

The Development and Innovation of Social-Emotional Learning in China

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Abstract: In today's society, implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) is an important way to promote children's all-round development from the small sense, and the key to building global citizenship from the large sense. With the concept of social-emotional learning being proposed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), and SEL was putting on the global policy agenda by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), many countries have begun to explore and carry out relevant practices according to their actual conditions. This study takes the practice of MOE-UNICEF SEL Programme Team in China as an example to analyse how the policies and practices related to social-emotional learning were diffused and innovated in China. On this basis, some preliminary suggestions on policy formation, theoretical framework, areas requiring special attention, programme implementation and evaluation can be put forward, which are hoped to provide a little reference for the better promotion of SEL.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, pilot programme, case study, innovation

1. Introduction

The programme of social-emotional learning was first proposed in 1994 by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an international organization founded by American psychologist Daniel Goleman and educator Linda Lantieri. CASEL defined SEL as the process to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions [1].

Nowadays, the role of SEL in promoting the all-round development of human beings has been paid more and more official attention. The Education 2030 Framework for Action adopted by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 4 November 2015 put SEL on the global policy agenda [2,3]. According to Education for Sustainable Development Goals: learning objectives published by UNESCO in 2017, social-emotional domain is an important part of the specific learning objectives for the SDGs [4]. SEL is also regarded as the key to building global citizenship [5]. Since the 21st century, the US, the UK, Japan, Singapore and other countries have widely promoted SEL programmes in a large number of schools and achieved good results. In China, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) have set up MOE-UNICEF SEL Programme Team and carried out the pilot SEL programme for about a decade [6]. Now the programme is still in progress.

Against this background, existing research on SEL focuses on several typical areas: Significance and effect [7-10], evaluation method [11], criticism and critical analysis [12-14], future development trend [15], and case study to help reflect the current situation and provide suggestions for improvement or localization [9, 16]. Relatively few studies reflect the details of the development and innovation of SEL in the process of introducing and localizing SEL through a specific programme. This study takes the practice of MOE-UNICEF SEL Programme Team in China as an example to explain from the perspective of ordinary people in the beneficiary country how good international or foreign policies and practices are introduced into a country, modified locally, and then implemented.

2. Case Description

To prevent policies and practices that succeed in one environment encounter disappointing results after migrating to another environment [17]. Educational practice based on foreign experience should be pilot studied and evaluated to analyse the cultural mobility [18]. Most of the attempts of social-emotional teaching led by the Chinese authorities are the pilot practices conducted by MOE-UNICEF SEL Programme Team since 2011. Focusing on social-emotion learning courses and creation of supportive atmosphere, the programme is exploring a mode of education to promote all-round development of students. So far, it has finished two programme cycles—2011-2015 and 2016-2020, and is in the third cycle of 2022-2025. The first cycle of the programme is mainly practiced in 5 western regions, including 250 primary schools in 5 pilot counties of Panzhou, Guizhou; Mile, Yunnan; Zhongxian, Chongqing; Sanjiang, Guangxi; Shule, Xinjiang. Gradually, in 2018 there are 275 primary schools in 11 pilot counties including Qufu, Shandong; Macheng, Hubei; Yanchi, Ningxia; Gonghe, Qinghai; Kuqa, Xinjiang and so on. The test points in the third cycle are extended to 485 primary schools in 23 pilot areas of 8 provincial regions, including Sichuan, Chongqing, Hubei, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunnan.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the programme mainly draws lessons from the US and the UK. In December 2004, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) accepted the provisions of the Children's Mental Health Act of 2003 calling on the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to incorporate SEL standards into the Illinois State learning standards, and published the learning standards. In the standards, the three learning objectives that students must master based on CASEL's definition of SEL skills include "cultivating self-cognition and management ability to ensure achievement in academic and life" and "using social cognition and interpersonal communication skills to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships" [19].

In 2003, after a report named *What Works in Promoting Children's Emotional and Social Competence and Wellbeing?* was published by Gay Gray with the support of the UK's Department of Education and Skills, the UK started to implement Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme in 25 Local Authorities. According to Gorman's five-factor model of emotional intelligence, the programme defines social-emotional skills as five dimensions including self-awareness and managing feeling [19].

