

Leadership's Role in Cultivating School Cultures Focused on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in International Education Across Asia

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ABSTRACT

The growth of international schools across Asia, along with a shift toward predominantly local student populations, has increased expectations for school leaders to foster cultures that support both academic excellence and social-emotional development. Despite the acknowledged importance of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), little research has explored how leadership influences SEL-focused school culture in international schools across Asia. In this study, a qualitative interpretive approach was used, involving systematic document analysis and thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed literature from 2021 to 2024, sourced from the Journal of Research in International Education, the Asia Pacific Journal of Education, the East Asia Regional Council of Schools (EARCOS), and the International Baccalaureate (IB). From the results, four themes emerged. First, visionary leadership acts as a catalyst when SEL is positioned as a strategic institutional priority. Second, shared leadership is essential for sustainability in a sector characterized by relatively short leadership tenures. Third, culturally responsive adaptations are necessary to translate predominantly Western SEL frameworks into Confucian heritage and collectivist contexts. Finally, leaders must actively manage the tension between academic performance and student well-being by structurally aligning efforts. The findings emphasize the need for culturally responsive leadership training and ongoing organizational commitment. In the future, context-specific empirical research is recommended to better understand SEL-focused leadership in international schools across Asia.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning, School Leadership, International Schools, Asia, School Culture, Distributed Leadership, Cultural Responsiveness, Well-Being

INTRODUCTION

International education in Asia has grown significantly, shifting from a small niche serving mostly expatriates to a complex system that now caters to a broader range of students. This expansion has been especially notable in Asia, where international schools have grown alongside increasing parental demand and changing national education policies (Wright et al., 2024). Just as these schools vary in student demographics and curricula, they also face higher expectations to balance academic excellence with a holistic approach to student development (Bailey & Gibson, 2024).

SEL has become a key focus in international education. SEL is commonly defined as the process by which learners develop skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Cipriano et al., 2023). A strong body of empirical research shows that well-implemented SEL programs are associated with better academic outcomes, greater school engagement, and improved socio-emotional well-being (Cipriano et al., 2023). This investigation indicates that SEL supports, rather than competes with, academic learning, especially in high-pressure educational settings.

Major curriculum frameworks in Asian international schools have increased their focus on holistic development. The International Baccalaureate (IB), for example, emphasizes empathy, reflection, and intercultural understanding in its learner profile (Wright et al., 2024). The British Columbia (BC) Canadian curriculum

incorporates social and emotional development through its core competencies framework, especially within the personal and social competency, which covers personal awareness, identity, and social responsibility (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024).

The importance of SEL is especially strong in Asian international school settings, where students navigate complex cultural, linguistic, and identity shifts. Research on Third Culture Kids and transnational learners clearly highlights the social and emotional challenges tied to mobility, cultural hybridity, and high academic demands (Cruz et al., 2023). Empirical studies in Asian contexts also show a positive link between SEL skills and academic success. For example, a longitudinal study in Hong Kong schools found that self-management and social awareness skills significantly predict English language achievement, emphasizing the academic significance of SEL in Confucian-heritage educational environments (Bai et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2024).

Despite increasing recognition of SEL's importance, effective implementation in international schools remains inconsistent. Research indicates that SEL outcomes largely depend on the quality of implementation, and leadership plays a crucial role in shaping school climate, staff involvement, and the sustainability of these programs (Cipriano & Brackett, 2023). Challenges like these are often more pronounced in international schools, where leaders must understand and manage culturally diverse communities, complex governance systems, high staff turnover, and market-driven accountability pressures (Gibson & Bailey, 2021; Gibson & Bailey, 2023).

Current scholarship on international school leadership suggests that leaders must operate within uniquely complex institutional conditions, often balancing global educational ideals with local cultural expectations and governance constraints (Bailey & Gibson, 2024; Morrison, 2025). While leadership has been widely recognized as a source of influence in international schooling, research has examined how leaders cultivate SEL-focused school cultures, particularly in Asian international education, an area that remains limited. Research has focused on curriculum implementation or structural governance issues, with comparatively little attention given to leadership practices that embed SEL into everyday school culture (Pearce, 2023; Wright et al., 2024).

