



The Enhancement of Social-Emotional Learning among Primary Students through Group Activities

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Abstract

This study aims to: 1) explore the SEL situation of students; 2) compare the SEL levels of students before and after participating in group activities; 3) compare the SEL levels of students in the experimental group and the control group after participating in group activities. The sample comprises third-grade primary students in Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China. A quantitative quasi-experimental design was used. Four classes (200 students) were randomly selected from twelve in stage one, with equal selection probability. In stage two, students completed questionnaires, and two low-scoring classes with no significant differences were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, each with 50 students. The research tools are group activities and questionnaires. Quantitative data descriptive statistical analysis, including mean and standard deviation, and t-test dependent were used to compare and analyze SEL data before and after participating in group activity, and t-test independent was used to compare and analyze the SEL of the experimental group. The research results are as follows: 1) The overall SEL level of the students is relatively high. 2) After participating in group activities, the SEL scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than those before the activities. 3) After the group activity intervention, the SEL scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group, and the difference was statistically significant.

Keyword: Primary school students; Social-Emotional Learning; group activities; quasi-experiment; SEL Intervention

1. Introduction

With the global emphasis on the development of students' comprehensive qualities, social and emotional learning (SEL) has increasingly become the core of educational research, especially during the critical psychological development period of 9-10 years old, when students often encounter psychological problems such as behavioral disorders, anxiety, and emotional imbalance (Organization & Fund, 2024). Li et al. (2022) found that Chinese teenagers generally face mental health problems such as depression, loneliness, and mobile phone addiction. Studies have shown that SEL, by cultivating self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making abilities, can effectively enhance students' emotional regulation (Roeser et al., 2020), psychological resilience and self-control (Diamond & Lee, 2011), and reduce risks such as internet addiction (Agirkan, 2023). At the same time, SEL helps improve the classroom atmosphere and academic performance (Gueldner et al., 2020), enhances empathy and cultural understanding, promotes positive interpersonal relationships, and reduces aggressive behavior (Selman, 2003). Therefore, SEL plays an irreplaceable and crucial role in supporting students' mental health, enhancing academic performance, and promoting social adaptability.



Today, Chinese third-grade students face psychological challenges during their growth process, including academic pressure and learning anxiety (Yang & Wang, 2023), ADHD tendencies (Banaschewski et al., 2017), social withdrawal and school bullying (Olweus & Breivik, 2014), and low self-identity leading to inferiority and comparison (Schwartz et al., 2015). Emotionally, family conflicts, causing separation anxiety and internet addiction-induced game addiction, also hurt their emotional health (Gao et al., 2018). These problems indicate that improving students' social and emotional learning ability has become an urgent and important topic to be addressed.

Group activities can effectively develop students' SEL abilities. Firstly, group dynamics theory states that members in a group are interdependent and interact with each other, which provides an important foundation for the development of individual social behavior (Forsyth, 2014). The social cognition theory proposes that, in this collective environment, students can enhance their awareness and regulation of their own and others' emotions through observation, imitation, and feedback (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The experiential learning theory emphasizes that students can deeply internalize SEL abilities, such as emotional regulation, communication, and cooperation, through experiencing specific experiences, reflecting on observations, constructing concepts, and actively practicing in group activities (Kolb et al., 2014). Secondly, group activities provide students with real social situations, such as role-playing, group tasks, and cooperative games, which help students develop empathy, responsibility, and relationship skills through practical interaction. At the same time, collaboration also enhances students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy, which are crucial for children's psychological growth (Johnson et al., 2013). In summary, group activities not only have theoretical support but also provide an ideal platform for students to internalize and practice the five core SEL abilities through rich social interaction and situational experiences.

