined into three skills (see Table 3) [12].

**Table 3.** "Big Five personality model" of social-emotional competence

| Task performance | Emotional regulation | Collaboration | Open-mindedness | Engaging with others |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Responsibility | Stress resistance | Empathy | Tolerance | Vitality |
| Perseverance | Optimism | Cooperation | Curiosity | Assertiveness |
| Self-control | Emotional control | Trust | Creativity | Sociability |

### 3.2. Measurement of social-emotional learning

Building on influential social-emotional competence frameworks, scholars at home and abroad have developed various related measurement scales and questionnaires.

As researchers increasingly focus on promoting students' physical and mental development and improving their social-emotional competence, Schonert-Reichl et al. developed the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI), a self-report tool to measure school-age children's well-being, and tested its reliability and validity. The MDI assesses five aspects of children's well-being in school and out-of-school settings: (1) social and emotional development, (2) connections with peers and adults, (3) school experiences, (4) physical and mental health, and (5) use of after-school time [13]. Hinerman et al. developed the Social Emotional and Character Development Scale (SECDS), which includes 29 Likert-scale items to assess skills and behaviors related to social-emotional and character development [8]. The SECDS comprises six constructs: prosocial behavior, self-control, respect for school, respect for family, honesty, and self-development. The scale uses the prompt: "How often do you engage in the following behaviors?" Items are rated on a 4-point scale (never, rarely, often, always), with higher scores indicating higher levels of SEL and character [8].

In 2011, the project team of "Social-Emotional Learning and School Management Improvement" jointly initiated by China's Ministry of Education and UNICEF conducted a series of studies. Combining foreign research with China's educational reality, they constructed a localized SEL framework and developed a scale to measure students' social-emotional competence. Using a 5-point Likert scale, the scale includes six dimensions: self-cognition, self-management, others' cognition, others' management, collective cognition, and collective management, with a total of 32 items. Huang Shenghua et al. designed a scale based on the five dimensions of students' SEL proposed by the OECD, with 8 items for each of the 15 subdimensions under the five dimensions, using a 5-point scoring system, totaling 120 items [14].

Subsequent assessments have become more comprehensive and complex. For example, Chen Zhaojun et al. (2023) developed a College Students' Social-Emotional Learning Scale to evaluate the development level of social-emotional competence among Chinese college students. This scale includes four dimensions: self-relationship ability, others-relationship ability, collective-relationship ability, and responsible decision-making ability. It emphasizes the connections between college students and themselves, others, and collectives. The scale's items, question formulation, and reliability and validity tests have been verified, ensuring its rigor [15]. The 2014 version of the Social Emotional Health Surveys (SEHS) includes four main dimensions, each with three subdimensions: Belief-in-self (self-efficacy, self-awareness, persistence), Belief-in-others (school support, family coherence, peer support), Emotional competence (emotional regulation, empathy, behavioral self-control), and Engaged living (gratitude, zest, optimism) [16]. The 2020 version adjusted the 2014 version by changing the 6-point scale to a 4-point scale and fine-tuning some subdimensions [17].

## 4. Research progress on students' social-emotional learning

Research aimed at improving students' social-emotional competence focuses on the development and implementation of SEL programs, factors influencing program effectiveness, and the impact of SEL on life.

### 4.1. Development of SEL programs and influencing factors

As the concept of SEL continues to evolve and gain popularity, researchers have increasingly recognized that SEL is not an innate ability but can be influenced by acquired interventions. Consequently, various programs designed to enhance students' social-emotional competence have been widely implemented across countries and regions, and their value and effectiveness have been repeatedly confirmed.

Taylor et al. conducted a meta-analysis of students from 82 schools in different regions that implemented social-emotional learning [18]. These students came from areas with varying economic levels, age groups, and school locations. A control group of students who did not receive interventions and an experimental group of students who received SEL interventions were

compared after long-term intervention. The results showed that students in the experimental group significantly achieved better academic performance, skill acquisition, learning attitudes, and prosocial behaviors [18]. An SEL program aimed at activating students' social empathy was implemented in Ireland to explore whether students' empathy levels were higher after participating in the program than before. The study involved 539 middle school students from 9 different schools, divided into a control group and an intervention group, with pre-test and post-test conducted for both groups. The results indicated that students who participated in the long-term program had higher social empathy, social care, and emotional resonance with others compared to those who did not participate, and the results were also better than their pre-test scores [19].

Numerous studies have shown that school-based SEL interventions are effective in promoting social-emotional competence, as evidenced by enhanced social and academic adaptability, and reduced behavioral problems and emotional distress [18,20-23].

Through a comprehensive literature review and synthesis, factors influencing students' SEL are categorized into external factors (unrelated to individual students) and internal factors (related to individual students), including program support, school characteristics, teacher characteristics, and student characteristics [24-29].

Domitrovich et al. (2015) examined whether the frequency and quality of implementing a game designed to improve students' SEL in classrooms were influenced by teacher and school factors. The results showed that only teacher-related factors affected program implementation, including the alignment between teachers' teaching methods and the game, and teachers' emotional exhaustion, while teacher demographic characteristics such as age influenced the quality of program implementation [24]. In the same year, another study explored the impact of teacher factors and school organizational factors on the implementation of a program promoting students' SEL, finding that influencing factors included school organizational forms and teachers' attitudes toward program implementation [25]. Additionally, Domitrovich and Combs et al. noted that resources available to teachers, students' personal characteristics, and the level of program support (e.g., training opportunities) can influence program implementation and thus students' social-emotional [26, 27].