On the basis of extensive reference to various studies, the programme expert team in China believes that students' social-emotional ability includes two dimensions: cognition and management. The former is a cognitive factor, which involves the problem of "knowing how to do"; The latter is a behavioural factor, which is related to the problem of "how to do it actually" [3]. In addition, the theoretical framework of western countries mostly emphasizes the two aspects of individuals and

others. China's theoretical framework has been slightly modified based on the Chinese cultural values, adding the "collective" aspect.

Therefore, to improve students' social and emotional skills, the technical team, composed of experts from Beijing Normal University and various programme areas, constructs the theoretical framework as follows with Chinese characteristics. The framework bases on the tradition of Chinese cultural values and the reality of China's basic education. It aims to cultivate students' cognition and management of themselves, others, and the collective.

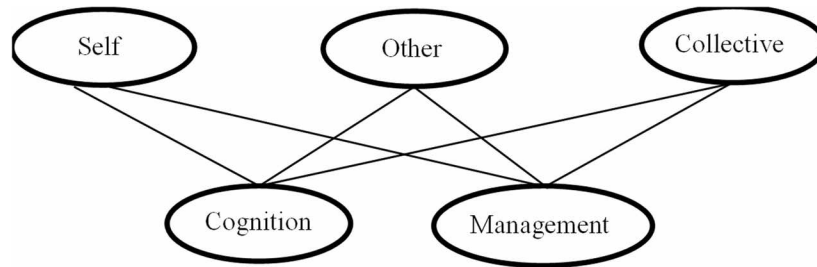


Figure 1: MOE-UNICEF SEL programme team's theoretical framework.

3.2. Organization Structure

There are two main leading agencies of the programme: UNICEF and the Department of Teacher Affairs of the MOE who set up the special working group—MOE-UNICEF SEL Programme Team. The Department of Teacher Affairs of the MOE also set up a programme management office to overall responsible for evaluation and analysis, formulation of guidance plan, design of courses and textbooks, etc. The expert team of state-level with members who are mainly university professors entrusted by the MOE and recommended by programme provinces are formed as the think tank of the programme to promote the implementation of SEL curriculum. In the process of specific implementation, the Programme Team is responsible for overall planning, after determining the province where the programme will be implemented, the person in charge leads the team to carry out practice in test points. The Programme Team and relevant institutions will also actively build expert teams of city-level, county-level and school-level for the local area to provide technical support in the process of programme implementation.

First, the Programme Team will draw up a research plan to approximately determine the number and geographical distribution of schools required for the programme, write a research plan, and then submit it to the MOE and UNICEF for review. After reviewing and determining, request the Department of teacher work of the MOE to inform the education department of each province in the form of issuing a document, and then ask the education department of each province to choose the programme school. The Programme Team will clearly write down the requirements of the programme school in the research plan, but will not interfere too much in how the provincial education department chooses the programme school. Provincial education department adopts the form that the school reports voluntarily first and determines by the MOE. It is also possible for the education department to appoint directly.

3.3. Test Points

In the preparatory stage of the programme, the most important thing is how the Programme Team determines the province for the test. At the initial stage of the programme, the practice is mainly conducted in relatively remote, underdeveloped, ethnic minority inhabited areas. This not only refers

to the experience of the US and the UK, but also considers the realistic factors of China. Under the influence of factors including regional culture, national development policy, the system of local responsibility for basic education, local social and economic development level and natural conditions, the development level of basic education in the remote ethnic areas in western China is relatively low. Therefore, it is difficult for children living here to obtain adequate school education. In addition, most parents go to work in cities far away from home making their children left-behind and lack of family education [20]. These factors make children lack of social-emotional learning, which can easily cause them to be troubled by bad emotions, and have a low level of self-acceptance and self-confidence [21].

From the perspective of overall personal development, children in these areas urgently need social-emotional learning. Taking these areas as the first batch of pilots can improve their emotional wellness and even change their lives. From the perspective of building lasting regional peace and stability, carrying out the programme in these areas first is conducive to maintaining regional social stability, promoting the quality of education in remote ethnic minority areas and cultivating high-quality talents. It will help to alleviate the problems faced by the region. From the perspective of the promotion of the programme, carrying out the programme in the most needed areas first will make it easier to get significant results in the early stage of the pilot practice, and then provide a reference for the subsequent practice of the programme.



