



# CONSTRUCTING A SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING SUPPORT SYSTEM IN RURAL SCHOOLS: A MODEL CENTERED ON STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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## ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of a policy shift in rural education from “academic remediation” to “whole-person development,” how to provide systematic, sustained, and contextually appropriate social-emotional learning (SEL) support for students with learning difficulties has become a key issue in basic education. Drawing on ecological systems theory and a risk-protection perspective, this article synthesizes recent international and Chinese research on SEL effectiveness, the psychosocial development of rural and left-behind children, and educational interventions. It focuses on the vulnerabilities of rural students with learning difficulties in emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, self-efficacy, and learning motivation, and identifies the major gaps in support currently provided by schools, families, and communities. On this basis, the article proposes a rural SEL support system model centered on students with learning difficulties that integrates classroom instruction, school culture, and family-community collaboration.

From the dual perspectives of “demand side” and “supply side,” the article analyzes the risk structure of rural students’ social-emotional development, elucidates the internal logic among a three-tier resource support structure, a bidirectional practice translation mechanism, and an integrated evaluation-feedback loop, and discusses three core driving mechanisms: institutional safeguards, teacher professional development, and the empowerment of digital tools. Finally, in light of China’s rural education modernization and common prosperity strategies, it offers several recommendations at the levels of policy guidance, curriculum standards, resource allocation, and research orientation.

**KEYWORDS:** Social-Emotional Learning; Students with Learning Difficulties; Rural Schools; Support System; Left-Behind Children

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social-emotional learning has come to occupy a prominent place on the global education reform agenda as a crucial pathway for simultaneously promoting students’ academic achievement and mental health (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017). A large body of meta-analyses and systematic reviews has shown that high-quality SEL programs can significantly enhance students’ self-awareness, emotion regulation, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making, while producing an average learning gain of about one-tenth of a standard deviation and reducing the incidence of behavioral problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2018). The five core competencies proposed by CASEL have become a common reference point worldwide for the design, implementation, and evaluation of SEL programs (CASEL, 2020).

Compared with the international trend, attention to SEL in mainland China started relatively late but has risen rapidly in recent years. SEL is increasingly viewed—especially in rural and less developed areas—as a key lever for breaking the negative cycle of “problem labels–low expectations–weak support” and promoting educational equity for disadvantaged students. A series of SEL intervention studies conducted with rural primary school students in central China have demonstrated that systematic curricula combined with teacher training can significantly improve children’s self-esteem, confidence, prosocial behavior, and learning engagement (Li et al., 2022; Li & Hesketh, 2024; Li et al., 2025). However,

compared with urban schools, rural schools face pronounced constraints in terms of teaching staff, curricular resources, professional support, and family cooperation. For students with learning difficulties—who constitute a high-risk group in rural schools—systematic and sustained SEL support remains particularly scarce.

### 1.1 Research background: From “academic remediation” to “whole-person development”

For a long time, rural students with learning difficulties have been simplified as a group with “weak academic foundations” and “negative learning attitudes.” Educational responses have therefore concentrated on after-school tutoring, test drilling, and other forms of “academic remediation” oriented toward raising test scores. However, a large number of studies on left-behind and rural children have shown that emotional distress, parent-child separation, peer rejection, low teacher expectations, and a lack of school belonging often exert subtle yet far-reaching effects on their academic performance and developmental trajectories (Liu et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2020; Zhang & Li, 2021).

On the one hand, experiences of parental migration, poverty-related stress, and uneven educational resources place some rural students with learning difficulties at a marked disadvantage in self-concept, self-efficacy, and future expectations. On the other hand, the management logic of many schools is still dominated by “discipline-scores-promotion,” with insufficient systematic attention to students’ emotional,



relational, and psychological needs (Zhuang & Wu, 2024; Wang et al., 2020). Under these conditions, remediation strategies that focus solely on filling knowledge gaps and drilling skills are unlikely to fundamentally change the developmental situations of students with learning difficulties. Constructing a support system that simultaneously addresses cognitive, emotional, and social domains has therefore become a key task in the transformation of rural education.

