

INPLASY202550052  
doi: 10.37766/inplasy2025.5.0052  
Received: 19 May 2025  
Published: 19 May 2025

Sun, Y; Wigelsworth, M; Wilkinson, H.

**Corresponding author:**  
Yuzhe Sun

yuzhe.sun@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

**Author Affiliation:**  
The University of Manchester.

**ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION**

**Support** - N/A.

**Review Stage at time of this submission** - The review has not yet started.

**Conflicts of interest** - The review is a part of a PhD project in University of Manchester. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

**INPLASY registration number:** INPLASY202550052

**Amendments** - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 19 May 2025 and was last updated on 19 May 2025.

**INTRODUCTION**

**Review question / Objective** This systematic literature review aims to address the following questions:

- (1) Following Brown’s cultural adaptation framework, how have existing SEL programs implemented in China been adapted to local context?
- (2) How do teachers facilitate the implementation of SEL programs in elementary schools in mainland China?

**Rationale** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the process of developing key social, emotional, and behavioural competencies. When implementing SEL interventions, the cultural context of the region should be taken into consideration, including the role of teachers. The Chinese government and researchers have implemented SEL interventions to improve students’ social-emotional skills and mental health. However, since SEL originated from the Western

background, which is different from the Chinese cultural background, cultural adaptation and teachers’ role are needed to be considered when implementing SEL interventions in China.

Although there are studies exploring the SEL interventions in the Chinese context, research exploring cultural adaptation of SEL implementation in China remains limited, including the role of the teacher as implementer. While some scholars have begun to explore the importance of teachers in SEL programmes, most studies focus on teachers’ own social-emotional competence (SEC) and how it affects program implementation.

This study aims to review the SEL intervention studies implemented in mainstream elementary schools in mainland China, to address the research gaps. This review uses Brown’s cultural adaptation framework as theoretical framework, to explore how cultural adaptation is carried out during the implementation process and the role of teachers in it.

This study aims to help policy makers, implementers, and researchers understand the different forms of cultural adaptation and the role of teachers through a review of the implementation intervention, to help them better adjust the SEL intervention to adapt to the Chinese cultural environment, enable the SEL intervention to better play its role, and promote the development of more inclusive SEL practices globally.

**Condition being studied** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the process of developing key social, emotional, and behavioural competencies such as understanding and managing emotions, setting and achieving goals, showing empathy, building relationships, and making responsible decisions. SEL intervention has a positive impact on students' mental health and personal development. This review explores how SEL interventions adapted to Chinese cultural background in elementary schools in China and what teachers do during the interventions.

## METHODS

**Search strategy** This review will include studies related to SEL interventions in elementary schools in China. Seven databases will be used in the review to search articles. For Chinese literature, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang databases will be used; For English-language literature: PsychInfo; Scopus; Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC); British Education Index (BEI); Applied Social Sciences Indexes and Abstracts (ASSIA) will be used.

Three sets of key words have been established: Terms relating to SEL programs and 5 core areas in CASEL framework; Terms relating to conducted country; Terms relating to the population in the study. For English literature, the keywords are: "social-emotional learning" OR "social-emotional education" OR "social and emotional" OR "social & emotional" OR "SEL" OR "social and emotional learning" OR "social and emotional education" OR "self-awareness" OR "self-management" OR "social awareness" OR "relationship skills" OR "responsible decision-making" AND "China" OR "Chinese" AND "primary school" OR "elementary" OR "student" OR "children" OR "teenager" OR "pupil". For Chinese literature, the keywords are: "社会情感" + "社会情感学习" + "社会情感教育" + "社会情感能力" + "自我认识" + "自我管理" + "社会认知" + "社交技能" + "决策" + "三项六维" 并且 "小学" + "小学生" + "青少年" + "中小學生" + "兒童".

**Participant or population** This review focuses on students in mainstream primary schools in mainland China, generally aged from 6 to 12 years old. This review includes school-based SEL interventions, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies, pilot study (including no control group in the study).