Figure 2: Distribution of pilot provinces in the first period.

One of the goals of the programme is to gradually spread SEL education across the country based on the experience of accumulated in the early cycle. The first cycle mainly focuses on remote and weak areas. In the second cycle, some central regions of China gradually join the programme, and in 2018 the number of provinces involved increase from 5 to 11. The test objects further expand and have more generally representative. During the third cycle, the selection of the provinces participating in the programme emphasizes the full coverage of western, central and eastern China.

Therefore, many developed eastern regions have been added to the programme, including Jiangsu Province which has achieved a high score in the PISA test of OECD. On the one hand, test points in regions with different development levels reflect how the programme in the west, central and east of China more suit local conditions. On the other hand, the regions involved in the test are those with relatively strong influence in their surrounding areas, and the transformational force of these test points forms a radial network, which can accumulate experience and provide reference for the overall

policy change and system innovation, promoting the pilot results to regions with different conditions throughout the country [22].



Figure 3: Distribution of pilot provinces in the third period.

3.4. Implementation

The implementation of the programme depends on the construction of a supportive environment including school management, teaching and home-school cooperation. According to Pensner—director of the education of UNICEF, social and emotional knowledge can be integrated into the school spirit through school management, the all-round development of students can be promoted through teaching, and more psychosocial support can be provided through the cooperation between parents and teachers.

The effective implementation of SEL programme in schools needs to carry out comprehensive reforms from various aspects, such as the improvement of principals' leadership, the development of teachers' professional ability, the implementation of effective teaching, the creation of supportive school climate, and the application of SEL in the family. The executants of these changes—school principals, teachers and parents—need solid theoretical support and concrete, actionable practical guidance.

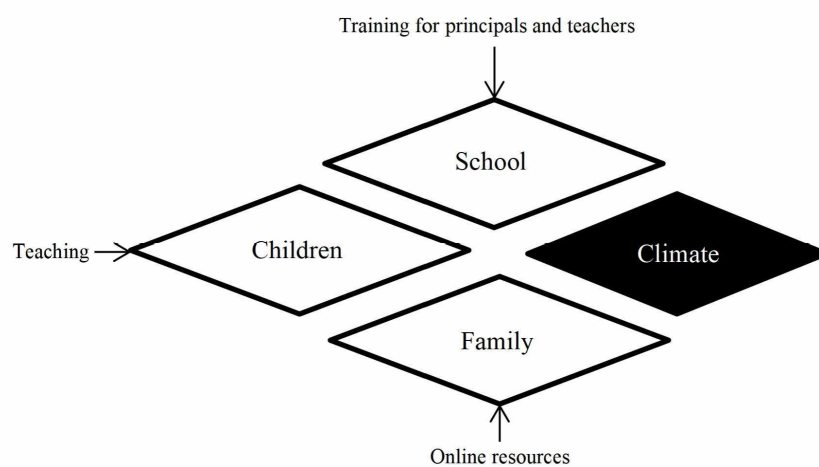


Figure 4: Stakeholders in implementation.

In the process of programme implementation of the first two cycle, the Programme Team drawn from SEL programmes in countries like the UK, the US, and Australia, combine with the direction and practice of domestic basic education development and SEL experience, develop completed series

resources (manual for creating school climate, principals, teachers, training, school teaching, family activities, etc.) to guide the practice in detail, also lay a solid foundation for the programme to promote in wider range. As in the UK, the Programme Team puts these resources online for those who need them. In addition to the resources for schools, UNICEF has also opened a WeChat column on SEL for parents, working with schools to escort the development of SEL of children.

Combined with the British SEAL teaching materials and China's own educational and cultural background, the teaching and management of the primary and secondary schools, the Programme Team organize the materials of SEL course teaching, open seven programmes of SEL school-based curriculum, and build the curriculum implementation of the four links teaching mode on the basis of learning from international experience.

In the new cycle, the following are the things to focus on. First, carry out the investigation and publicity of the current situation during the compulsory education stage; Second, support local governments in expanding the coverage of primary schools of the programme; Improve the existing resources of SEL in primary schools and digitize them; Formulate guidelines for the secondary school stage, develop teaching resources in junior middle school, and carry out teacher ability building activities to better meet the needs of junior high school students; And develop a general framework for SEL competence that runs through all learning stages to provide a basis for national and regional policy development, school management and evaluation systems.