## 4.2. Impact of SEL on students' learning and life

For example, Li et al. explored the relationship between the home learning environment and its internal structure (i.e., family structural characteristics, parents' beliefs and interests, and educational processes) and children's SEL, as well as whether gender plays a moderating role in this relationship [3]. A study investigated the impact of SEL on school adaptation among children transitioning from kindergarten to primary school, and its relationship with outcomes related to language or self-regulation [30]. Turki et al. explored the impact of social connectedness, achievement motivation, and SEL on college students' adaptation, as well as gender differences in achievement motivation and SEL levels [31]. Martinsone et al. , based on parents' and teachers' evaluations of preschool children, examined the influence of SEL on preschoolers' emotional and behavioral problems and learning outcomes [32]. SEL can also enhance young students' competitiveness, help them establish good interpersonal relationships and social environments, and facilitate a smooth transition from educational to work environments [33]. Mao Yaqing noted that SEL should be integrated with subject teaching, emphasizing knowledge connections between subject content and SEL enhancement, creating a positive participation atmosphere in teaching, guiding students to learn independently and experience actively, and helping them perceive the charm of positive emotions [34].

In summary, domestic and foreign research on social-emotional learning can be summarized into the following two levels:

Theoretically, research mainly focuses on the connotation, dimensional framework, and measurement of social-emotional learning. As an authoritative organization that first defined social-emotional learning, SACEL summarized SEL into five dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. Later, the OECD further divided these five dimensions into task performance, emotional regulation, collaboration, open-mindedness, and engaging with others. Many scholars have adjusted and improved these frameworks. Chinese scholars have also begun to propose localized connotations and dimensional frameworks based on these foundations. The OECD has collaborated with the Suzhou Education Bureau in China to conduct SEL assessment projects, measuring students' various abilities under SEL.

(II) Practically, research mainly focuses on applied studies of social-emotional learning. Research on social-emotional learning involves various fields, with education, psychology, and sociology all paying attention to it. In the field of education, researchers mostly focus on school management, teacher-student relationships, family education, and competence enhancement.

To conclude, in the early stages of research, scholars focused on theories of social-emotional learning, such as framework construction and improvement, program evaluation, and policies. Subsequently, they began to explore influencing factors of social-emotional learning and its relationship with other variables, finding that social-emotional competence can directly influence variables or play an intermediary role. Compared to foreign research, domestic research on this topic lags slightly, with early studies mainly referencing foreign theoretical research, but there is a growing trend toward localization. Furthermore, despite diverse research perspectives, few studies explore integration with specific subjects, especially in science disciplines, leaving room for further development in social-emotional learning research.

## 5. Research implications

### 5.1. Strengthen cultivation awareness and construct an efficient and systematic SEL program system

To address the challenges in developing school-based SEL courses, it is first necessary to correct conceptual biases, strengthen value guidance, and achieve ideological and behavioral consciousness in SEL education. Education authorities must deeply recognize the significance of SEL cultivation in implementing the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and promoting students' comprehensive development, explicitly elevating it to the strategic level of school development and the core goal of talent cultivation. School decision-makers should provide full-time teachers with activities such as thematic seminars, teacher-student discussions, and educational lectures to enhance attention to students' SEL cultivation. Additionally, SEL cultivation should be integrated into academic atmosphere and campus culture, and a strong atmosphere for social-emotional learning should be continuously built through diverse media and thematic activities, internalizing it into the common belief and conscious pursuit of all teachers and students, thereby laying a solid ideological foundation and broad consensus for curriculum development.

Meanwhile, establish a special working group, set up a stable and continuous special funding mechanism, and coordinate resource allocation and task promotion. In program design, stratified goals should be formulated according to students' cognitive development stages—for example, focusing on emotion recognition for lower-grade students and social responsibility for higher-grade students. Decision-makers should focus programs on students' real-world experiences, implement problem-solving projects to enable students to practice decision-making and leadership skills. Finally, design multi-dimensional evaluation tools to monitor students' performance in real time, forming a complete closed-loop for SEL program development.

### 5.2. Enhance teacher development and promote the integration of SEL with subject teaching

Teacher development for SEL courses should proceed on "dual tracks": on one hand, schools should actively introduce or cultivate a group of high-level teachers proficient in social-emotional learning theory and practice to undertake core curriculum development and demonstration teaching, forming a stable and reliable professional support force; on the other hand, integrate SEL cultivation concepts and teaching skills into teacher development systems, and improve all teachers' practical abilities in this field through full-staff training, thematic workshops, and excellent case sharing.

Promote the organic integration of SEL elements with professional courses based on the characteristics of different subjects. First, transform core elements of SEL—such as self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision-making—into subject teaching goals, achieving implicit integration through curriculum design. Second, innovate teaching methods, such as adopting experiential learning, gamified tasks, and mixed-age interaction, to integrate SEL elements like emotional expression and conflict mediation into knowledge transmission, forming a "unity of knowledge and action" teaching context. Finally, reform the evaluation system, establish a dynamic tracking mechanism combining process evaluation and digital tools, and achieve accurate assessment of students' SEL development through emotional diaries and records of collaborative contributions.

## Fund project

Youth Project of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Ministry of Education: Research on the Influence Mechanism and Long - term Intervention of Mathematics Academic Emotions of Primary and Secondary School Students in China under the Background of "Double Reduction" (22YJC880040); General Project of the 2022 Guangdong Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning, Research on the Current Situation and Ecological Mechanism of Students' Academic Burden in Compulsory Education in the Greater Bay Area (GD22CJY16); General Project of the 2024 Guangdong Province Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning: "A Study on the Theory and Strategies for Pre-service Cultivation of Innovative Teachers in the New Era" (GD24CJY47)

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