

Implementation Methods of Social Emotional Learning: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. As adolescent mental health issues have received more and more attention in society, how to effectively implement social emotional learning (SEL) has become the focus of domestic and foreign educational researchers. Through a systematic literature review, this study summarizes the 6 research papers on SEL implementation methods from 2015 to 2024, and analyzes the characteristics, effects, challenges and deficiencies of previous studies. The results show that the implementation methods of social emotional learning can be mainly divided into three categories: independent courses, integration into daily teaching and whole-school methods, covering aspects such as emotion management, social skills training and responsible decision-making. However, existing research has certain deficiencies in the effectiveness of implementation methods, applicability at various educational stages, and long-term effect tracking. It is hoped that through the analysis of this article, it will provide valuable reference and reference for educational researchers in optimizing SEL implementation methods.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning; Systematic Review; Mental health.

1. Introduction

In recent years, social and emotional learning (SEL) has become particularly important due to the continuous impact of social development. First, the rapidly developing social and technological environment requires students to have not only academic abilities, but also strong soft skills or non-cognitive skills to adapt to complex social changes and workplace challenges. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of students' mental health. The increase in emotional problems, anxiety, and isolation has prompted educators to pay attention to the role of SEL to help students better cope with stress and emotional distress. In addition, SEL teaching can promote the all-round development of students, enhance their self-cognition and social responsibility, and lay a solid foundation for future social life and career development. In summary, SEL not only focuses on students' academic performance, but also their overall well-being and social adaptability, and is an indispensable part of the modern education system. This study adopts the method of systematic literature review to provide a scientific basis for the implementation of SEL by comprehensively analyzing existing research results. Finally, through in-depth exploration of the research questions, it is hoped that it will provide valuable references for educational practitioners and policymakers, and promote the widespread application and deep integration of SEL in the global education system.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a relatively broad field, and common terms include character education, personality, soft skills, and non-cognitive skills [1](Jones & Doolittle, 2017). [2]Weissberg et al.(2015) summarized social emotional learning into five aspects: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making. The core of SEL is to help children recognize and manage their emotions in a positive way, as well as deal with interpersonal problems [1](Jones & Doolittle, 2017). In the actual teaching process, this method mainly teaches students specific skills such as growth mindset, empathy, stress management, and interpersonal communication [3](Mahoney et al., 2018). Compared with the traditional education model, social

emotional learning pays more attention to students' mental health and social skills, and focuses on all-round development. The goal of SEL is to comprehensively improve the comprehensive quality of children and adolescents so that they can succeed in all aspects such as school education, future workplace, interpersonal relationships, and civic responsibility [1](Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

In this study, social-emotional learning refers to the important educational process of preparing students to identify and manage emotions, build positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, and make responsible decisions.

2.2. Implementation Methods of Social Emotional Learning

As children's mental health has received increasing attention, social and emotional learning has been widely implemented in kindergartens, primary schools, and middle schools. The implementation methods of social and emotional learning mainly include independent courses, integration into subject education, and whole-school approaches. First, teaching SEL as an independent course is a more popular approach, such as the Second Step Program from the United States [4](Low et al., 2015). The advantage of this approach is that there are specific courses for different age groups to cultivate students' relevant skills, such as stress management, attention, communication skills [4](Low et al., 2015). In addition, compared with the other two approaches, it has a more systematic curriculum structure and evaluation standards, which makes it easier for teachers to track students' progress and intervention effects. However, this approach is also accompanied by more financial investment, such as the large demand for teaching resources and materials and the additional costs incurred by professional training for teachers [5](Bailey et al., 2019). Secondly, SEL intervention integrated into daily teaching courses has higher requirements for teachers' teaching ability. Teachers adjust their teaching strategies in a timely manner through the recognition, evaluation and understanding of students' emotions in daily teaching [6](Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This requires more professional pre-service training for teachers so that they can deal with various emotional problems that arise in the classroom and use teaching strategies to subtly cultivate students' social and emotional competence [6](Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Finally, the implementation of SEL interventions throughout the school is understood as integrating SEL implementation strategies into a broader school environment, including cross-curricular teaching activities, school atmosphere and spirit, and focusing on family and community involvement [7](Oberle et al., 2019). For example, the KidsMatter Primary project in Australia and the SEAL program in the UK [8](Goldberg et al., 2019). It is worth noting that this approach not only focuses on school atmosphere and teachers' teaching methods, but also emphasizes the important role of the community and family in cultivating students' social and emotional competence. Research shows that the most successful results are often produced when interventions are integrated into daily practice and school culture, strengthen skills outside the classroom, support parent involvement, and coordinate work with external agencies [9](Barry et al., 2017).