This article addresses this gap by critically examining the role of school leadership in creating and maintaining SEL-focused school cultures within Asian international education contexts. Detailed data will be drawn from recent peer-reviewed research in international education and Asia-Pacific scholarship published between 2021 and 2024. The study will also investigate how leaders effectively navigate cultural complexities, curriculum expectations, and organizational challenges to integrate SEL meaningfully into school life. Special attention is given to leadership practices in schools implementing international curricula, such as the IB and the BC Canadian curriculum, where SEL is considered essential to student learning and well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Paradigms in Educational Settings: From Hierarchical to Distributed Models

Over the years, educational leadership has shifted from hierarchical, top-down models to more collaborative, distributed approaches (Nadeem, 2024). A systematic review by Mifsud (2023) documented significant growth in both research and practice on distributed leadership between 2010 and 2022, while cautioning that issues of power remain under-explored. Although widely endorsed, distributed leadership continues to raise questions about its implementation and practical effects.

This situation highlights the growing understanding that complex school environments, especially international schools operating across different cultures and political contexts, cannot depend on a single strong leader (Ghamrawi et al., 2024b). Rapid demographic shifts and heightened focus on student well-being may call for leadership approaches that build shared capacity within the school rather than relying solely on a single person's authority.

Transformational leadership has primarily influenced educational contexts. It encompasses various aspects such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, which explain vision and collective purpose (Bush, 2018). Empirical research often links transformational leadership to collective teacher efficacy, innovative climate, and organizational resilience (Itani & Freiha, 2024; Liu et al.,

2020). Itani and Freiha (2024) found that transformational leadership significantly predicts collective teacher efficacy and an innovative climate, which, in turn, mediate its relationship with organizational resilience. Structural equation modeling has shown largely indirect effects through collective teacher efficacy and innovative climates, thereby underestimating the importance of shared beliefs and adaptive norms.

The transferability of transformational leadership to international school settings warrants thorough examination. Gibson and Bailey (2023) describe international schools as “postcolonial sites” in which Western leadership models may not align with local sociocultural realities. Morrison’s (2025) survey of 177 international Heads of Schools shows a demographic homogeneity of 84.9% white and 63.0% male, while about 80% of students are now local nationals. These demographic shifts could pose challenges for students applying Western leadership models without adjustment, especially when implementing culturally responsive programs such as adapted SEL. In such contexts, leadership effectiveness may be judged not only by school performance but also by how well leaders meet cultural needs and adapt to local contexts (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024).

However, distributed leadership might serve as a more adaptable alternative. Seen as a leadership practice that spans people and situations, it acknowledges that lasting improvement usually comes from networks of interaction rather than central control (Spillane, 2006; Mifsud, 2023). Ghamrawi and Al-Thani (2023) argue in their studies that schools, as complex adaptive systems, cannot establish sustainability, including SEL, solely through policy mandates. Instead, it may require “a proliferation of leadership from below, incremental, dialogic, and networked efforts” (p. 15). Empirical evidence supports this view by showing positive links between distributed leadership, teacher self-efficacy, and job satisfaction when teachers are actively involved in decision-making (Kılınç et al., 2024; Liu, Bellibaş, & Gümüş, 2021). Overall, these findings imply that distributed leadership can create the structural conditions needed to sustain SEL initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the strengths and limitations of leadership paradigms. Ghamrawi et al. (2023a) found that hierarchical structures proved inadequate during sudden school disruptions in Qatar, leading to increased teacher leadership in curriculum adaptation, technology use, and family communication—roles that persisted beyond the crisis. Bailey and Gibson (2024) similarly reported that international schools with established distributed leadership structures and explicit well-being policies were better equipped to support students’ social-emotional needs during the total lockdown. Therefore, schools where leaders view SEL as secondary or unimportant to academic goals may struggle to sustain well-being systems.

School Culture as a Mediator of Leadership Effects

Contemporary research has shown that leadership mainly influences student outcomes, often through mediating organizational factors such as school culture, teacher collaboration, and collective efficacy. Liu et al. (2021) found in their study that positive relationships between instructional and distributed leadership, teacher self-efficacy, and job satisfaction were effectively strengthened when strongly mediated by a supportive school culture and collaborative practices. Using multilevel structural equation modeling, they clearly demonstrated that cultures characterized by trust, shared values, mutual respect, and collaborative norms create an environment where teachers feel empowered and highly motivated to innovate, take pedagogical risks, and collectively commit to student success.