The theoretical framework of group activities promoting the development of students' SEL. Group activities, as an educational method, can effectively promote the development of students' social and emotional learning (SEL) abilities through artistic creation, game therapy, and brainstorming strategies (including AI interaction, scenario simulation, role-playing, competitive games, brainstorming, interactive games, and group painting). Artistic activities such as painting help students express and regulate emotions in a non-verbal way (Malchiodi, 2020); Role-playing and scenario simulation enhance empathy and interpersonal communication skills (Lillard et al., 2013), reducing aggressive behavior (Gray, 2017); Team competition and group discussions enhance cooperation and communication skills, reducing inappropriate behavior (Gillies, 2016); Brainstorming stimulates creativity and nurtures rational decision-making and problem-solving skill (AlMutairi, 2015). These activities provide students with opportunities to practice the five core competencies of the SEL framework, which help to enhance emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and teamwork. Studies have shown that students who participate in group activities generally experience an increase in empathy and cooperative skills, a reduction in classroom conflicts, and an improvement in their engagement levels (Ashrafzade et al., 2023).

Based on the above background, researchers explored ways to enhance students' SEL and used group activities to help students develop SEL. Domestic and international studies have consistently demonstrated that group activities are an effective means of promoting students' social and emotional learning. However, there are still relatively few intervention studies on SEL for third-grade primary school students at present, especially in the context of Chinese education. The systematic design of group activities still needs further exploration. This study aims to utilize group activities as a means of supplementing the research deficiencies in this field and has carried out a project aimed at promoting the development of social and emotional abilities (SEL) in primary school students.



2. Research Methodology

1. Research design

This study adopted a quantitative quasi-experimental research design, with the control group and the experimental group as the research subjects. Through evaluations before and after the intervention, the study compared the impact of group activity intervention on the social and emotional learning development of primary school students. Due to the voluntary nature of student participation and the limitations of random allocation, the quasi-experimental design was suitable for the current study's conditions (Campbell & Cook, 1979).

This study designed an 8-week group activity consisting of 8 thematic units, with one unit per week and two lessons per unit (each 40 minutes long), focusing on the five core competencies of social and emotional learning.

2. Research subjects

The study subjects were third-grade students (aged 9-10) at Wen Qing Road Primary School in Zhang Gong District, Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province. There was a total of 621 third-grade students in the school.

3. Sample Selection

This study employed a staged random sampling method, as follows:

1. Four classes were randomly selected from the 12 third-grade classes, totaling 200 students.

2. A social-emotional learning questionnaire survey was conducted among fourth-grade students, and the two classes with the lowest scores (totaling 100 students) were selected, ensuring no significant differences between the two classes. The students were then randomly divided into an experimental group and a control group (50 students each). The experimental group received a group activity intervention, while the control group underwent regular teaching.

Sample Characteristics: The final sample consisted of 100 students, with ages ranging from 9 to 10 years old.

4. Research instruments

Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire

The Social-Emotional Learning Questionnaire (SEKQ) used in this study was adapted from the original scale designed by Zhou and Yi (2012) and is suitable for elementary school students. The questionnaire covers five core competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making (refer to the CASEL framework). To meet the research objectives of this study, the number of questionnaire items was expanded from the original 25 to 32, ensuring that multiple items measure each core competency. The measurement results of this study were categorized into five levels: 1.00–1.80 (very low), 1.81–2.60 (low), 2.61–3.40 (moderate), 3.41–4.20 (high), and 4.21–5.00 (very high), to enhance the objectivity and sensitivity of the assessment.

Three professors verified the objective consistency of the scale's items (IOC). The post-verification IOC values ranged from 0.67 to 1.00, indicating good validity.

This study employed Cronbach's α to test the internal consistency reliability of the scale. The analysis results showed:

1. Valid sample size: 50 (no missing values, 100% effective response rate)
2. Number of items: 32
3. Reliability coefficient: $\alpha = 0.941$. This scale exhibits excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.941$, with 32 items), surpassing the standard of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978), which indicates high internal consistency reliability.

The scale is as follows: see the appendix for details.