Last, it is also important to implement the technical support mechanism and expert team of provincial- county-district schools, and do a good job in the launching meeting and ability improvement training meeting of the province (city, district) of each programme. The expert team needs to constantly innovate, and summarize the case results and development rules of SEL in the primary school stage, construct the theoretical framework of the junior middle school stage, actively explore the implementation path and promote the vertical connection of SEL in the compulsory education stage.

3.5. Analysis of Feedback, Evaluation, and Spread

The process of programme promotion is consistent with the framework of policy innovation and policy diffusion, reflecting the four modes of nationwide interaction, regional dissemination, leader-follower and vertical influence [23].

As an "evidence based" educational practice, phase assessment is the basis of innovation and diffusion of the programme. At present, the evaluation of the effect of the programme is conducted in various forms, mainly adopting quantitative research methods and supplemented by quantity research methods such as interviews. The questionnaire for quantitative research is being continuously optimized and invested in the latest large-scale evaluation. The official evaluation is entrusted by the programme office to the expert team, and the members of expert team is mainly from Beijing Normal University and other universities. The professors will lead their own investigation teams to collect data on the spot for analysis. These survey assessments include comprehensive assessments and researches focused on specific aspects, on the one hand, to understand the current situation of the supporting conditions for the development of students' social and emotional ability; on the other hand, to help the programme areas and schools to explore their advantages and find the right direction.

Unstructured feedback is also necessary. The program team hold a meeting regularly, sometimes hold a large-scale programme promotion meeting, let the programme area of the last cycle to share the main experience of programme implementation and successful practices, representatives of the new pilot area also speak. It makes the meeting become important ways for programme leaders to obtain unstructured feedback, and also gives different regions of an opportunity for fully exchanges and learning experience. This builds a national interactive network for the dissemination of the local good policies, enabling areas that have not yet started new programmes to efficiently learn from the experiences of areas that have adopted new programmes.

Although the SEL programme is still in the exploratory stage and has not yet formed the policies at the national level, some grass-roots governments that have carried out the practice and successfully explored the experience have incorporated them into the local policies. For example, Zhongxian County of Chongqing wrote the programme promotion into the government work report, incorporated it into the local education plan and the decision of regional-characteristic construction of education, took the programme training as an important part of talent construction, and listed the implementation of the programme as a boutique key talent programme. In the practice of the first three programme cycles, the local governments receive the guidance of the central government and the intergovernmental organizations, so the policy innovation of the county-level governments has something to do with the vertical influence of state-province-city. In addition to developing in areas where official guidance is received, the programme can also be actively adopted in the process of learning from each other in neighbouring districts. According to the leader-follower model, the places with strong influence can also promote the spread of good policies and measures in the neighbouring areas with similar basic conditions.

4. Suggestions

Based on the above analysis, there are some suggestions. It would be great if the suggestions could provide a little help for the further development of the programme.

4.1. Policy and Theoretical Framework

First, as for policy, SEL has so far not explicitly reflected as a national policy in China. Under the guidance of the MOE and UNICEF, when the SEL programme in China have developed to a certain scale and accumulated sufficient experience, it can be included in the policy agenda and upgraded to systematic policy recommendations at the national level. The practice of the UK and other countries can be referred that local authorities and schools to selectively implement SEL education according to needs [24]. Second, new content reflecting the changes of the times can be further added to the theoretical framework.

4.2. Programme in Rural Areas

Depending on where the programme is carried out, bringing in SEL education may be unfavourable for rural schools to improve the teaching level of academic courses because the total amount of resources available for rural schools to improve education are limited. To promote SEL education in rural areas must not rush for success. The programme should be carried out gradually within schools' acceptable level, making this programme a long-term work and slowly achieve the goal. At the same time, it is also necessary to provide extra help to improve the teaching level of academic courses in rural areas, and ensure that the practice of SEL education does not weaken existing teaching activities. If the financial allocation received is not be enough to perfectly implement the programme, it can be tried to obtain funds from more channels, for example, investment and donation, and launch Public-Private Partnership program (PPP) for more resources.