School culture is considered essential to SEL implementation because it involves more than adopting separate programs; it may require a shift in how schools view relationships, learning, and student growth (Castro et al., 2025). In the study by Agustina et al. (2025), testing SEL implementation within Indonesia’s Merdeka Curriculum showed that successful integration depends on whole-school cultural alignment. SEL principles were integrated into classroom interactions, assessment practices, teacher-student relationships, and community partnerships, rather than being limited to isolated lessons. Leadership skills were critical in supporting this change (Mahoney et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Principals who clearly communicated a vision of holistic education, demonstrated SEL competencies, and created structural supports achieved more meaningful and lasting implementation.

The mediating role of school culture can be especially important in international school settings, where multiple cultural frameworks come together. International schools often need to manage conflicts between host-country

values, expatriate families' expectations, international curriculum standards, and institutional missions (Cruz et al., 2023). Wright et al. (2024) found that most international schools in China face several pressures to comply with national educational priorities while also maintaining international accreditation. These conflicts directly influence SEL implementation, particularly in Chinese moral education, which is rooted in Confucian traditions and may differ from Western SEL models that focus on emotional expression and individual autonomy. In such contexts, leadership must consistently foster a culturally responsive school culture that balances these competing influences.

Teacher Leadership and Professional Learning Communities

Teacher leadership is a key mechanism through which school leaders can foster SEL-supportive cultures. Ghamrawi et al. (2024b) conducted a three-year grounded theory study across three private schools in Beirut and Lebanon, in which teachers assumed leadership roles to guide their colleagues' professional development. Their findings identified three core dimensions: reciprocal empowerment, conceptual awareness, and collaborative metacognition. These dimensions have structured teachers' leadership opportunities and have strengthened both individual skills and the collective culture. Teachers who develop leadership skills show greater ability to integrate holistic approaches, including social-emotional aspects, into their instructional practices.

The connection between teacher leadership and well-being further underscores its significance for SEL. Ghamrawi et al. (2023c), in a case study of 312 teachers in Lebanon, found strong positive links between opportunities for teacher leadership and indicators of well-being, including job satisfaction, engagement, and professional efficacy. Therefore, schools that promote teacher leadership foster environments where educators can develop the same social-emotional skills they are expected to cultivate in their students, supporting authentic rather than superficial SEL implementation.

Despite its benefits, teacher leadership development continues to face barriers, including time constraints, limited resources, role overload, and organizational cultures marked by mistrust or resistance to change (Angelle & Schmid, 2007; Berry, 2014; Pan & Chen, 2024). Ghamrawi et al. (2025) documented the role of student voice in sustaining teacher leadership, and their findings suggest that involving students in decision-making increases commitment and immediate effectiveness among teacher leaders.

The Intersection of SEL, School Culture, and Leadership

Research consistently demonstrates that leadership is a crucial factor in both the quality and sustainability of SEL implementation. Dowling and Barry (2020), in their quasi-experimental study of Irish schools, found that implementation quality—measured by program adherence, teacher confidence, and curricular integration—has significantly predicted student outcomes. However, hierarchical regression analysis showed that leadership support, which includes professional development, time allocation, and publicly prioritizing SEL, explained 34% of the variance in implementation quality beyond teacher-level factors. These findings clearly illustrate leadership's role not only in endorsing SEL but also in shaping the structural conditions necessary for its effective delivery.

Cipriano et al. (2023), in a meta-analysis of 424 universal SEL interventions involving over 575,000 students across 53 countries, further emphasize and document the importance of implementation features. Various factors influence program effects, and leadership decisions often determine this variability. Programs that include SAFE practices (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit) tend to produce stronger outcomes than those lacking these elements. Leadership influences SAFE implementation through strategic resource allocation, scheduling, teacher preparation, and fostering supportive climates. Most importantly, multi-year programs have provided cumulative benefits, but sustainability depends on long-term leadership commitment and institutional integration, rather than short-term enthusiasm.

Measuring SEL outcomes also presents an additional leadership challenge. According to Cipriano and Brackett (2023), social-emotional competencies are multidimensional and may not be fully captured by standardized assessments alone. Leaders should learn to foster cultures that recognize multiple forms of evidence, including

student self-reports, teacher observations, behavioral data, and qualitative indicators of relationship quality and school climate. This evidence requires leaders to engage governing boards, parents, and accreditors in developing informed, realistic expectations for SEL evaluation.