Group Activities

The group activities designed by this research institute integrate three methods: art therapy, game therapy, and brainstorming. The aim is to enhance the five core competencies of students' social and emotional learning (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) through diverse activity formats. The activities include:

Art activities: Group painting, color expression, helping students release emotional conflicts, and improving self-awareness and emotional management skills.

Game activities Include Role-Playing, competitive games, and scenario simulations, which enhance students' social awareness and relationship skills through interaction and collaboration.

Brainstorming activities: Through the collision of viewpoints and problem-solving, cultivating students' decision-making ability and innovative thinking.

5. Data collection procedure

(1) Ethical considerations: Before initiating the data collection process, the rights of the participants were fully considered, including confidentiality and privacy.

During the recruitment process, participants were informed of the research purpose, duration, methodology, and expected benefits before deciding to participate in the study. They signed an informed consent form, guaranteeing voluntary cooperation, and were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time.

(2) The steps for collecting experimental data are as follows:

The first step is for the researcher to use a questionnaire to understand the scores on social and emotional learning measurements for third-grade students.

The second step is that after the experimental group is completed, the students in the experimental group and the control group will take the social and emotional learning questionnaire to understand the score situation after the test.

6. Data analysis: In this study, Quantitative data descriptive statistical analysis, including mean and standard deviation, and t-test, were used to compare and analyze SEL data before and after participating in a group activity. A t-test for independent variables was used to compare and analyze the SEL of the experimental group.

3. Results and Discussion

The empirical data of this study were analyzed using the SPSS statistical analysis platform, employing descriptive statistics and t-tests. Before conducting the t-test analysis, Shapiro-Wilk normality analysis was performed. The data of the experimental group ($W = 0.981, p = 0.606$) and the control group ($W = 0.966, p = 0.155$) all met the standard distribution criteria ($p > 0.05$), indicating that there was no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group before the intervention, which met the prerequisites for the t-test. Therefore, this study conducted data analysis based on this foundation. In the realm of data analysis, researchers use specific symbols to determine the average results of their studies.

n	Replace	Sample Size
M	Replace	Mean
S D	Replace	Standard Deviation
t	Replace	t-test
P	Replace	p-value
MD	Replace	Mean Difference
W	Replace	Shapiro-Wilk Test statistics

1. The SEL of primary school students

To comprehensively understand the current status of students' SEL. Through the mean and standard deviation index, we can see the differences in students' performance across five dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making. (As shown in Table 1):

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the overall status of students' SEL in five dimensions (n = 200)

Overall description of SEL dimensions	Third Grade of Primary School (n=200)		LEVEL
	M	SD	
Self-Awareness	3.78	0.86	High
Self-Management	3.78	0.86	High
Social Awareness	3.68	0.92	High
Relationship skills	3.70	0.91	High
Responsible Decision-Making	3.87	0.96	High
Overall	3.75	0.77	High

Table 1 shows that the overall mean score of SEL is M = 3.75, indicating a relatively high level. The mean scores of all SEL dimensions are all within the range of 3.60 to 3.90, and the standard deviations are all within the range of 0.85 to 1.00. This suggests that each dimension of SEL has a positive capability foundation, characterized by similar means and significant individual differences. Among them, the mean and standard deviation of self-awareness and self-management are the same, indicating that they exhibit a coordinated development feature. The mean of responsible decision-making, M = 3.87, is the highest, but the standard deviation, SD = 0.96, has the most significant individual differences.

2. To compare the SEL of the Primary students before and after participating in the group activity.

To evaluate the effect of group activities on the social and emotional learning of students in the experimental group, the SEL and five dimensions were analyzed before and after the intervention in the experimental group (Table 2).