### 1.2 Key concept definitions

In this article, “students with learning difficulties” refers not only to those whose academic performance has persistently ranked at the bottom of the class and who lack effective learning strategies, but also to students whose emotional distress, behavioral problems, and interpersonal conflicts place them at the margins of classroom engagement and learning. In rural school settings, this group often overlaps with labels such as “left-behind,” “impoverished,” and “single-parent or grandparent care.” Their social-emotional development is shaped both by family structural changes and weakened community support, and constrained by limited school resources and teachers’ professional capacity (Liu et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2020).

Social-emotional learning is understood as a continuous process that runs from early childhood through secondary education, whereby students, through intentional curricula, pedagogy, and school culture, acquire and apply skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). The “SEL support system” discussed in this article encompasses not only classroom-level curriculum and instruction, but also school-level policies and culture, family and community collaboration, professional services, and digital resources. It emphasizes a “systemic and integrated” design centered on students with learning difficulties.

### 1.3 Research aims and questions

Synthesizing the latest international and Chinese research, this article seeks to address the following questions:

In rural educational settings, what are the main risk and protective factors underlying the social-emotional development of students with learning difficulties, and what “demand-side” risk structure do they present?

What gaps and fractures exist in the support resources currently provided by schools, families, and communities, and what are the major “supply-side” dilemmas?

How can a SEL support system centered on students with learning difficulties—integrating classroom teaching, school culture, and family–community collaboration—be constructed in specific rural school contexts?

What are the core driving mechanisms and implementation pathways of such a system, and what theoretical and practical implications does it hold for the modernization of rural education in China?

To answer these questions, the article first proposes an analytical framework organized around “risk–protection–

support system” based on a systematic review of relevant research, and then builds a conceptual model of a SEL support system for rural students with learning difficulties. The aim is to provide a theoretically grounded starting point that can be tested and refined in future empirical studies and context-specific interventions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 SEL and the development of disadvantaged students

International research has consistently shown that high-quality SEL programs can significantly improve students’ social-emotional competencies and academic performance, and reduce behavioral problems and emotional difficulties, with particularly important benefits for disadvantaged student groups (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018). In recent years, a growing number of SEL studies have focused on children in rural or impoverished contexts, highlighting how low-cost, context-appropriate interventions can enhance self-esteem, confidence, emotion regulation, and relationship quality in resource-constrained settings (Greenberg et al., 2017; Learning Policy Institute, 2023).

In rural China, a series of SEL intervention studies conducted by Li and colleagues in central provinces have shown that when teachers receive systematic training and embed activities on emotion recognition, problem solving, and peer cooperation into their lessons, students’ self-esteem, self-efficacy, and prosocial behavior improve significantly, and some studies also report concurrent gains in academic achievement (Li et al., 2022; Li & Hesketh, 2024; Li et al., 2025). Fu et al.’s quasi-experimental work further demonstrates that locally adapted SEL programs are perceived as acceptable and feasible in rural schools, and can effectively reduce students’ anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems (Fu et al., 2024). These findings provide empirical support for the potential of SEL interventions in rural contexts and lay a practical foundation for constructing a support system for students with learning difficulties.

Nonetheless, the existing literature still focuses predominantly on “program effectiveness” at a single point in time, paying insufficient attention to school-level systemic construction, cross-system collaboration mechanisms, and heterogeneity within the population of students with learning difficulties. In particular, in rural school contexts, there is a lack of systematic theoretical integration and model building on how to coordinate classroom teaching, school management, family education, and community services under conditions of limited resources (Zhuang & Wu, 2024; Wang et al., 2020).