**Intervention** This study focuses on SEL interventions implemented in mainstream primary schools in mainland China. The intervention targets students aged 6 to 12 years old. The intervention aims to intervene in students' social-emotional competence, involving five competencies in CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

**Comparator** This study does not involve the use of comparators.

**Study designs to be included** This study will adopt a systematic literature review (SLR) design to identify and synthesize empirical research on the implementation of SEL programs in mainstream elementary schools in mainland China. The review will follow the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. Seven databases will be used in the study, for searching peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2011 to 2025. Three sets of key words have been established: Terms relating to SEL programs and 5 core areas in CASEL framework; Terms relating to conducted country; Terms re.

**Eligibility criteria** Studies will be included in this review if they meet the following criteria:

- (a) The study was conducted in mainland China and published in either English or Chinese. For Chinese-language articles, the intervention methods, processes, and outcomes will be translated by the author using translation software (e.g., Google Translate) and reviewed by a bilingual researcher to ensure accuracy.
- (b) The article was peer-reviewed and published between 2011 and 2025, including online-first publications.
- (c) The study investigates a school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) intervention conducted in mainstream primary schools (i.e., excluding special education settings).
- (d) Eligible study designs include randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies, pilot studies (regardless of whether a control group is included), as well as mixed-methods studies that report empirical findings related to SEL implementation.

(e) The participants must be elementary school-aged students (typically ages 6–12) enrolled in mainstream educational settings, regardless of school type (public or private).

Studies will be excluded if they meet any of the following conditions:

(a) The study was not conducted in mainland China.

(b) The intervention does not involve elementary school-aged children or does not specifically address the SEL needs or outcomes of this age group.

(c) The study was not peer-reviewed, or is classified as grey literature, such as dissertations, conference proceedings, or internal reports.

(d) The study was conducted in special education schools or settings exclusively targeting children with special needs.

(e) The study does not report original empirical data, such as theoretical papers, opinion pieces, systematic reviews, or meta-analyses.

**Information sources** Seven databases will be used to identify eligible studies: For Chinese literature, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Wanfang databases will be used; For English-language literature PsychInfo, Scopus; Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC); British Education Index (BEI); Applied Social Sciences Indexes and Abstracts (ASSIA) will be used. The studies should be peer-reviewed. Grey literature will not be included in the review.

**Main outcome(s)** This review will categorize the SEL interventions implemented in mainstream primary schools in China based on the types (content adaptation, procedural of considering adaptation, program delivery adaptation) and levels (none, surface level, deep level, mixed level) of cultural adaptation. This review will also analyse the role of teachers in the implementation process based on the implemented SEL interventions.

**Additional outcome(s)** None.

**Data management** During the literature search, all records will be collected from the database search will be transferred to Coevidence. The following steps will be performed on this platform: import the preliminary search results, perform the screening process, record the screening process and reasons and inclusion and exclusion criteria, monitor the inclusion and exclusion decisions, and export the screening results.

During the qualitative data analysis process, the data will be imported into NVivo for analysis. A thematic analysis will be then conducted to

identify, code, and organize patterns across the studies. The coding process will be iterative and theory-informed, drawing on both inductive themes and pre-determined categories derived from the research questions and theoretical framework.

All data will be securely stored and backed up regularly. All data files will be securely stored on an encrypted institutional server, with regular backups maintained on a password-protected cloud platform.

**Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis** To assess the methodological quality and potential risk of bias of the included studies, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT, version 2018) will be employed. Each study will be appraised using the corresponding set of five methodological criteria according to its study design. For each criterion, responses will be coded as “Yes,” “No,” or “Can’t tell.” The MMAT score will not be used as an exclusion criterion; rather, it will serve to provide a transparent overview of study quality, and to support the interpretation of findings during synthesis. Sensitivity analyses may be conducted to explore whether study quality influences the review outcomes.