Table 2 compares the SEL of primary school students before and after participating in group activities (n = 100)

Objective	Pre-test		Post-test		MD	t	P	Correlation-P
	M	SD	M	SD				
Self-awareness	3.54	0.96	4.16	0.70	-0.62	-4.34**	<0.001	0.030*
Self-management	3.75	0.73	4.06	0.68	-0.31	-2.66*	0.011	0.019*
Social consciousness	3.38	1.06	4.05	0.68	-0.67	-4.74**	<0.001	0.003**
relationship skills	3.52	0.92	4.08	0.70	-0.56	-4.42**	<0.001	0.004**
Responsible decision-making	3.72	1.23	4.13	0.77	-0.41	-2.62*	0.012	<0.001* *

SEL	3.56	0.73	4.09	0.57	-0.53	-6.22**	< 0.001	<0.001*
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* is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

** is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Paired-sample t-test results (see Table 2) revealed significant improvements across all five SEL dimensions and the overall score after the group activity intervention ($p < 0.05$), with effect sizes ranging from small to large (Cohen’s $d = 0.37$ to 0.88).

Among the five core competencies, the most notable gains were observed in “social awareness” ($d = 0.67$) and “relationship skills” ($d = 0.63$), both of which showed medium effect sizes and substantial mean increases. “Self-awareness” also improved significantly ($d = 0.61$), while “self-management” and “responsible decision-making” showed relatively minor but still statistically significant improvements ($d \approx 0.37$). Notably, the **overall SEL score** demonstrated a large effect size ($d = 0.88$), indicating a robust enhancement in students’ comprehensive social-emotional competence.

Furthermore, reductions in standard deviations in dimensions like relationship skills suggest increased group consistency. At the same time, areas with smaller effect sizes (e.g., self-management) may benefit from more targeted or differentiated intervention strategies. In summary, the intervention effectively boosted students’ SEL, especially in empathy, communication, and emotional awareness, with room for refinement in domains such as behavioral regulation and moral reasoning.

3. To compare the SEL of the primary students after participating in the group activity between the experimental and control groups.

To evaluate the actual intervention effect of group activities on the SEL of students in the experimental group, the researchers used the t-test for independent samples to quantitatively compare the social emotional learning of students in the experimental group and the control group (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3 compares the SEL of primary school students in the experimental group and the control group after they participated in group activities ($n = 100$)

Objective	Experimental group(n=50)		Control group (n=50)		MD	t	P
	M	SD	M	SD			
Self-awareness	3.49	0.87	4.16	0.70	-0.67	-4.26**	<0.001
Self-management	3.58	0.87	4.06	0.68	-0.48	-3.07**	0.003
Social consciousness	3.72	0.69	4.05	0.68	-0.33	-2.41*	0.018
relationship skills	3.70	0.68	4.08	0.70	-0.38	-2.77**	0.007
Responsible decision-making	3.80	0.82	4.13	0.77	-0.33	-2.06*	0.042
SEL	3.67	0.67	4.09	0.57	-0.42	-3.41**	<0.001

* is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

** is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

The data analysis results (Table 3) indicate that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in all dimensions of SEL and the overall score ($p < 0.05$), with

small to large effect sizes (Cohen's d ranging from 0.41 to 0.95), demonstrating the effectiveness of the group activity intervention.

Specifically, the most significant improvements were observed in self-awareness ($d = 0.85$) and overall SEL ($d = 0.71$), suggesting a substantial impact of the intervention in these areas. Self-management and relationship skills also showed moderate effect sizes ($d = 0.61$ and $d = 0.56$, respectively), while social awareness and responsible decision-making reached statistical significance with minor effects ($d = 0.48$ and $d = 0.41$). Although these latter dimensions improved less dramatically, the consistent upward trend across all domains confirms the comprehensive benefit of structured group activities on students' social and emotional development.