### 2.2 A risk–protection perspective on the social-emotional development of rural and left-behind children

A large body of evidence indicates that rural left-behind and migrant children in China are generally disadvantaged in subjective well-being, school satisfaction, parent–child relationship quality, and mental health (Ye et al., 2020; Chai et al., 2019; Hung et al., 2023). In a survey of left-behind children in an eastern rural region, Ye et al. (2020) found that family economic status, neighborhood cohesion, and trust



relationships with caregivers significantly predicted children's subjective well-being. Liu et al.'s (2023) qualitative study further revealed that the social adjustment of left-behind children exhibits a duality: alongside negative patterns such as depression, loneliness, and academic difficulties, many display positive adjustments through adaptive coping strategies and life skills.

From a risk-protection perspective, long-term parental absence, insufficient emotional support from caregivers, school labeling, and peer exclusion constitute cumulative risks, while teacher care, peer support, community mutual-aid networks, and effective school interventions can serve as critical protective factors (Zhang & Li, 2021; Ye et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2025). In their scoping review of interventions for left-behind children in mainland China, Zhuang and Wu (2024) concluded that existing programs mainly focus on psychological counseling, academic tutoring, and basic care, while systematic cultivation of social-emotional competencies remains relatively limited and is often weakly embedded in formal curricula and school-level structures.

### 2.3 Theoretical foundations: Ecological systems theory and the capability approach

This article primarily draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the capability approach. Ecological systems theory emphasizes that individual development is embedded in multi-layered systems of family, school, community, and macro-level institutions; thus, the social-emotional development of rural students with learning difficulties cannot be explained solely by individual traits or family background, but must be understood in terms of resource allocation and interaction patterns across systems.

The capability approach, for its part, stresses that education should focus on "what lives children are able to lead"—that is, the real opportunities and pathways available to them—rather than on single indicators such as test scores.

Building on these perspectives, this article conceptualizes students with learning difficulties as "capability-constrained" individuals situated in multiple structural disadvantages. Their social-emotional development is shaped not only by internal characteristics and earlier experiences, but also by the opportunity structures provided by schools, families, and communities. Constructing a SEL support system for rural students with learning difficulties thus entails reshaping opportunity structures and expanding capability spaces through systemic educational interventions.

## 3. CURRENT REALITIES: GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN SEL SUPPORT FOR RURAL STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

### 3.1 Demand side: The specific SEL needs of rural students with learning difficulties

On the demand side, rural students with learning difficulties exhibit particularly acute support needs in the areas of emotion regulation, self-efficacy, relationship building, and school belonging. Research has shown that experiences of parental migration and economic pressure are often associated with

higher levels of loneliness, depressive symptoms, and behavioral problems, accompanied by a sense of helplessness regarding academic failure and a tendency toward self-denial (Ye et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2023). Zhang and Li (2021) further found that experiences of childhood neglect significantly reduce the life satisfaction of left-behind children by undermining positive psychological qualities such as self-compassion and gratitude—suggesting that SEL support needs to explicitly strengthen self-care and positive emotions.

At the same time, rural students with learning difficulties often face dual performance pressures from families and schools. Parents or caregivers, driven by aspirations for upward mobility, may place high expectations on academic improvement yet lack concrete and feasible strategies for learning and emotional support. Schools, constrained by limited resources and intense examination pressure, tend to frame students with learning difficulties as "objects of discipline" or "instructional burdens," pushing them into a cycle of "low expectations-low engagement-low returns" (Zeng et al., 2025; Hung et al., 2023). These factors collectively heighten the caution and withdrawal of rural students with learning difficulties regarding emotional expression, help-seeking, and interpersonal trust, and underscore their need for safe, stable, and continuous support environments.

### 3.2 Supply side: Fragmented and low-effectiveness support

On the supply side, rural schools face multiple challenges in responding to the SEL needs of students with learning difficulties.

First, teachers' professional preparation is insufficient. Most rural teachers have had limited opportunities to receive systematic training in SEL knowledge and skills either in pre-service education or in-service professional development. As a result, students' emotional and behavioral problems are often construed as "family issues" or matters of personal character, rather than being incorporated into everyday teaching and classroom management from a professional perspective (Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018).