**Strategy of data synthesis** This study will adopt a qualitative research method to analyse the intervention methods and teacher’s role in the included studies. To answer the two research questions, this study employs inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis to make the analysis achieve greater rigor (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Data will be coded using NVivo software.

Deductive thematic analysis will be used to identify adaptation strategies based on the Cultural Adaptation Framework. There are three stages. In Stage 1, predefined themes—content adaptations, program delivery adaptations, and procedures for considering adaptations—will be established based on the Cultural Adaptation Framework. Extracted qualitative data will be imported into NVivo, where the researcher read and annotated the texts for familiarization. In Stage 2, a subset of texts will be pilot-coded using NVivo’s “Nodes” feature. Parent nodes will represent the predefined categories, and sub-nodes will be added inductively as patterns emerged. The finalized coding structure will be then applied to the full dataset. In Stage 3, themes will be synthesized across studies using NVivo’s Framework Matrices. Visual tools, such as hierarchical charts and word clouds, will be used to illustrate cultural adaptation patterns.

Inductive thematic analysis will be used to identify what teachers in China do in the SEL programmes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are 6 steps to do the inductive thematic analysis: Familiarization with the data; generate initial codes; find themes; review themes; define themes; final analysis. To analyse how teachers facilitate SEL implementation and the challenges they encounter, this study employs inductive thematic analysis using NVivo. First, relevant qualitative data about what teachers do in the implementation will be imported into NVivo, where the researcher familiarizes themselves with the content through multiple readings. Initial open coding will be conducted by systematically identifying meaningful phrases or patterns related to teachers' facilitation strategies and challenges without predefined categories. These codes will be then refined and grouped into broader themes based on emerging patterns. Using NVivo's hierarchical node structure, related codes will be clustered to develop overarching themes, ensuring a data-driven approach. Throughout the process, the memo function will be used to document analytical insights and evolving interpretations. Additionally, NVivo's visualization tools, such as word frequency queries and concept maps, assist in refining themes and identifying relationships within the data. Once themes are established, they will be reviewed, defined, and supported with direct excerpts from the data to ensure clarity and coherence.

**Subgroup analysis** To explore variations in SEL implementation and outcomes across different contexts, this review will conduct subgroup analyses based on selected study characteristics. Where sufficient data are available, studies will be grouped and compared according to: (1) the implementer of the SEL program (e.g., homeroom teachers vs. school counselors), (2) the grade level or age of participants (e.g., lower vs. upper elementary students), and (3) the setting (e.g., urban vs. rural schools). Findings from subgroup comparisons will be used to generate culturally grounded recommendations for SEL program design and delivery in China.

**Sensitivity analysis** Sensitivity analyses will be conducted by re-examining key themes under different inclusion conditions. The analysis will compare themes derived from (1) Chinese-language versus English-language publications, and (2) studies with different designs (e.g., RCTs, quasi-experimental, or non-controlled studies). The aim is to assess whether the central findings are consistent across subsets of the data.

**Language restriction** Studies published in English and Chinese will be included in the review.

**Country(ies) involved** This study is based in the United Kingdom. All authors are affiliated with UK institutions, and the lead author is originally from China.

**Other relevant information** This review is a part of a PhD project in University of Manchester and will contribute to a thesis by publication. The study is supervised by two academic advisors.

**Keywords** Social emotional learning (SEL); elementary education; cultural adaptation; systematic review.

**Dissemination plans** This study plans to be: (a) published in relevant academic journals after peer review; (b) presented at relevant academic conferences; (c) a part of a PhD thesis by publication at the University of Manchester.

#### Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Yuzhe Sun - developed the protocol, designed the search strategy, coding framework and analysis strategy, and wrote the draft.

Email: yuzhe.sun@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Author 2 - Michael Wigelsworth - Provided supervision in SEL, guided the writing of the protocol and participated in the searching process.

Email: michael.wigelsworth@manchester.ac.uk

Author 3 - Hannah Wilkinson - participated in the searching process.

Email: hannah.wilkinson@manchester.ac.uk