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Mechanisms and an Implementation Framework for Social and Emotional Learning to Support Students Experiencing Academic Difficulties in Rural China: A Theoretical Construction Study

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Abstract

Persistent academic difficulties in rural schools stem not only from gaps in subject knowledge but also from factors such as students' emotion regulation, learning beliefs, classroom participation, and relational support. Social and emotional learning (SEL) offers a multidimensional framework for understanding these processes. However, current evidence remains insufficient to determine whether SEL can directly and consistently improve the academic achievement of students experiencing academic difficulties in rural China. This study utilizes a theory-driven integrative literature synthesis to compare international meta-analyses, intervention studies, and empirical and implementation research on SEL in rural Chinese schools. Drawing on the SEL competency framework, social cognitive theory, and a school–family–community systems perspective, the study constructs a framework linking the development of social and emotional competencies, learning motivation and engagement, and a relational learning environment. The analysis suggests that SEL may indirectly support students' learning adjustment by strengthening self-awareness and emotion regulation, increasing academic self-efficacy and engagement, and enhancing teacher–student and peer interactions. Student heterogeneity, intervention quality, school resources, and implementation sustainability constrain these effects. The study differentiates between proximal social-emotional outcomes, intermediate learning processes, and distal academic outcomes. It proposes testable theoretical propositions and an implementation framework for rural schools that integrates universal provision with targeted support.

Keywords

Social and Emotional Learning; Rural Education; Students Experiencing Academic Difficulties; Academic Self-Efficacy; Academic Engagement; Implementation Science

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Statement: From Knowledge Remediation to Multidimensional Learning Support

Persistent academic difficulties constitute a significant challenge for educational equity and school improvement in rural compulsory education. Traditional interventions focus on addressing subject knowledge gaps through remediation, additional practice, and individual tutoring. However, these methods may not adequately meet the needs of students who also experience learning anxiety, low self-efficacy, negative peer interactions, and a reduced sense of school belonging. Academic difficulties should not be attributed exclusively to students' abilities or learning attitudes; rather, they should be examined in relation to individual development, classroom dynamics, and institutional support.

Research in developmental science and educational psychology indicates that social and emotional competencies are closely linked to children's school adjustment, behavioral regulation, and academic development. The development of self-regulation and executive function significantly influences school readiness and academic performance (Blair & Raver, 2015). Social-emotional development and academic learning interact during classroom activities (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Nevertheless, academic difficulties do not necessarily stem from deficits in social and emotional competencies, nor can social and emotional learning (SEL) substitute for subject teaching and special education support. A more nuanced perspective suggests that social-emotional processes may serve as important mechanisms associated with academic difficulties and represent conditions amenable to intervention.

1.2. Existing Evidence and Research Gaps

International research offers substantial empirical evidence supporting the educational value of school-based SEL. Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs involving 270,034 students, reporting improvements in participants' social-emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance. The observed improvement in academic performance corresponded to an increase of approximately 11 percentile points. Cipriano et al. (2023) synthesized 424 studies, 252 programs, and 575,361 students across 53 countries, finding that SEL interventions were associated with enhancements in social-emotional competencies, school climate, peer relationships, and academic achievement. These effects varied depending on intervention content, implementation context, and implementation quality. Notably, these studies primarily focused on general student populations, and their findings cannot be directly generalized to students experiencing persistent academic difficulties.

Empirical research on SEL in rural Chinese schools has expanded in recent years. Wang et al. (2016) conducted a randomized controlled trial involving 7,495 students from 70 rural middle schools in China, finding that dropout rates and

learning anxiety declined after eight months of intervention. However, the overall effects were no longer significant at 15 months, although some students at high risk of dropping out continued to benefit. A quasi-experimental study in rural primary schools by Li and Hesketh (2024) reported that an SEL program produced a modest reduction in students' psychosocial difficulties immediately after the intervention and at a five-month follow-up. However, academic achievement was not directly examined. Fu et al. (2024) implemented a locally adapted SEL program with 648 fifth-grade students from two rural primary schools in Chongqing. Students reported improvements in their social-emotional competencies, but the study did not separately analyze students experiencing persistent academic difficulties. In a subsequent study, Fu et al. (2025) interviewed 15 teachers and administrators involved in program implementation and identified teacher training, ongoing coaching, and school-based support as facilitators of implementation. Academic performance pressure, administrative workload, limited community involvement, and insufficient funding were identified as major barriers.