However, current researchers are more concerned about the impact of social and emotional learning on specific groups, and the research usually focuses on specific age groups, cultural backgrounds or special groups. Some studies only explore the impact of social and emotional learning in primary school, and the included reviews are all intervention measures in primary school [10](Wigelsworth et al., 2022). Some studies systematically analyze social and emotional learning in urban schools, involving family cultural capital and socioeconomic status [11](Barnes, 2019). Some studies focus on the social and emotional abilities of students in special education [12](Hassani & Schwab, 2021).

These studies all regard the diversity of research subjects as an influencing factor of social and emotional learning effects, thereby ignoring the important impact of specific implementation methods on students' social and emotional abilities. This study aims to use the implementation methods of social and emotional learning as a key factor affecting students' social and emotional abilities, and analyze the effectiveness of different methods and their applicability at different stages of education. In addition, this study also compares and analyzes the important influencing factors in the implementation of social and emotional learning.

In summary, there is still a lack of systematic literature review on the implementation methods of social and emotional learning. A review of existing research on social and emotional learning can help future research identify the key needs of different groups and analyze the specific reasons why different implementation methods are suitable for different age groups.

2.3. Research Questions

The psychological problems of children and adolescents have always received widespread attention from all walks of life, and this problem has become more prominent after the epidemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, long-term online learning, closed family environment and depressing social atmosphere have caused adolescents to have more or less problems in social interaction, communication and emotional management. The cultivation of social and emotional skills has been proven to effectively reduce the occurrence of such situations. Therefore, research on the implementation methods of social and emotional learning has important practical significance and value, and plays an important role in helping schools formulate the implementation framework of SEL. However, most of the current empirical research on SEL implementation methods is based on specific educational backgrounds and samples, lacking a comprehensive and systematic comparison and evaluation of implementation methods and impacts, and lacking consideration of the applicability of different implementation methods to students at different educational stages.

Therefore, it is necessary to review the existing research on SEL implementation methods. Based on the above review, three research questions are proposed for this study:

- (1) What is the effect of different SEL implementation methods (independent courses, integration into daily education and whole-school methods) in improving students' social and emotional abilities?
- (2) What are the differences in the applicability and effectiveness of various implementation methods at different educational stages?
- (3) In the process of implementing SEL, what factors have a significant impact on the implementation methods?

3. Methods

This study used a systematic literature review method to analyze basic information on empirical research on SEL implementation methods from 2015 to 2024, and focused on analyzing independent courses, integration into daily teaching, and whole-school methods for implementing SEL. Literature screening and document coding were processed using Zotero and Prisma, and data analysis and chart production were processed using Microsoft Excel software.

3.1. Literature Search

To ensure the research value of this study, the English literature studied in this study comes from SSCI and SCI journals in the Web of Science database. In English literature, "social emotional learning" is translated as "social and emotional learning". After many retrieval attempts, it was finally determined to use "sel" as the keyword for retrieval in the Web of Science database, and add "publication year 2015-2024", "English", and "education research field" as screening conditions, and finally retrieved 431 English literature.

3.2. Literature Screening

Since the quality of some retrieved literature did not meet the research requirements, these literatures need to be further evaluated and screened. The inclusion and exclusion criteria of the literature based on the literature screening steps of this study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature inclusion and exclusion criteria

Literature inclusion criteria	Literature exclusion criteria
1. The research publication language is English	1. Research published in other languages
2. Full text available	2. The full text is not available
3. The research is empirical	3. The research is theoretical research or review research
4. The literature type is SSCI, SCI journal article	4. The document type is not a SSCI or SCI journal article
5. The research belongs to the discipline of education	5. The research does not belong to the education discipline
6. The research context is social emotional learning	6. The research context is other projects

The literature screening first conducts preliminary screening based on the title and abstract of the literature, and then reads the full text for further screening. In addition to the researcher herself, this study invited an undergraduate graduate to independently screen the literature. First, the two researchers searched the target database, and finally obtained 431 English literatures (as of July 25, 2024) after removing duplicate literature entries. Secondly, by browsing the titles and abstracts of the literature, articles that did not meet the requirements of empirical research on the implementation methods of social emotional learning were excluded, and 12 literatures were obtained after preliminary screening. The two researchers browsed the full text of the 12 articles, excluded articles whose research subjects were college students, and finally determined to include 6 articles. If there is a dispute on whether the research should be retained, the two researchers will review the full text of the article and discuss and decide together.