Cultural Dimensions of SEL in Asian Contexts: Confucian Heritage and Collectivist Values

The implementation of SEL in Asian international schools must be embedded within broader cultural contexts, especially Confucian heritage culture (CHC) and collectivist value systems. Research describes Asian societies, including China, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, as prioritizing social harmony, hierarchical relationships, and collective responsibility over individual autonomy (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1995). These orientations, rooted in Confucian traditions of filial piety and relational ethics, influence how emotions, moral development, and social responsibilities are understood (Cho, 2001; Ren & Kuai, 2023).

Shen et al. (2024) discovered that primary school students in Hong Kong possess strong skills in understanding themselves and others. They are clear about their goals, aware of their emotions, and sensitive to social support. These strengths are only apparent in school environments that emphasize values and goal-setting.

However, students might exhibit weaker self-management skills as defined by Western SEL models, which often emphasize assertiveness and independence. This indicates that SEL skills can look different across cultures. In such cases, SEL programs should be adapted to the local cultural context rather than directly copied from Western models (Gao et al., 2025).

In collectivist contexts, individuals' actions may reflect on the group, which can limit practices common in Western SEL models, such as publicly acknowledging mistakes or openly sharing emotions (Volet & Ang, 2005). Effective leadership in such settings requires culturally responsive adaptation, like incorporating private reflection, small-group discussions, and viewing all challenges as collective growth opportunities rather than individual failures.

Definitions of social-emotional competence might need cultural adaptation. While the CASEL framework emphasizes self-awareness and autonomy in decision-making, Confucianism emphasizes moral development as relational, placing greater emphasis on virtuous role enactment and harmonious relationships (Park & Chesla, 2007). Ren and Kuai (2023) found higher collectivist orientations among Chinese participants compared to Indian participants. This is partly due to traditions that discourage open confrontation in favor of harmony. As a result, competencies such as responsible decision-making may need clearer explanation in contexts where decisions are made through collective deliberation and respect for authority rather than individual autonomy.

Well-Being Leadership: An Emerging Paradigm

Well-being leadership is a form of leadership that emphasizes enhancing the physical, mental, emotional, and social health of stakeholders in the school community. This concept gained greater importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ghamrawi and Al-Thani (2023) interviewed school leaders from 14 countries. They identified five main components of well-being leadership: creating a caring school environment, prioritizing emotional safety, helping staff balance work and personal life, building strong, supportive communities, and practicing good self-care as a leader. The study also found that many leaders from Asian countries place greater emphasis on relationships and teamwork.

Ghamrawi et al. (2023c) identify the bidirectional relationships between teacher leadership opportunities and teacher well-being, demonstrating that the distribution of leadership structures can simultaneously enhance staff well-being and students' support capacity. International schools often face unique well-being challenges. Many educators are expatriates; they help manage cultural transitions and personal adjustments while also supporting students in similar situations (Bailey & Gibson, 2024). Competitive academic environments, driven by university admissions pressures and parental expectations, can undermine well-being priorities. Morrison (2025) reported that international school heads have an average tenure of 4.2 years, with several governance tensions frequently cited as reasons for departure. Such instability may impede sustained well-being and SEL initiatives, especially when governing boards prioritize quantifiable academic outcomes over holistic development.

Leadership Preparation and Development for SEL Implementation

Despite recognizing leadership's central role in SEL, research on how leaders develop the required competencies remains limited. Lambrecht et al. (2020), in their examination of leadership in inclusive education, found that effective support for individualized planning requires preparation in pedagogical knowledge and change management. Many challenges are intensified in international schools, where leaders often operate within highly complex governance structures. Gibson and Bailey (2021) describe the boundaries between principalship and governance, with leaders frequently accountable to boards that emphasize financial sustainability and measurable outcomes. Leaders involved in promoting SEL must therefore combine several skills, such as technical knowledge, political acumen, strategic integration abilities, and cultural intelligence, to navigate diverse stakeholder expectations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive design rooted in constructivist epistemology. While constructivism assumes that meaning is socially constructed through interaction within specific cultural, historical, and institutional contexts, this orientation is suitable and aligns with the study's main focus: understanding how leadership influences SEL-focused school cultures in Asian international schools (Creswell, 2014; Dahal, 2025). Leadership, culture, and social-emotional learning are all relational and context-dependent, often resisting reduction to quantifiable variables. A qualitative interpretive approach allows for nuanced, situated analysis of how these constructs intersect across different educational cultures and environments.