Overall, the primary limitation of existing research is not the lack of SEL studies in rural Chinese schools, but rather three key gaps. First, students experiencing persistent academic difficulties are seldom examined as a distinct group, and their social-emotional developmental needs remain insufficiently understood. Second, there is a lack of coherent explanations of the mechanisms by which SEL may influence academic progress, particularly through academic self-efficacy, engagement, and classroom relationships. Third, while existing studies have identified short-term intervention outcomes, the long-term sustainability of these effects and the influence of school, family, and community conditions require further investigation.

1.3. Research Aim, Questions, and Theoretical Contributions

This study brings together the SEL competency framework, theories of learning motivation, and evidence from rural school implementation to develop a conceptual framework for understanding how SEL may support students with persistent academic difficulties in rural China. It also examines the possible mechanisms and contextual conditions involved. The study addresses three research questions: RQ1: Which social-emotional developmental needs of students with persistent academic difficulties are associated with their learning engagement and school adjustment? RQ2: Through which individual psychological and classroom relational mechanisms might SEL influence these students' learning engagement and academic development? RQ3: Which school, family, and community conditions may facilitate or constrain the quality and sustainability of SEL implementation in rural schools?

The study offers three principal theoretical contributions. First, it links the five core SEL competencies with the learning processes of students experiencing academic difficulties, avoiding a reductionist interpretation of social-emotional development

as an individual competency deficit. Second, it distinguishes social-emotional competencies, academic self-efficacy, academic engagement, and academic outcomes, and outlines pathways with temporal and mediating logic. Third, it incorporates school, family, and community support, as well as implementation quality, into the analytical framework. This approach highlights the context-dependent nature of SEL and avoids treating it as a universal causal effect independent of educational settings.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Definition of Key Concepts

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is not a single emotion-training course and should not be equated with "non-cognitive skills." According to CASEL, SEL is the process through which individuals acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, understand others, establish supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions. SEL includes five interrelated competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These competencies are developed through individual development and are cultivated through interactions in classrooms, schools, families, and communities.

In this study, the term "students experiencing academic difficulties" refers to those who have not met grade-level or curriculum learning expectations over a sustained period and who continue to show limited progress under regular classroom instruction. This concept describes students' educational performance and support needs, rather than a fixed identity. It should not be conflated with clinical or special education categories such as intellectual disability, specific learning disorders, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Identification should consider how long the difficulties have lasted, the subjects affected, and students' learning progress; a single examination result is insufficient.

Rural residence or left-behind status is not evidence of inadequate social-emotional competencies. Family migration, caregiving arrangements, economic resources, and school conditions may affect students' access to support. However, rural students are a heterogeneous group, and structural circumstances should not be turned into deficit labels for individual students.

2.2. SEL and Academic Outcomes: From Overall Effects to the Evidential Boundaries for the Target Group

Meta-analyses indicate that school-based SEL programs generally enhance students' social-emotional competencies and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023). However, these effects may vary according to age, program content, implementer, and school context. The overall effects observed in the

general student population cannot be assumed to apply equally to students experiencing persistent academic difficulties. Implementation quality and contextual differences are particularly influential. While research on universal SEL provides a foundation for understanding potential mechanisms, it does not directly answer whether students experiencing persistent academic difficulties benefit to the same extent.

Studies conducted in rural Chinese schools suggest that the effects of SEL may initially manifest in proximal outcomes, such as reduced learning anxiety, improved psychosocial functioning, and enhanced social-emotional competencies. Wang et al. (2016) observed that some intervention effects diminished over time, with high-risk students exhibiting different responses. Li and Hesketh (2024) reported a modest improvement in students' overall psychosocial difficulties, without significant changes on any subscale. Fu et al. (2024) identified primary improvements in social-emotional competencies, while Fu et al. (2025) highlighted organizational pressure, administrative workload, and limited resources as constraints on sustained implementation. These findings offer preliminary support for SEL implementation in rural schools. However, they do not directly answer whether SEL improves the academic performance of students experiencing persistent academic difficulties.

2.3. Theoretical Foundations: Competency Framework, Social Cognitive Mechanisms, and Implementation Context

This study establishes a theoretical foundation for examining SEL across three dimensions: competency development, motivational mechanisms, and implementation context.