4. Discussion

This study verified the promoting effect of group activities on the social and emotional learning (SEL) of primary school students. According to the data analysis results, 1) The overall level of social and emotional understanding of primary school students was high. 2) After participating in group activities, the SEL scores of the experimental group showed a significant improvement compared to those before the activity was conducted. The total SEL score after the post-test (130.96 ± 18.26) was significantly higher than that before the pre-test (113.96 ± 23.25), with an increase of 17 points ($p < 0.001$). 3) After the intervention of group activities, the SEL scores of the experimental group significantly exceeded those of the control group (117.40 ± 21.35) by 13.56 points ($p < 0.01$). Moreover, the difference reached statistical significance. This indicates that group activities can significantly enhance the social and emotional abilities of primary school students.

1. The overall current situation of social and emotional learning among third-grade primary school students.

(1) The overall social and emotional learning of primary school students is good, but there are differences in the development of various dimensions

The research found that the overall SEL level of third-grade primary school students is relatively high ($M = 3.74$), with each dimension exceeding the theoretical median. Especially, "responsible decision-making", "self-awareness", and "self-management" perform the best, reflecting the positive promoting effect of a good family and school environment on students' SEL. However, the development of social awareness and relationship skills is relatively lagging, with a significant standard deviation, showing noticeable individual differences. This is mainly limited by the cognitive development stage of students and the complexity of high-level social skills. Additionally, family communication methods and educational approaches also have an impact on it. Based on this, this study proposes three innovative intervention strategies: role rotation to enhance weak dimensions, multi-dimensional art integration to strengthen internal connections, and an emotional feedback mechanism to calibrate students' emotional expression and understanding precisely.

(2) Group activities significantly improve the social and emotional abilities of students in the experimental group.

After receiving group activity intervention, the SEL total score of the experimental group increased significantly (\uparrow by 17 points, $p < 0.001$), and all five dimensions showed significant improvement, verifying the effectiveness of group activities in promoting students' social and emotional development. Its effect is supported by multiple theoretical mechanisms: group dynamics enhance interaction dependence, social cognitive theory strengthens imitation learning, and experiential learning helps internalization of abilities. In practice, structured interaction improves relationship skills ($\uparrow 5.64$), peer feedback promotes self and social awareness ($\uparrow 20.8\%$, 19.8%), shared responsibility strengthens decision-making ability ($\uparrow 10.9\%$), emotional support improves self-management ($\uparrow 8.2\%$), and multi-dimensional collaboration drives the overall improvement of SEL ($\uparrow 14.9\%$). This study systematically

verifies the comprehensive effectiveness of group activities in enhancing the social and emotional abilities of primary school students.

(3) Comparison between the experimental group and the control group: The intervention of group activities has significant advantages

There was no difference in the pre-test, and after the intervention, the SEL total score of the experimental group was significantly higher than that of the control group by 13.56 points ($p = 0.001$, large effect size), with significant improvements in self-awareness, self-management, and interpersonal skills, and improvements in social awareness and responsibility decision-making. The control group did not participate in group activities and had little change.

From a theoretical perspective, group activities align with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. Through group activities, a socialized learning environment is created, promoting the development of cognitive and social skills. Its advantages lie in the ability to create a realistic social situation (Kutnick et al., 2008), stimulating emotional regulation and problem-solving abilities (Cherniss et al., 2004), and tasks that align with SEL goals (Jones et al., 2021). This study not only verifies the effectiveness of group activities in the five dimensions of SEL, but also further highlights its targeted promoting value for third-grade students, a critical age group.

2. Group activities effectively enhance the five core competencies of students' social and emotional learning.

Experimental data shows that group activities significantly improve the five core competencies of students' social and emotional learning: self-awareness (score increased from 17.72 to 20.80, increase of 17.4%), self-management (18.76 → 20.30, +8.2%), social awareness (23.68 → 28.38, +19.8%), relationship skills (35.20 → 40.84, +16.0%), and responsible decision-making (18.60 → 20.64, +11.0%). These improvements were achieved through various forms of activities such as thematic painting and situational simulation, and are consistent with the research results of Montero (2023) This study innovatively integrates AI interaction and other technologies with art therapy strategies, using team collaboration as the carrier, and promoting the development of students' social and emotional skills in dynamic collaboration.

