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FROM REMEDIAL INSTRUCTION TO WHOLE-CHILD DEVELOPMENT: A PARADIGM SHIFT BROUGHT BY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR RURAL STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in Amartya Sen's capability approach, this article understands rural students with learning difficulties as situated in structural contexts of capability deprivation and argues for using social and emotional learning (SEL) as a lever to shift from a remedial, score-oriented paradigm toward one centered on capability expansion. First, drawing on the notion of capability deprivation, the article analyzes the structural limitations of traditional remedial models and reveals their failures in problem attribution, intervention goals, and institutional logic. Second, based on the CASEL framework and meta-analytic evidence, it elaborates three core shifts in an SEL paradigm oriented toward capability expansion. Third, from the levels of curriculum and classroom instruction, teachers and schools, and families and communities, it proposes a multi-level action framework for SEL with rural students with learning difficulties, illustrated with emerging empirical studies from rural China. Finally, it discusses the enabling conditions and future challenges for institutionalizing this paradigm shift, including policy and system support, teacher professional learning, and evidence-based evaluation. The article contends that only by reinterpreting "learning difficulties" at the intersection of social-emotional development and structural inequality, and treating rural students with learning difficulties as subjects in need of capability expansion rather than mere recipients of remedial instruction, can rural education truly move from a narrow remedial logic toward a whole-child development logic and open more dignified and meaningful developmental pathways for these students.

KEYWORDS: *Rural Students with Learning Difficulties; Social and Emotional Learning; Capability Approach; Left-Behind Children; Educational Intervention*

1. THE PROBLEM WITH THE REMEDIAL PARADIGM: SYSTEMIC FAILURE FROM A CAPABILITY-DEPRIVATION PERSPECTIVE

1.1. Capability Deprivation Behind the "Learning Difficulties" Label

In school administration, students with learning difficulties are often defined simply as those with "poor grades" and "weak academic foundations." However, existing research on rural children, including left-behind children, consistently shows that a large proportion of rural students with learning difficulties experience higher levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, as well as learning problems such as inattention in class, low learning motivation, and poor homework completion (Sun et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019). These factors substantially undermine their engagement and academic performance through pathways such as mental health, emotion regulation, and interpersonal relationships (Su et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2021).

From the perspective of the capability approach, this is not merely an "academic problem." Rural students with learning difficulties are often affected by multiple overlapping disadvantages, including long-term parental migration, limited parent–child communication, lack of emotional support, and constrained educational expectations on the part of caregivers. Together, these factors compress their learning capabilities, social relationships, and agency across multiple dimensions. For these students, unsafe caregiving environments, limited educational resources, and weak social support significantly restrict their real freedom to decide "what kind of person to become" and "what kind of life to live." The capability approach understands development as the expansion of people's substantive freedoms and capability sets (Sen, 1999). In this sense, "learning difficulties" are only the most visible manifestation of deeper capability deprivation in school contexts.

1.2. Traditional Remedial Instruction: Treating Outcome Problems as Starting-Point Problems

In practice, support for students with learning difficulties tends to rely on remedial measures such as extra tutoring, intensive exercises, and streamed instruction. The implicit assumption is that "as long as knowledge gaps are filled, the problem will be solved." However, research on rural and other disadvantaged groups shows that when students experience long-term emotional distress, low self-esteem,

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social exclusion, and feelings of helplessness in learning, purely academic remediation is often ineffective and may even reinforce their self-identification as "academic failures" (Sun et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2022). Empirical studies further reveal that left-behind and other vulnerable children show disadvantages in classroom participation, self-regulation, and perseverance, and that academic difficulties are frequently the "output" of prolonged social-emotional adversity in the academic domain (Su et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2015).

If students continue to be treated as passive "containers of knowledge" and schools attempt to "force progress" by increasing homework and test pressure, they are likely to deplete students' already limited psychological resources. This can exacerbate learning avoidance, misconduct, and even dropout tendencies (Greenberg et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019).