Finally, a total of 6 articles met the inclusion criteria. The literature screening Prisma flow chart is shown in Figure 1.

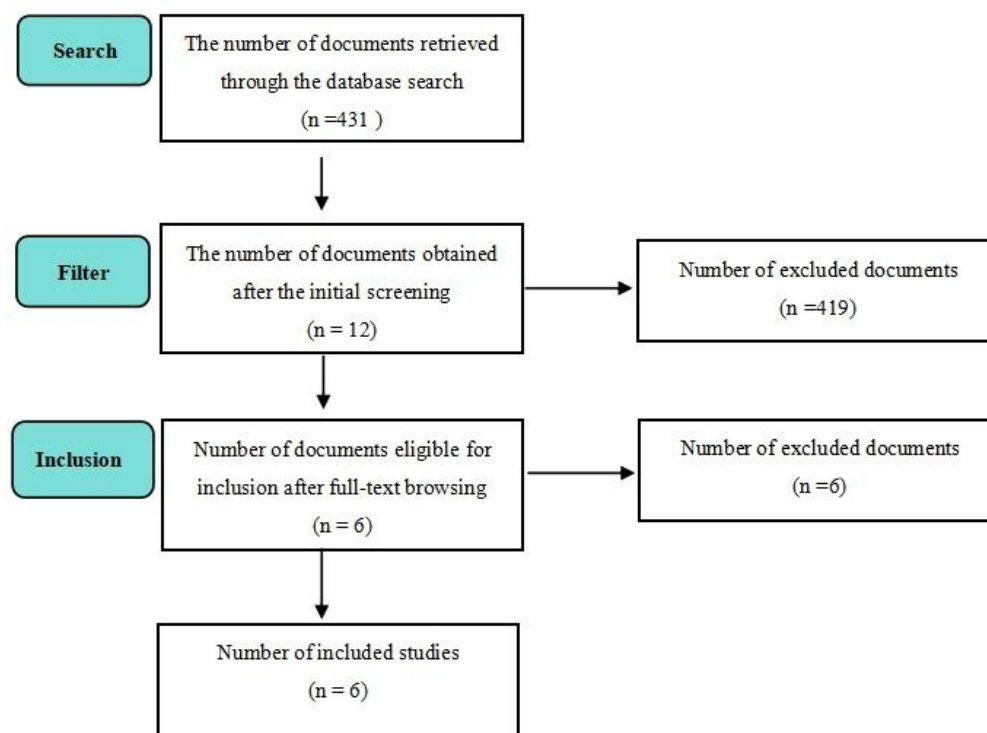


Figure 1. Prisma flow chart for literature screening

3.3. Coding

In literature coding, i.e. the “extracting data” step of the systematic literature review, this study developed a literature coding table based on the research questions, as shown in Table 2. In order to ensure the accuracy and scientificity of the coding, in addition to the researcher himself, a graduate student in education was invited to participate in the coding. The two researchers independently read and coded 30% of the included literature. By calculating the coding results of the two researchers, 76% consistency was obtained, which showed that the coding results had a high degree of consistency. In the subsequent discussion, it was found that the two researchers had differences mainly on the implementation methods of social emotional learning. After full consultation, a full consensus on the coding results was reached, and the coding of the remaining literature was independently completed by the authors of this study.

Table 2. Literature coding table

Dimensions	Description item name	Coding
Basic information of the study	Research identification code Document title First author Published year Research location	Research identification code Document title First author Published year Country/region where the research was conducted
Study sample information	Research sample size Grade stage	Research sample size 1 Primary school 2 Middle school 3 High school
Research Methods	Social emotional learning effectiveness measurement method Social emotional learning implementation method Social emotional ability specific dimensions Factors affecting the implementation effect of social emotional learning	Experimental method, questionnaire method, scale method Independent curriculum, integration into daily teaching, whole-school approach Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, etc. Teacher training, parent involvement, school size and school atmosphere, etc.