The CASEL competency framework defines the content of SEL. Self-awareness and self-management mainly involve recognizing emotions, understanding personal strengths, regulating behavior, and managing goals. Social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making focus on understanding others, communicating cooperatively, resolving conflict, and evaluating behavioral consequences. These five competencies are related and together shape students' daily learning and social interactions (CASEL, 2020).

Social cognitive theory elucidates potential motivational mechanisms linking SEL to academic behavior. Bandura (1977, 1997) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capacity to organize and execute actions necessary to achieve specific goals. Self-efficacy influences goal selection, effort, and persistence in the face of challenges. Although self-efficacy is not a core competency in SEL, it may develop through self-regulation and positive interactions. Successful learning experiences, peer modeling, teacher feedback, and the regulation of anxiety and frustration may collectively strengthen students' academic self-efficacy, which in turn may enhance their persistence and engagement in learning. This proposed

pathway remains theoretical and requires empirical validation through media. A school–family–community systems perspective clarifies the conditions necessary for effective SEL implementation. CASEL highlights the importance of collaboration among classrooms, schools, families, and communities (CASEL, 2020). Implementation research demonstrates that program outcomes depend not only on curriculum content but also on organizational support, implementer competence, training and coaching, resource provision, program adaptation, and implementation quality (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Research in rural schools by Fu et al. (2025) further indicates that academic performance pressure, administrative workload, insufficient community involvement, and limited funding may constrain the sustained implementation of SEL programs.

2.4. Logical Structure Drawing on these theoretical perspectives

This study constructs a conceptual framework to understand how SEL may support students experiencing persistent academic difficulties. The proposed process is organized into three interconnected levels: competency development, motivational engagement, and the relational environment. The implementation context serves as a set of boundary conditions across these levels.

At the competency development level, self-awareness and self-management may help students identify emotions, regulate stress, maintain attention, and set learning goals. These competencies form a foundation for self-regulation in learning.

At the motivational engagement level, successful learning experiences, supportive feedback, and peer modeling may strengthen students' academic self-efficacy. This may promote task persistence, classroom participation, and help-seeking behaviors.

At the relational environment level, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making may foster interaction norms based on cooperation, respect, and constructive conflict resolution. These norms may increase opportunities for teacher support and peer acceptance.

These levels do not represent a strictly unidirectional causal chain; rather, they constitute a dynamic process of mutual reinforcement. Self-regulation may promote learning engagement, while active participation can generate new experiences of success. Teacher and peer support serve as important contexts for SEL practice and shape students' opportunities to develop social-emotional competencies. Additionally, teacher capacity, school leadership support, family involvement, and community resources collectively influence program acceptance, implementation quality, and sustainability. The framework therefore centers on competency development, motivational engagement, and the relational environment, while acknowledging reciprocal relationships and contextual constraints.

3. Research Method: Theory-Driven Integrative Literature Synthesis

The present study employs a theory-driven integrative conceptual synthesis rather than an empirical investigation based on original data, a systematic review, or a meta-analysis. This methodology integrates evidence from diverse research designs to examine selected conceptual relationships, variations in findings, and boundaries of applicability. The resulting analysis informs the development of a conceptual framework for subsequent research.

3.1. Scope of the Literature and Types of Evidence

Four principal types of literature are integrated: theoretical studies defining core social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies and academic self-efficacy; meta-analyses evaluating the overall effects of school-based SEL; randomized controlled trials, quasi-experiments, and program evaluations conducted in rural Chinese schools; and qualitative studies examining the acceptability, implementation quality, and sustainability of SEL programs in rural schools. Literature selection prioritized the rigor of research designs, relevance to rural Chinese educational contexts, and direct relevance to social-emotional competencies, academic processes, and implementation mechanisms.

Each type of evidence serves a distinct explanatory function. International meta-analyses offer an overview of the overall effects of SEL. Intervention studies conducted in rural China facilitate examination of contextual applicability and proximal outcomes. Implementation studies elucidate the organizational and environmental conditions influencing program delivery. The present study uses these evidence types to support specific conclusions rather than indiscriminately aggregating findings or relying on a single type of evidence.