1.3. Three Structural Limitations of the Remedial Paradigm

Synthesizing domestic and international studies, the limitations of the traditional remedial paradigm can be summarized in three dimensions. First, there is a "monolithic" attribution of problems. Remedial approaches often attribute learning difficulties to students' intelligence, effort, or parental "lack of concern," while overlooking the profound ways in which structural factors such as urban–rural disparities, unequal distribution of educational resources, and labor migration shape learning opportunities and educational processes (Sun et al., 2015; Lu, 2019). Second, there is a "narrow" definition of intervention goals. As teacher and school evaluations have become highly test-score oriented, interventions tend to focus on short-term score gains, neglecting social-emotional competencies—such as emotion regulation, interpersonal connection, and self-efficacy—that are equally critical for academic and life outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2017; Weissberg, 2019). Third, governance is "fragmented." In many locales, support for students with learning difficulties depends largely on individual teachers' moral commitment and ad hoc arrangements, lacking cross-sector coordination and systemic policy design. As a result, support measures are scattered, short term, and unsustainable (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Liu, 2021).

In this sense, the remedial paradigm is not entirely useless, but it struggles to reach the deeper mechanisms underlying the difficulties of rural students with learning problems. It tends to provide only limited patchwork at the outcome level, without bringing about substantive change in students' capability structures.

2. CORE OF THE NEW PARADIGM: THREE SEL SHIFTS ORIENTED TOWARD CAPABILITY EXPANSION

2.1. From Score Orientation to Capability Expansion: A Theoretical Pivot

The capability approach posits that the primary task of education is to expand individuals' real capabilities to pursue lives they have reason to value, rather than merely improve quantifiable output indicators (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This provides an important theoretical fulcrum for rethinking rural students with learning difficulties: academic achievement is only one dimension of a multidimensional capability structure. Emotion regulation, social connectedness, self-identity, sense of purpose, and hope are equally essential components of being a "capable learner."

SEL lies at the heart of capability expansion. International meta-analyses consistently show that high-quality SEL programs significantly enhance students' social-emotional skills, prosocial behavior, and academic performance, while reducing behavioral problems and emotional distress, with effects sustained over follow-up periods (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2017). This means that an SEL-based paradigm does not "abandon academic learning for soft skills," but rather seeks to reconcile academic learning and broader development through capability expansion.

2.2. From Deficit Remediation to Strength Development: A Developmental Perspective

Traditional interventions for students with learning difficulties are often premised on "correction" and "remediation," potentially reinforcing students' problem-oriented identities. In contrast, SEL adopts a developmental perspective, targeting all children and adolescents and viewing social-emotional competence as a set of key skills that every child can acquire and strengthen (CASEL, 2020; Weissberg, 2019). Lawson and colleagues' (2019) analysis of evidence-based SEL programs shows that successful initiatives typically emphasize active skills training, repeated practice, and transfer across contexts, rather than simple "problem fixing."

In the context of rural students with learning difficulties, this perspective is particularly important. Many such students show distinctive strengths in resilience, responsibility, and willingness to help others, yet there are few educational spaces in which these strengths can be recognized and developed. By transforming classrooms into safe environments where students can practice self-awareness, emotion management, and cooperative problem solving, SEL helps shift discourse from "problems" to "potential" and enables students to rebuild confidence in themselves and in learning through positive experiences (Greenberg et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2022).

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2.3. From Individual Responsibility to System Responsibility: A Public Health Perspective

Greenberg and colleagues (2017) argue for a public health approach to SEL, viewing it as a universal, system-level strategy for promotion and prevention rather than an add-on service for a small subset of "problem students." From this vantage point, the social-emotional difficulties of rural students with learning problems should not be reduced to their personal "vulnerability" or "failure," but understood as psychological and developmental imprints of family migration, rural social change, and unequal educational resources.

Accordingly, an SEL-centered paradigm must emphasize systemic responsibilities of schools, families, communities, and macro-level policies. Schools need to design curricula and institutional arrangements that provide sustainable social-emotional support for rural students with learning difficulties. Families and caregivers must improve parent–child communication and emotional bonding to offer a secure emotional base. Public policy should ensure stable, long-term financial and institutional support for rural SEL initiatives (OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2021; Learning Policy Institute, 2023).