4.3. Implementation

In terms of implementation, in the new cycle, when forming the overall plan of SEL education in secondary school, the number of class hours can be reduced, and few but quality assured SEL curriculum and counselling services can be offered. The potential negative impact on junior school students' scores in academic courses. Considering that secondary school students are busy studying multiple courses and face the pressure of school entrance examination, too many SEL courses will shorten

the time they spend on academic studies, which may have a negative impact on their test scores of academic courses. To avoid the unintended adverse consequence, the main beneficiaries of the SEL curriculum could be narrowed to primary school students. While for junior school students, more attention can be paid to the quality and pertinence of the SEL courses services, and different forms of services for students in need. This allows secondary school students to achieve a balance between the SEL education and the learning of academic courses.

4.4. Evaluation

As for evaluation, in the unstructured feedback, if interviews are to be conducted, the interviewees can include school children in addition to principals, teachers, etc. On-the-spot interview can be carried to obtain information about children's satisfaction of SEL courses and their learning effects.

For structured assessment, first, the effect to be achieved in a school can be more specific. For example, taking "the proportion of rural children graduating with social and emotional knowledge and skills" as the ultimate outcome indicator. The target can be 60% of rural children graduate with social and emotional knowledge and skills. Second, in terms of evaluation methods, the difference in differences technique can be adopted more. Because the programme needs both assessing impact by comparing outcomes before and after the programme was implemented, and comparing the test points with other similar schools that were not subject to the intervention, the difference in differences technique, which combines "matching" with "Before/After" approach, becomes the first choice. Apart from that, the difference in differences technique can also help eliminate the impact of common external factors.

In terms of grouping, the children will become the treatment group if their school is already a pilot site taught, other children who are similar to those in treatment group from schools in similar areas nearby but without the implementation of the programme will become the control group. A questionnaire can be conducted with the treatment group and the control group to assess the level of social and emotional skills of the children at this time. During this period, the treatment group includes the children whose school is intended to adopt the programme. After a period of programme implementation, the same questionnaire will be issued again. Compare the difference in "level of social and emotional skills of children who have received a period of SEL education and before" with that of children in the control group. The net effect of policy implementation can be obtained.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the pilot SEL programme planned by MOE-UNICEF SEL Programme Team in China has learned the successful experience of other countries, and carried out localization and innovation according to the local social and economic development situation, education system, social consensus, etc. The development and innovation of the SEL programme in China show the following characteristics:

First, keep the part of foreign theories and practices applicable in China to the greatest extent to ensure that the original intention and concept of SEL can be accurately realized. The theoretical framework of the programme is extracted and integrated from the Illinois State Learning standards of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) in the USs and the definition of social-emotive skills of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme in the UK. It is based on the well-developed theories that the Programme Team adds the "collective" aspect into the theoretical framework. Necessary preservations provide a firm basis for subsequent development and innovation.

Second, give full play to the characteristics of the system, not only emphasize the guidance of the superior authorities, but also attach importance to the subjective initiative of the local government

and each school. Under the system of local responsibility for basic education, the Ministry of Education set up special group and office to formulate the overall development plan, prepare the manual books and promote the implementation of the programme. The national expert team established by the Ministry of Education provide consultation and technical support, and the officials of UNICEF provide guidance throughout the process, ensuring the pass down from the national level to the provincial level; Each province is responsible for the specific implementation of SEL in pilot schools in its jurisdiction under the guidance and supervision of the superior authorities. The programme makes full use of this hierarchical management system, so that SEL can be implemented in different places according to local conditions under a good top-level design.

Third, make the focal content stand out. On the one hand, emphasize professionalism. Not only has the importance of the expert team been emphasized in the past and in the future, but also the training of teachers and principals has always been the focus of the work. A variety of training forms, led by training manuals and training conferences, are trying to build a professional team of teachers and principals to carry out SEL practice. On the other hand, emphasize autonomy. From the perspective of the implementation process, counties are encouraged to explore new practices that are in line with their own conditions and form good experiences, and the Programme Team provides opportunities for exchange of experiences for them at the exchange meeting; From the perspective of teaching content, the programme attaches importance to school-based curriculum, so that schools can also give full play to their resource advantages, combine with school development to empower SEL practice.

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