3.2. Process of Theoretical Integration

The process of theoretical integration comprised four analytical steps. First, the CASEL framework was employed to define the five core competencies and relate them to the potential needs of students experiencing academic difficulties in emotion regulation, learning beliefs, classroom participation, and relational support. Second, social cognitive theory was applied to examine whether academic self-efficacy mediated the relationship between social-emotional competencies and learning behavior. Third, international evidence on overall effects was compared with intervention evidence from rural China to distinguish among social-emotional, psychosocial, learning engagement, and academic outcomes and prevent inappropriate inferences across outcome variables. Finally, findings from implementation research were used to integrate teacher, school, family, and community factors into a framework of mechanisms and contextual conditions.

3.3. Methodological Boundaries and Transparency

This study is a theoretical synthesis based on selected key literature, rather than an

exhaustive review of the available evidence. Search logs, search strings, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and quality appraisal records needed to replicate the search process are unavailable. Consequently, the study does not report the number of records retrieved or screened, nor does it claim to have conducted a systematic search in accordance with PRISMA guidelines. If the study is further developed into a systematic or scoping review, it will be necessary to specify search strategies for Chinese- and English-language databases, search dates, eligibility criteria, deduplication procedures, and screening processes, and to report the review process in accordance with relevant guidelines. Until these procedures are completed, the study is presented as a theoretical synthesis rather than a systematic review.

4. Theoretical Analysis: Mechanisms and Propositions for SEL Support for Students Experiencing Academic Difficulties

4.1. Mechanism A: Developing Self-Awareness and Self-Management to Strengthen the Foundations of Learning Regulation

Persistent academic setbacks can result in anxiety, frustration, and learning avoidance among students. Such responses may impair attention maintenance, task initiation, and the ability to cope with difficulties. By fostering self-awareness, SEL enables students to identify their emotions and understand how these emotions relate to learning behaviors. Self-management supports goal setting, stress regulation, and behavioral monitoring, thereby offering a clear regulatory pathway for sustained engagement in learning. The relationship between self-regulation, executive function, school readiness, and academic performance provides a developmental science basis for this mechanism (Blair & Raver, 2015).

Research indicates that school-based SEL programs can enhance students' social-emotional skills and related behaviors. Intervention studies conducted in rural China have similarly reported positive changes in social-emotional competencies and reductions in psychosocial difficulties (Durlak et al., 2011; Cipriano et al., 2023; Li & Hesketh, 2024; Fu et al., 2024). However, these findings do not establish that improvements in regulatory competencies directly result in higher academic achievement. This mechanism should be regarded as a foundational contribution to learning engagement rather than as remediation of subject knowledge. Furthermore, it cannot substitute for professional assessment of specific learning disorders or mental health concerns.

4.2. Mechanism B: Strengthening Academic Self-Efficacy to Promote Learning.

Students who have experienced persistent academic setbacks may face learning difficulties, including limited mastery of learning strategies and negative beliefs about their abilities and the value of their efforts. Bandura's (1997) social cognitive

theory identifies mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states as key sources of self-efficacy. When incorporated into subject-learning tasks, SEL can strengthen self-efficacy through differentiated tasks and timely feedback. Peer collaboration offers opportunities for modeling, while supportive teacher–student interactions and emotion regulation can enhance students' confidence in addressing academic challenges.

Within this framework, academic self-efficacy serves as a potential mediator linking social-emotional competencies to learning behavior, though it is not itself a component of SEL. Its influence is evident in task initiation, sustained engagement, strategy adjustment, and help-seeking behaviors. Wang et al.'s (2016) study of an SEL program in rural Chinese middle schools indicates that high-risk students may respond differently to interventions. Further research should therefore examine how students' risk levels and intervention duration relate to learning outcomes, and whether effects are maintained over time. Short-term psychosocial improvements should not be construed as evidence of long-term gains in academic achievement.

4.3. Mechanism C: Improving Teacher–Student and Peer Relationships to Expand Opportunities for Learning Engagement

Learning engagement is influenced not only by individual competencies but also by teacher–student and peer relationships. Research shows that positive teacher–student relationships are associated with increased school engagement and academic achievement (Roorda et al., 2011). In contrast, peer rejection and negative interactions can hinder school adjustment by affecting classroom engagement and self-concept (Buhs, 2005; Buhs & Ladd, 2001). SEL competencies such as social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making can help students understand others, collaborate, resolve conflicts, and seek support. However, whether these competencies translate into actual opportunities for participation also depends on teacher responses and the classroom interaction environment.