4. Results

4.1. Basic Information of Included Studies

This study included 6 English literatures. From the perspective of the year of publication, most of the included literatures were published in a similar year, with 2 articles published in 2023, 1 article published in 2015, 2020, 2021 and 2022, and no literature meeting the inclusion criteria of this study was published in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. Most of the studies were concentrated in the past two years, with the most published in 2023. It can be seen that the publication of related studies in recent years has shown a rapid growth trend.

From the perspective of research location, three of the included studies were conducted in the United States. In addition, one study was conducted in Portugal, Germany and India.

4.2. Sample Information of Included Studies

According to statistics, the included literature includes primary school, middle school and high school stages. Among them, except for one study that included primary school, middle school and high school at the same time, four studies were for primary school and one was for middle school. Regarding the number of research subjects in the literature, the number of research samples included in the research is relatively large, and most of the studies are more than 700 people. Only two literatures have a small number of samples, with 94 and 232 people. Among them, the number of research subjects in three literatures is huge, with 1394, 2615, and 23532 people respectively.

4.3. Research Methods of Included Studies

4.3.1 Measurement Methods of Social Emotional Learning Effects

After reading the full text and coding statistics, 66.7% of the included studies used experimental methods to measure the effectiveness of social emotional learning. By comparing the control group and the experimental group in the context of social emotional learning, the impact of a specific intervention or teaching method on students' social emotional abilities can be more clearly determined. In addition, among the included studies, 16.7% of the studies used questionnaires and scales to measure social emotional abilities. Due to the large number of samples of research subjects, questionnaires and scales can improve the efficiency of data collection and facilitate statistical analysis. In addition, the questionnaire measurement method used in one of the studies included scoring questions and open-ended questions. This method uses different types of questions to achieve a more comprehensive evaluation.

4.3.2 Specific Dimensions of Social Emotional Competence

After reading and analyzing the full text and coding statistics, the included studies have specific descriptions of the specific dimensions of social-emotional competence. Social-emotional competence mainly includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and responsible decision-making. Among the included studies, 66.7% of the studies mentioned these four social-emotional competences. In addition, the ability to prevent behavioral problems and emotional regulation accounted for 33.3%, and communication ability accounted for 16.7%. It can be seen that when specifically analyzing the effectiveness of social-emotional competence, the specific dimensions of social-emotional competence should be mainly developed from self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and responsible decision-making.

4.3.3 Implementation Methods of Social Emotional Learning

After reading and analyzing the full text and coding statistics, the implementation methods of social emotional learning mainly include independent courses, integration into daily teaching, and whole-school methods. Most studies use independent courses to carry out social emotional learning, and a small number use integration into daily teaching. Among the included literature, 50% use independent courses, 33.3% use whole-school methods, and 16.7% use integration into daily teaching. Among the four studies with primary schools as the research subjects, two studies used independent courses, one whole-school method, and one integration into daily teaching. One study with secondary school as the research subject used independent courses. In addition, one of the studies covering primary school, middle school, and high school used whole-school methods. It can be seen that schools that use independent courses to implement social emotional learning account for a higher proportion and are more commonly used in primary schools.

4.3.4 Factors Affecting the Implementation Methods of Social Emotional Learning

After reading the full text and coding statistics, the implementation of social emotional learning is affected by different factors. Among the included studies, 66.7% of the studies considered teacher training as an influencing factor of implementation methods, parent participation, school size and atmosphere accounted for 33.3% respectively, and family socioeconomic status and policy support accounted for 16.7% respectively. Among them, in the included studies, the implementation methods

of independent courses and integration into daily teaching were both affected by teacher training. One of the studies using the independent course method was also affected by the school atmosphere. In addition, the implementation of the integration into daily teaching method is also related to the family socioeconomic status of students. The whole school method is affected by parents, schools and external resources, which are specifically reflected in parent participation, school size and policy support. It can be seen that the independent curriculum and integration into daily teaching methods are significantly affected by teacher ability, while the whole school method tends to be supported by parents, schools and external resources.

5. Discussion

This study aims to explore the effectiveness and applicability of different implementation methods of social emotional learning, and to conduct a systematic literature review of empirical research on the implementation methods of social emotional learning. It not only analyzes the effectiveness of the included studies in cultivating students' social emotional abilities, but also reviews the applicability of these methods at different educational stages, and also focuses on discussing the reasons behind these methods and important influencing factors.