Second, existing support resources are fragmented. Although some localities have implemented programs related to mental health education, moral education, and academic support, these initiatives are rarely part of an integrated design; their goals overlap while content remains scattered, making it difficult to provide students with continuous and coherent support trajectories (Zhuang & Wu, 2024; Wang et al., 2020).

Third, family and community participation is weak. Studies have shown that caregivers' conservative educational beliefs, heavy economic burdens, and unstable working hours limit their participation in school activities and parent-child interaction, while public services and social work support at the community level remain underdeveloped (Ye et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2023).

Overall, rural students with learning difficulties face a structural contradiction of "high-intensity demand and low-density supply." This contradiction is reflected not only in the absolute shortage of resources, but also in the lack of contextual appropriateness and systemic coherence in the forms and



content of support. Hence, there is a pressing need to explore a composite SEL support system centered on students with learning difficulties, grounded in a systematic understanding of both demand-side and supply-side characteristics.

#### **4. SYSTEM CONSTRUCTION: A COMPOSITE SUPPORT MODEL CENTERED ON STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

##### **4.1 Three-tier resource support: From classroom to school and family–community**

From an ecological perspective, the SEL support system proposed in this article comprises three nested resource tiers: the classroom, the whole school, and the family–community.

At the classroom level, locally relevant SEL curricula and teaching strategies can be used to embed emotion recognition, conflict resolution, and cooperative learning into subjects such as Chinese language and “Morality and the Rule of Law,” thereby providing students with learning difficulties frequent, predictable, and safe opportunities to practice social-emotional skills (Li et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025).

At the whole-school level, an enabling school culture can be cultivated, mechanisms for identifying and referring at-risk students established, and collaborative lesson planning and case-based discussions among teachers organized. These efforts help integrate fragmented initiatives in mental health education, classroom management, and moral education into a systemwide arrangement that serves all students while placing particular emphasis on those with learning difficulties (Greenberg et al., 2017; Learning Policy Institute, 2023).

At the family–community level, parent workshops, take-home SEL assignments, community childcare programs, and social work interventions can be employed to strengthen the roles of families and communities in emotional companionship, learning support, and safe supervision (Ye et al., 2020; Chai et al., 2019).

##### **4.2 Bidirectional practice translation: School-based integration and external collaboration**

###### **4.2.1 School-based integration: Embedding SEL in everyday operations**

Within schools, the support system emphasizes transforming SEL from a “project” into an everyday practice. First, at the curriculum level, schools can develop thematic units suited to the characteristics of rural students with learning difficulties—such as “Understanding Emotions,” “I Can Do It,” and “Getting Along With Classmates”—and encourage teachers to use stories, role-plays, group work, and reflective journaling to guide students in practicing emotion regulation and problem solving in authentic contexts.

Second, in classroom management, the system advocates a “restorative,” rather than punitive, perspective on discipline. Through class meetings, peer mentoring, and teacher–student dialogues, students with learning difficulties are supported to learn from mistakes and repair relationships (Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018).

Third, in teacher professional development, schools are encouraged to use school-based research, peer support, and external expert guidance to help teachers cultivate “emotional sensitivity,” a “trauma-informed” perspective, and “reflective practice.” Such capacities enable teachers to move beyond intuitive labeling when identifying, understanding, and responding to the complex emotions and behaviors of students with learning difficulties (Liu et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2025).

###### **4.2.2 External collaboration: Linking families and communities**

In terms of external collaboration, the support system underscores the importance of schools proactively linking and integrating family and community resources to construct a multi-actor support network. On the one hand, regular parent classes and open days can be used to introduce SEL concepts and practices to caregivers, helping them understand the connection between “emotion education” and “learning support,” and enhancing their self-efficacy in emotional companionship and learning guidance (Ye et al., 2020; Zhang & Li, 2021).

On the other hand, schools can cooperate with township social work stations, women’s federations, and committees for the care of the next generation to organize parent–child activities, group counseling, and community festivals for left-behind and impoverished families, thereby strengthening students’ sense of community belonging and safety (Hung et al., 2023; Zhuang & Wu, 2024).