Relational support should not be limited to expecting students with academic difficulties to improve their interpersonal skills independently. Schools must also improve interaction structures. This includes avoiding public rankings and negative labels, clarifying student roles in collaborative tasks, fostering a safe environment for help-seeking through constructive feedback, and minimizing exclusionary or humiliating interactions. Students' social-emotional competencies and relational environments are mutually influential. Successful reintegration into the learning community depends on both individual competencies and the extent to which teachers and peers provide authentic opportunities for participation.

4.4. Contextual Conditions: Implementation Quality Determines Whether the Proposed Pathways Can Emerge

The mechanisms outlined above do not emerge automatically; their development

and sustainability depend on implementation conditions. Durlak and DuPre (2008) observed that implementation quality and organizational factors influence intervention outcomes. Research in rural Chinese schools by Fu et al. (2025) identified teacher training, ongoing coaching, school-based champions, and administrative involvement as facilitators of implementation. Conversely, academic performance pressure, administrative workload, limited community support, and insufficient funding may compromise program feasibility and sustainability. Implementation support is therefore not merely an external condition for program operation but a critical factor determining whether SEL mechanisms can be initiated and maintained.

SEL should be implemented through a tiered model that combines universal provision with targeted support. Universal SEL for all students may prevent the stigmatization of students experiencing academic difficulties. Students with persistent needs in emotion regulation, learning engagement, or relational support may receive small-group guidance, mentoring, or individualized academic assistance in addition to universal provision. Students with specific learning disorders, severe psychological distress, or other needs requiring professional support should receive appropriate screening and referral. SEL should not replace necessary professional services.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Contributions: From "Social-Emotional Deficits" to a Multilevel Explanation of Learning Processes

The primary contribution of this study is that it moves beyond explanations that attribute rural students' academic difficulties exclusively to deficits in social-emotional competencies. Social-emotional competencies should not be regarded as inherent deficits or labels assigned to students. Instead, they represent developmental resources that can be enhanced or limited through learning experiences, teacher–student interactions, and school support. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) should therefore address students' developmental needs and opportunities for support within specific learning and relational contexts. This approach prevents the misattribution of structural educational inequalities as individual deficits.

The study further clarifies the conceptual levels of core SEL competencies, academic self-efficacy, learning engagement, and academic outcomes. Social-emotional competencies are conceptualized as developmental resources, while self-efficacy and learning engagement are identified as potential intermediate mechanisms. Academic progress, learning persistence, and dropout risk are classified as distal outcomes. This distinction clarifies the theoretical position of each variable and establishes a foundation for developing measurement models and testing the temporal sequence of the proposed mechanisms.

Additionally, the study includes implementation context in the theoretical framework. Research on SEL in rural China shows that program acceptability and improvements in students' proximal outcomes do not necessarily ensure long-term sustainability (Fu et al., 2024, 2025). Teacher workload, school assessment systems, funding, and community involvement can affect both implementation and maintenance. Therefore, explaining SEL effects requires attention to curriculum content, implementers, organizational conditions, implementation quality, and contextual alignment.

5.2. A Cautious Interpretation of Existing Evidence

Existing research demonstrates positive associations between SEL and students' social-emotional competencies, behavior, school adjustment, and certain academic outcomes. Preliminary evidence also supports the adaptation of SEL for rural Chinese schools. However, current evidence is insufficient to directly establish that SEL improves the academic performance of students with persistent academic difficulties. International meta-analyses primarily address general student populations, while intervention studies in rural China focus mainly on social-emotional competencies and psychosocial outcomes. The rural middle-school randomized trial primarily examines learning anxiety and dropout risk. Systematic investigations of academic mechanisms among students with persistent academic difficulties remain limited. Therefore, the research question remains whether SEL can improve academic performance in this specific group, and direct and indirect evidence, as well as theoretical propositions, should be clearly distinguished.

Specifically, the overall effects of SEL on academic achievement in general student populations should not be directly generalized to the challenges encountered by students with academic difficulties in rural areas. Subject knowledge, foundational reading and mathematics skills, teaching quality, learning opportunities, and special education support are essential conditions for academic development. Accordingly, the key question is whether SEL can support the social-emotional conditions of learning while complementing high-quality subject teaching and targeted academic assistance.