5.1. Effectiveness of the Implementation Methods of Social Emotional Learning

According to statistics, the included studies include three implementation methods of social emotional learning, namely independent courses, integration into daily education, and whole-school methods. The included studies have proven the positive role of the three methods in cultivating students' social emotional competence. However, the three implementation methods also have different effects due to their different implementation frameworks and specific details.

Independent courses are courses designed specifically for cultivating students' social emotional skills. These courses are usually carried out regularly and directly teach social emotional skills such as emotion management, conflict resolution, and teamwork. Among the included studies, three studies used independent course methods, namely the PATHS program, the acSELeRate program, and the SPARK program. These studies all showed that independent courses effectively improved students' emotional management and problem-solving abilities, especially in the short term. However, independent courses may sometimes be out of touch with other subject content, making it difficult to apply the learned skills to real life, which is not conducive to the long-term development of social emotional competence.

The method of integration into daily teaching is to integrate the teaching of SEL skills into daily courses and classroom activities. One of the included studies proved that serious games are an effective way to cultivate students' social emotional competence based on the classroom. Using serious games in daily teaching can cultivate students' emotional management, empathy, social skills, conflict resolution, self-awareness and reflection. In addition, teachers can cultivate students' cooperation, communication, responsibility and problem-solving skills by embedding SEL themes in the course content, using classroom management and behavior guidance, classroom inquiry and cooperative learning, teacher demonstration and role-playing and other teaching strategies. These methods can more naturally combine social emotional skills with learning content, provide specific application scenarios for students to develop social emotional skills in the long term, and improve social emotional literacy in a subtle way.

The whole-school approach has a significant effect in improving students' social emotional skills. It creates a supportive environment by integrating various aspects of school, family and community to ensure that students can receive consistent social emotional support at all levels. At the school level, not only can students be taught various social emotional skills through the classroom, but also a positive and inclusive school atmosphere can have a positive impact on students' long-term development. At the family and community level, SEL becomes an integral part of students' lives, and students can receive continuous social emotional support outside of school. Students can apply

their social emotional skills in actual social environments by participating in community service projects to develop a sense of responsibility and social awareness. Therefore, the whole-school approach not only improves students' social-emotional competence in the short term, but also has a positive impact on students' long-term development, and is widely regarded as the most effective way to implement SEL.

Overall, in the included studies, independent courses, integration into daily teaching, and the whole-school approach all have different degrees of positive impact on students' social-emotional competence, but there are slight differences in the specific dimensions of social-emotional competence and subsequent effects.

5.2. Applicability of the Implementation Methods of Social Emotional Learning at Different Educational Stages

In the included studies, the subjects included students at primary school, middle school and high school levels. The applicability of different implementation methods to students at different educational stages varies, mainly based on the students' age, development needs and educational environment.

Primary school students are usually between 6 and 12 years old. From the perspective of cognitive ability, students at this age are more receptive to systematic learning and regular activities. In addition, primary school students are at a critical period of emotional development. They need to learn how to identify and express emotions and how to adjust their emotional responses in different situations. In the included studies, the research on independent courses was conducted at the primary school level. Independent courses teach basic social emotional skills through a systematic framework and provide students with clear strategies in a structured way, which is more in line with the cognitive and developmental characteristics of students at this age.

Students at the secondary school stage are in adolescence and face more complex social emotional challenges. The applicability of independent courses at this stage depends on whether the course content is related to their real-life needs. If the course content is consistent with students' actual experience, such as peer relationships, stress management and self-identity, the effect will be significantly improved. Compared with independent courses, integration into daily teaching and whole-school approaches are more effective for middle school students. By integrating SEL strategies into the classroom, such as group discussions and group cooperation, students can practice the skills they have learned when dealing with academic pressure and interpersonal relationships. In addition, students need more support to cope with emotional fluctuations and social pressure at this stage. The whole-school approach can provide a supportive environment to help students better cope with these challenges.

High school students are in the late adolescence, and students at this stage are experiencing physical, psychological and social changes. Stress usually comes from academic burdens, peer relationships, family expectations and uncertainty about the future. Students' main development needs include identity, self-management, social skills, emotional regulation, etc. High school is a critical period for students to transition from adolescence to adulthood. The whole-school approach helps students better manage challenges in independent life, such as career planning, academic pressure and interpersonal relationships, by providing consistent support and guidance and cultivating relevant SEL skills. Schools can provide students with additional resources and support such as career planning lectures and alumni associations by working with community organizations and service agencies. Therefore, in high school, the whole-school approach plays a more important role.