It should be noted that in many rural communities, long-standing “acquaintance society” structures both enable diverse forms of caregiving and supervision and risk intensifying gossip, labeling, and stigma. External collaboration efforts should therefore respect local culture while using public advocacy, role modeling, and institutional design to gradually shift labels from “problematic students” to “students in need of additional support,” and foster an inclusive environment that serves all students while focusing particularly on those with learning difficulties.

###### **4.3 An integrated evaluation–feedback loop: Data-informed support optimization**

To prevent the support system from becoming merely symbolic, it is necessary to establish an integrated evaluation–feedback loop. This loop should incorporate at least three levels of data collection and use.

First, at the student level, brief and low-burden scales and teacher observational records can be used to regularly monitor changes in students’ social-emotional competencies, mental health, relationship quality, and learning engagement, with special attention to students with learning difficulties (Li & Hesketh, 2024; Durlak et al., 2011).

Second, at the teacher and parent levels, process feedback—such as teachers’ reflections on implementation challenges and parents’ assessments of the feasibility of home-based tasks—can inform the ongoing optimization of activities and support strategies.



Third, at the school level, institutional reflection can be conducted through annual reviews of resource allocation, equity, and sustainability, to ensure that the support system is not disrupted by staff turnover or project endings.

Through such multi-level data collection and feedback, schools can gradually develop a cyclical improvement mechanism of “goal setting– implementation– evaluation– adjustment,” enabling the SEL support system for rural students with learning difficulties to become part of routine school operations rather than a short-term, activity-based initiative.

## 5. CORE MECHANISMS AND IMPLEMENTATION PATHWAYS

### 5.1 Three core driving mechanisms

The effective operation of a SEL support system for rural students with learning difficulties relies on at least three core driving mechanisms.

First is the institutional safeguard mechanism. This includes incorporating SEL goals into school development plans and school-based curriculum schemes, recognizing teachers’ SEL-related work in workload calculations and performance evaluations, and aligning school-level initiatives with policies from higher-level education authorities to secure necessary funding and professional support (Greenberg et al., 2017; Learning Policy Institute, 2023).

Second is the teacher professional development mechanism. Teachers are the key implementers of SEL support systems, and their beliefs, emotion regulation capacities, and classroom practices have a direct impact on students’ experiences and benefits. Continuous school-based professional learning, peer coaching, and external training can support teachers in “teaching students how to learn” while also “teaching students how to relate and live” (Mahoney et al., 2018; Li et al., 2022).

Third is the digital empowerment and cross-sector cooperation mechanism. As digital educational resources become more widely available, online SEL lessons, emotion-recognition training tools, and remote psychological counseling offer new possibilities for resource-limited regions (Li et al., 2025; Zeng et al., 2025). If digital resources can be combined with local schools, social work agencies, and university-based research teams—while safeguarding privacy and data security—the professionalism and coverage of the support system may be enhanced at a manageable cost.

### 5.2 A phased pathway from pilots to scaling-up

In terms of implementation, this article recommends that rural schools adopt a phased strategy of “diagnosis–piloting–expansion–institutionalization.”

In the diagnosis phase, schools conduct self-assessments, surveys, and interviews to comprehensively understand the SEL needs of students with learning difficulties and existing support conditions, and to identify strengths and key gaps in resources.

In the piloting phase, one or a small number of grades or classes

are selected to implement concrete and feasible SEL thematic projects. Particular attention is paid to ensuring adequate teacher support and detailed documentation of implementation processes, so as to guarantee quality and controllability on a small scale (Li et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2024).

In the expansion phase, based on the evaluation of pilot results, schools gradually expand coverage, incorporate successful experiences into routine policies and practices, and foster cross-grade and cross-subject collaborative practices.

Finally, in the institutionalization phase, the SEL support system is formally embedded in school governance structures through institutional documents, job descriptions, and resource allocation arrangements, and linked with evaluation and supervision by higher-level education authorities. This helps prevent the system from being undermined by changes in principals or key teachers.