3. PATHWAYS TO PRACTICE: A MULTI-LEVEL SEL ACTION FRAMEWORK FOR RURAL STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

3.1. Curriculum and Classroom: Embedding SEL in Subject Teaching

International evidence suggests that integrating SEL into everyday subject teaching is more conducive to sustained implementation than treating it as a stand-alone add-on course (Lawson et al., 2019; Hosokawa, 2024). In rural schools, where instructional time and human resources are limited, embedding SEL in Chinese language, morality and rule of law, and integrated practice courses aligns with local constraints and makes it easier for students with learning difficulties to "learn and apply" skills in authentic academic contexts.

Building on empirical SEL research in rural China, classroom-level practices can be developed in at least three ways. First, students can practice emotion recognition and empathy through texts and scenarios. Using classic stories, local narratives, and students' lived experiences, teachers can guide students to identify characters' emotions and motives, understand conflicts from multiple perspectives, and practice perspective taking (Li et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2024). Research indicates that such story- and role-play-based activities improve social cognition and peer acceptance, particularly for students who were previously marginalized in peer networks (Lawson et al., 2019). Second, self-regulation and a growth mindset can be strengthened through task design and assessment. By setting phased, attainable learning goals and encouraging students to record their efforts, strategies, and emotional changes, teachers can emphasize the relationship between effort, strategy, and progress in feedback, while deemphasizing single test scores as the only standard. This helps students with learning difficulties view failure as part of the learning process and gradually rebuild confidence in learning (Dweck, 2006; Durlak et al., 2011).

Third, social skills and responsibility can be developed through cooperative and project-based learning. Teachers can design cooperative tasks that address real rural issues—such as environmental protection or caring for left-behind elders—so that students practice communication, negotiation, and joint decision making while experiencing the positive feelings associated with "being helpful to others." Fu and colleagues (2024) found that an SEL program centered on cooperative problem solving in rural primary schools significantly improved children's self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills.

3.2. Teachers and Schools: Building High-Trust, High-Support SEL Ecologies

Teachers are the key implementers of SEL and, in rural schools, the adults who have the most frequent contact with students with learning difficulties. International research underscores that successful SEL implementation depends on teachers' endorsement of program values, enhanced implementation capacity, and the emergence of a supportive school climate (Domitrovich et al., 2008; CASEL, 2020).

Teacher professional development should therefore move "from classroom control to developmental support." Training for rural teachers needs to address SEL theory, classroom strategies, and teachers' own social-emotional competence. Li and colleagues' (2022) program in a poor rural primary school in central China shows that improvements in teachers' emotion regulation and classroom management skills can produce more sustained positive impacts on students' social-emotional competence and behavior.

School culture building is equally critical. By establishing expectations for positive behavior, anti-bullying norms, and peer-support mechanisms, schools can make "respect, support, and safety" explicit core values of their culture. This helps staff move away from stigmatizing narratives about "problem students" and adopt a growth-oriented perspective on the trajectories of students with learning difficulties (Greenberg et al., 2017; Learning Policy Institute, 2023).

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In addition, a tiered support system for high-risk students can be developed. Drawing on public health models of universal, selective, and indicated interventions, schools can provide universal SEL instruction to all students while offering small-group counseling, individual support, and referrals to specialized services for rural students with learning difficulties who exhibit persistent emotional and behavioral problems (Greenberg et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2022).

3.3. Families and Communities: Strengthening Social-Emotional Support Networks

Rural students with learning difficulties frequently face long-term parental migration and limited parent–child communication. Multiple studies indicate that the quality of parent–child communication is a key mediator linking left-behind status with children's mental health and educational expectations (Su et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2019; Zhuang & Zhang, 2025). Consequently, SEL for rural students with learning difficulties must extend beyond school boundaries and systematically involve families and communities.

First, the quality of parent–child communication and educational expectations should be improved. Through parent education workshops, online family activities, and "emotional homework," schools can help parents and primary caregivers learn listening, empathy, and positive feedback skills. Migrant parents can be encouraged to use video calls for high-quality interactions that go beyond academic supervision and practical reminders (Su et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2021).