5.3. Practical and Policy Implications: Universal Foundations, Targeted Support, and Professional Referral

For curriculum implementation, rural schools should integrate SEL into subject teaching, class activities, and daily school management rather than introducing it as a separate course. Chinese reading, scientific inquiry, and collaborative learning provide authentic contexts for developing emotion recognition, perspective-taking, communication, cooperation, and responsible decision-making. Curriculum design should include clear objectives, progressive skill development, ample practice, and specific feedback. Adaptation to students' grade levels, cultural backgrounds, and

life experiences is also necessary.

For student support, schools should implement a tiered support system. The universal level should deliver SEL to all students and promote positive classroom management. The targeted level should provide group-based training, learning mentors, peer support, and individualized academic assistance for students with persistent academic difficulties. The intensive level should provide appropriate assessment and professional referral for students suspected of having serious psychological, behavioral, developmental, or learning difficulties. Tiered support can reduce stigmatization and prevent SEL from replacing academic tutoring or professional services.

At the teacher and school levels, teacher training should transition from one-off lectures to a sustained support model that includes demonstration lessons, classroom practice, observation and feedback, and ongoing supervision. School leaders should support implementation through curriculum scheduling, workload adjustments, professional learning activities, and resource allocation. Evaluation should emphasize implementation quality over the quantity of activities delivered. As Fu et al. (2025) demonstrated, additional program requirements without sufficient time, training, funding, and administrative support may weaken teacher participation and program sustainability.

For school–family–community collaboration, schools should engage with families in ways that address their actual needs. Parental migration for work or grandparent caregiving should not be interpreted as family educational failure. Families can support children's development through consistent responses, positive communication, and support for learning goals. Community organizations and public cultural spaces can facilitate collaborative activities and foster a sense of belonging. Schools should also establish collaboration and referral pathways with professional agencies to address complex mental health and special education needs.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Empirical Research

Future research should more clearly define academic difficulties. Use academic performance over at least two consecutive semesters, attainment of curriculum standards, teacher assessments, and indicators of learning processes to identify students. Do not rely solely on a single examination. Use multiple sources of measurement, such as student self-reports, teacher assessments, peer relationship indicators, classroom observations, learning engagement scales, and objective academic performance, to minimize common method bias associated with a single self-report source.

Future studies should use longitudinal quasi-experimental designs or cluster randomized trials at the school or class level. Measure SEL competencies, academic self-efficacy, learning engagement, and academic outcomes at baseline, immediately

post-intervention, and at follow-up. Specify the temporal sequence of variables and examine relationships among changes in SEL competencies, self-efficacy, learning engagement, and academic progress. Also examine the mediating or moderating roles of teacher support, peer acceptance, and implementation quality.

Research should report intervention dosage, implementation fidelity, teacher training, curriculum adaptation, student participation rates, and program costs. Pre-specify heterogeneity analyses for grade level, gender, family caregiving arrangements, and initial academic achievement. For policy dissemination, give additional attention to program costs, long-term sustainability, and the prerequisites for replication across schools.

6. Conclusion

By integrating the SEL competency framework, social cognitive theory, and empirical evidence on implementation in rural Chinese schools, this study identifies three interconnected pathways through which SEL may support students experiencing academic difficulties in rural areas. First, self-awareness and self-management can strengthen learning regulation. Second, mastery experiences and supportive feedback may enhance academic self-efficacy and learning engagement. Third, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making may improve teacher–student and peer interactions and expand classroom participation. Teacher capacity, school organizational support, family involvement, and community resources are important contextual conditions that influence the development and sustained operation of these pathways.

This study does not claim that SEL alone can resolve academic difficulties. It also does not assume that the effects observed in universal SEL research are directly generalizable to students experiencing academic difficulties in rural China. Rather, SEL should be regarded as complementary support for improving the social-emotional conditions of learning. It is recommended that SEL be implemented alongside subject teaching, targeted academic assistance, and necessary professional services. Future research should examine the applicability of this framework to the target student population in rural Chinese schools, as well as its mechanisms, long-term effects, and implementation conditions.

Abbreviations

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

SEL: Social and Emotional Learning

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