3. How is the design of group activities enhancing students' SEL? Which activities are the most effective?

The group activities designed in this study can effectively enhance the five core competencies of students' social and emotional learning (SEL). The self-awareness dimension helps students visualize their emotional experiences through the "emotional color palette" and emotional story discussions; the self-management aspect uses the "traffic light game" to train impulse control; the social awareness aspect utilizes "role-playing" to catalyze cross-cultural empathy; the relationship skills are cultivated through "character description matching" and "magical fist" games to strengthen non-violent communication; and responsible decision-making is practiced through "scenario card drills" to enable students to apply moral choices.

The data indicate that role-playing and scenario simulation have a significant impact on SEL interventions. The social awareness score increased by 4.70 points (an increase of 19.8%), and the relationship skills score increased by 5.64 points. The theory of psychodrama (Moreno, 1946) supports that dramatizing the representation of conflicts can enhance empathy. Elias and Clabby (1992) found that role-playing can improve interpersonal problem-solving skills, and Harrington and Simon (2019) pointed out that scenario simulation enables students to understand the needs of others more accurately. This study innovatively integrates role-playing and scenario simulation, customizing scenarios and roles for the five core dimensions of SEL, allowing students to gain deep experience and skill training, achieving the systematic and comprehensive improvement of SEL.

This study has certain limitations. First, the lack of long-term follow-up makes it impossible to determine the sustainability of the intervention's effects. Second, the sample size is small and primarily concentrated in specific regions, which limits the cultural applicability of the results. Future studies could expand the sample size to more comprehensively assess the effects and mechanisms of group activities in different contexts.



5. Conclusion

In summary, this study ultimately reached a clear conclusion: Group activities have a significant promoting effect on enhancing students' social and emotional learning (SEL). Through a series of carefully designed group interactions, students have effectively improved their five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Among these, activities such as role-playing and scenario simulation have particularly prominent effects in enhancing students' empathy, communication skills, and social awareness. The data verified the positive impact of these activities on SEL, indicating that they can significantly improve students' social and emotional abilities, with effects that are universal and systematic across different dimensions. Overall, this study provides strong evidence for the education field, demonstrating that group activities are a crucial means of fostering students' social and emotional learning and laying a solid foundation for future educational practices and research in this area.

Suggestions for Research

This study design of group activities has enhanced SEL among third-grade primary school students. The experiment has shown that this is an effective intervention method. The use of group activities is of great significance in promoting students' SEL. Based on the researcher's own experience, some relevant suggestions are hereby proposed.

1. Suggestion for Application (This article presents research results that can be used and learned by others)

The establishment of a psychological perspective peer support mechanism can enable students to learn SEL skills through observation and imitation, interaction, and communication in team-building activities and cooperative learning, thereby enhancing self-efficacy and meeting the need for belonging. At the same time, emotional support from peers can help students regulate their emotions, enhance psychological resilience, and promote the development of their social interaction and teamwork skills.

2. Future Research Suggestions

Future suggestions for exploration include the following reasons for integrating group counseling with social and emotional learning (SEL): Firstly, group counseling techniques (such as psychodrama, solution-focused, etc.) can break through the limitation of traditional SEL that only stays at the surface level of learning, effectively deepen the intervention effect through experiential activities, and help students better enhance emotional awareness and internalize social skills. Secondly, there are deficiencies in the emotional experience aspect of current group SEL, and the effect of students' transfer and application of the learned skills is limited. The integration of group counseling is expected to fill this gap. In addition, the unique therapeutic factors in counseling (such as commonality, immediate feedback, etc.) can optimize the quality of group interaction, activate group dynamics, and provide more targeted intervention paths for high-risk students or those with cultural adaptation difficulties, precisely meeting their special needs.

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