## 6. DISCUSSION, REFLECTIONS, AND PROSPECTS

### 6.1 Potential challenges and risks

Despite the theoretical and practical necessity and feasibility of a rural SEL support system centered on students with learning difficulties, several challenges remain in implementation.

First, the “academic achievement first” logic continues to exert strong institutional and cultural influence. Some schools and parents may view SEL as an “extra burden” that encroaches on disciplinary teaching time rather than as a foundation for improving learning and long-term development (Mahoney et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2017).

Second, teachers in rural schools already face heavy workloads. Without additional personnel and time support, there is a risk that SEL implementation will become perfunctory.

Third, rural areas still lack sufficient professional psychological services, social work support, and digital infrastructure. In the absence of cross-sector collaboration and stable funding sources, the sustainability of the support system is likely to be constrained (Wang et al., 2020; Zhuang & Wu, 2024).

### 6.2 Theoretical reflection: From “remediation” to “empowerment”

Theoretically, a SEL support system centered on rural students with learning difficulties implies a paradigm shift from “problem–correction” to “capability–empowerment.” The former tends to adopt a deficit-focused perspective, construing students with learning difficulties as deviating from “normal” development and emphasizing correction and behavior control. The latter, by contrast, pays closer attention to the resilience, adaptability, and latent strengths that students exhibit in adverse environments, and seeks to expand their capability spaces through systemic support (Ye et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2023).

This shift also reminds researchers and practitioners to avoid relying solely on academic indicators to evaluate educational effectiveness. Instead, social-emotional development, subjective well-being, and capacity for social participation



should be incorporated into the core connotations of “educational quality.”

### 6.3 Future directions: From conceptual models to context-specific empirical work

The SEL support system model proposed in this article, grounded in literature review and theoretical integration, remains at the level of conceptual framework. Future research could advance in at least three directions.

First, action research should be conducted in different regions and types of rural schools to examine the contextual appropriateness of the support system and adapt it to variations in school size, teacher composition, and community resources (Li et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025).

Second, evaluation designs that combine longitudinal quantitative tracking with qualitative interpretation should be developed. These should attend not only to changes in academic and psychological indicators, but also to students’ lived experiences and meaning-making processes.

Third, the use of digital technologies to connect urban and rural resources should be explored, and the long-term impacts of blended online–offline SEL support models on rural students with learning difficulties assessed.

In short, constructing a SEL support system centered on rural students with learning difficulties is not only an educational issue related to enhancing individual developmental quality, but also a societal issue related to modernizing rural education and narrowing urban–rural disparities. Within the overarching framework of China’s rural revitalization and education-strengthening strategies, embedding such a system into policy, institutional arrangements, and daily practice will require sustained interdisciplinary collaboration and long-term follow-up research.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Drawing on international and Chinese research on SEL, the development of rural and left-behind children, and educational interventions, this article has analyzed the structural contradictions on the “demand side” and “supply side” of social-emotional development faced by rural students with learning difficulties. It has identified significant shortcomings in rural schools’ teacher preparation, resource integration, and family–community collaboration. On this basis, the article has proposed a composite support system model comprising a three-tier resource structure, a bidirectional practice translation mechanism, and an integrated evaluation–feedback loop, and has elaborated its core driving mechanisms and phased implementation pathway in terms of institutional safeguards, teacher professional development, and digital empowerment.

Theoretically, the model attempts to integrate ecological systems theory, a risk–protection perspective, and the capability approach, thereby enriching localized discussions of educational support systems for vulnerable children. Practically, it provides operable ideas for rural schools seeking to plan and implement SEL support for students with learning difficulties under conditions of limited resources. If future

context-sensitive empirical research can be conducted in diverse regions and types of schools, and if these efforts can resonate with national policy innovations, more robust evidence may be generated to advance the whole-person development of rural students with learning difficulties and promote educational opportunity equity.

### Abbreviations

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

SEL: Social and Emotional Learning

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