In summary, when exploring the applicability of SEL implementation methods at different educational stages, it was found that the effectiveness of each method at each stage varies depending on the age, development needs and educational environment of the students. Due to their cognitive abilities and emotional development characteristics, students in elementary school are more suitable for systematic independent courses. Students in middle school face more complex social and emotional challenges, and integrating into daily teaching and whole-school approaches can more

effectively support them in coping with academic pressure and interpersonal relationships. Students in high school face multiple pressures during the transition period, and the whole-school approach helps them solve key issues such as identity and future planning.

5.3. Important Factors Affecting the Implementation Methods of Social Emotional Learning

The implementation of SEL is affected by many factors, such as financial support, teacher training, parent participation, external resource support, etc. The implementation of independent courses often requires more financial investment because it requires a lot of curriculum development, teacher training and technical support. The school's large amount of financial support for SEL courses ensures the high-quality advancement of the curriculum so as to provide students with a systematic social emotional learning experience.

The method of integrating into daily teaching requires teachers to naturally integrate social emotional learning content into daily teaching activities, which puts higher demands on teachers' professional skills, teaching strategies and classroom management. Therefore, professional teacher training is an important influencing factor. Through systematic teacher training, teachers can integrate SEL with subject content, create a supportive classroom environment and conduct personalized teaching. In addition, professional teacher training also enhances teachers' ability to update and adjust teaching strategies, so that teachers can implement SEL teaching more targetedly in daily teaching.

Compared with the first two implementation methods, the whole-school approach pays more attention to the cooperation of schools, families and communities. When implementing the whole-school approach, the support of external resources is particularly important. On campus, the cooperation between schools and external psychological counseling agencies can effectively enhance the professionalism of the school's mental health service center and help students solve various problems in a timely and effective manner. Or by cooperating with non-profit organizations, foundations and government agencies, special funds can be provided for the implementation of SEL. Outside of school, external resource support such as online resource platforms, community service agencies, higher education research organizations, and family education organizations have made great contributions to the systematic planning, cross-departmental coordination, professional development of teachers, and participation of families and communities in SEL.

In summary, when analyzing the key influencing factors of SEL implementation methods, it is necessary to focus on the specific needs of each method. Independent courses usually require a lot of financial support, methods integrated into daily teaching require professional teacher training, and school-wide methods rely on extensive external resource support.

5.4. Limitations and Future Works

The literature sources of this study only selected the Web of Science database, which is not comprehensive enough, and there may be other high-quality English literature that has not been included. In addition, the assessment tools used in the included literature may not fully cover all dimensions of social emotional learning, which may affect the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the assessment results. Some studies rely on self-report data, which may have problems with social desirability effects and self-report bias.

Based on this study, future researchers can include diverse samples in further research on this issue, including more students of different ages, cultural backgrounds and regions, to enhance the adaptability of the research results. At the same time, researchers should conduct more longitudinal studies to track the development of students' social emotional abilities at different stages of education, which will help understand the long-term impact of SEL and optimize its implementation strategies. In addition, for educators, a deep understanding of students' backgrounds, interests and emotional states can help develop personalized teaching strategies. With the development of educational technology, educators can explore a variety of teaching tools to assist SEL personalized teaching, such as online platforms and applications, to enhance the implementation and evaluation of SEL.

6. Conclusion

Through a systematic literature review, this study conducted an in-depth analysis of different implementation methods of social emotional learning (SEL), revealing the effectiveness and applicability of independent courses, integration into daily teaching, and whole-school approaches in improving students' social emotional competence, as well as the key factors affecting their effectiveness. The study showed that although the three implementation methods can effectively improve students' social emotional competence in the short term, their respective effects vary in specific dimensions and subsequent impacts. In addition, the study found that the applicability of these implementation methods at different stages of education also varies. Therefore, the implementation of SEL needs to be personalized according to students' age, development needs, and educational environment. In future educational practice, different SEL implementation methods should be flexibly selected and combined according to students' age groups and specific needs to promote students' all-round development and lay a solid foundation for coping with future social and professional challenges.

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