Second, community resources should be activated to build diversified support networks. Village committees, women's federations, youth leagues, returnee college students, and respected local figures can jointly provide academic tutoring, interest clubs, and mental health awareness activities. A recent systematic review of interventions for left-behind children in Mainland China suggests that multi-component interventions that integrate family, school, and community resources are more likely to produce stable improvements in mental health and social-emotional development (Zhuang, 2024).

Finally, children's voices should be respected and their participation and agency strengthened. The capability approach emphasizes that children are not only individuals to be protected but also agents capable of making choices and participating in public life. Rural schools and communities can create student councils and participatory forums that involve students with learning difficulties in decision making around school rules and activity design. Experiences of being heard and trusted can help them develop self-respect and a sense of responsibility (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

4. ENABLING CONDITIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES: BRINGING SEL INTO THE "MAINSTREAM" OF RURAL EDUCATION

4.1. From Project-Based Pilots to Institutionalized Arrangements

At present, both internationally and in China, many high-quality SEL initiatives still operate as projects that depend on external funding or research teams, and face challenges such as short cycles, limited coverage, and difficulties in scaling up (Greenberg et al., 2017; Lawson et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2024). To make SEL a genuine new paradigm for rural students with learning difficulties, institutional breakthroughs are needed in several areas.

First, SEL should be incorporated into rural education quality monitoring and evaluation systems. National and local monitoring frameworks can add indicators of students' social-emotional development, encourage schools to develop localized SEL assessment tools, and use results to improve teaching and support systems, rather than as new punitive metrics. Second, stable funding and personnel support mechanisms should be created. Special funds and the conversion of project funding to regular budget lines can enable rural schools to purchase SEL curricula, organize teacher training, and hire professionals. At the same time, the effectiveness of supporting students' social-emotional development should be explicitly incorporated into performance appraisal and promotion systems for rural teachers, thereby counterbalancing the pressure generated by single academic indicators. Third, regional collaboration and experience sharing should be encouraged. At the county level, resource-sharing platforms can be established, enabling pilot schools to engage in mutual observation, joint lesson study, and knowledge exchange, and to identify SEL implementation pathways and management models suited to different types of rural schools in order to avoid "project islands."

4.2. Moving Forward Amid Uncertainty: Evidence-Based and Locally Responsive Innovation

Although international meta-analyses and studies in Chinese contexts provide strong support for SEL, it is by no means a panacea. Research indicates that implementation quality, cultural fit, and teacher beliefs all substantially influence program outcomes (Lawson et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2022). For rural students with learning difficulties, future practice and research must continue to explore how to maintain core SEL principles while fully respecting local cultures, dialect contexts, and community relationship structures.

Moreover, the rapid development of artificial intelligence and learning analytics has generated new possibilities for using digital tools to enhance students' social-emotional skills and identify those at risk (Hosokawa, 2024; Yang et al., 2025). These technologies hold

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promise for resource-constrained rural schools, but also raise concerns about data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the potential dehumanization of educational relationships. Their application therefore needs to be guided by robust ethical frameworks.

5. CONCLUSION

The shift from remedial instruction to whole-child development is not a mere technical refinement but a fundamental reimagining of who rural students with learning difficulties are and who they can become. SEL offers a pathway centered on capability expansion that balances academic learning and well-being. International meta-analyses and emerging empirical studies in rural China jointly demonstrate that when schools systematically cultivate safe, supportive, and high-expectation social-emotional ecologies, rural students with learning difficulties can achieve substantial gains in emotion regulation, interpersonal relationships, and self-efficacy. They are also more likely to break the vicious cycle of "capability deprivation–academic failure" and move more steadily toward lives characterized by dignity and real choice (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Li et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2024).

For researchers, the key next step is to conduct high-quality evaluations of SEL interventions targeting rural and marginalized populations and to deepen understanding of their mechanisms and contextual variations. For policymakers and practitioners, it is crucial to incorporate SEL into the core agenda of rural education modernization through institutional design and resource allocation, so that whole-child development moves beyond policy documents and slogans and becomes a lived reality that rural students with learning difficulties can feel, see, and experience in their everyday school lives.

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