Methodological Approach

The study combines systematic document analysis and thematic synthesis as complementary methods. Document analysis involves the systematic review and interpretation of printed and electronic texts to generate insights (Bowen, 2009). This approach is effective for gathering knowledge from geographically dispersed and institutionally diverse contexts.

To go beyond a descriptive review, a thematic synthesis was conducted according to the procedures outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). This method involved three iterative steps: (1) breaking down the textual data line by line, (2) developing descriptive themes across different sources, and (3) creating higher-level analytical themes that go beyond individual studies and provide new interpretive insights. Combining these methods allowed the synthesis of findings from multiple Asian contexts, including Hong Kong, mainland China, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, into a unified analytical framework.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

To enhance analytical rigor through triangulation, as discussed by Dowling and Barry (2020), the study gathered evidence from three categories of sources:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles, primarily from the *Journal of Research in International Education* and the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, published between 2021 and 2024.
2. Grey literature and practitioner-oriented research, including reports and publications from the East Asia Regional Council of Schools (EARCOS) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) research portal.
3. Curriculum and policy documents, along with the British Columbia Ministry of Education's Core Competencies framework, which several international schools across Asia also adopt.

Inclusion criteria required that sources used:

- (a) be published between January 2021 and December 2024;

- (b) address at least one of the study’s core areas, which are leadership practices, school culture, or SEL implementation; and
- (c) focus on, or demonstrate clear relevance to, Asian or international school contexts. Sources limited exclusively to domestic educational settings and without transferable relevance were excluded.

Analytical Procedure

Analysis was conducted abductively, iteratively integrating grounded empirical data with established theoretical frameworks. Key conceptual lenses included CASEL’s SEL competency model, Spillane’s (2006) distributed leadership theory, and Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions framework. Abductive analysis allows for interpretation informed by theory while staying responsive to emerging patterns in the data (Maher, 2025). This approach offers greater conceptual coherence than purely inductive coding while avoiding the main limitations of strictly deductive analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was reinforced through transparent documentation, ongoing engagement with source materials, and reflective consideration of the researcher’s cultural and professional stance. Triangulation using peer-reviewed research, practitioner literature, and policy documents further boosted credibility.

Findings

A thorough review of research articles, IB and EARCOS professional sources, and curriculum policy documents identified four interconnected themes. These themes illustrate how leadership influences, and sometimes restricts, the integration of SEL into school culture in international schools in Asia. **Table 1** summarizes all four themes and their implications for school culture.

Table 1: Summary of leadership themes that influence SEL integration.

Theme	Main Focus	Key Leadership Actions	Impact on School Culture
Visionary Leadership	Positioning SEL as a priority	Clear mission and vision, leadership modeling of values, and alignment of practice and policy	Strong implementation and teacher engagement
Distributed Leadership	Shared responsibility for SEL	The teacher’s leadership role, the administrators' collaboration, and shared decision-making	Sustainability and continuity regardless of leadership issues
Cultural Responsiveness	Adapting SEL to local contexts	Integration of local values, context competency development, and recognition of cultural identity	More authentic and culturally aligned SEL practice
Academic Well-Being Balance	Managing performance pressures	Adjusted timetables, structural well-being, policy alignment with well-being	Enhanced organizational resilience and reduced symbolic implementation

Theme 1: Visionary Leadership as a Catalyst for SEL Culture

All sources clearly document that SEL was effectively embedded when it was positioned as a strategic institutional priority, but not when it was treated as a supplementary initiative. Schools led by individuals who demonstrate a clear, mission-aligned vision for social-emotional development tend to show stronger implementation quality and higher staff engagement than those that adopt SEL reactively (Cipriano et al., 2023; Ghamrawi & Al-Thani, 2023).

The International Baccalaureate (IB) leadership framework describes “strategic intelligence” as the ability to align vision with institutional action, which is essential for IB World Schools (IBO, 2022). Evidence supports the importance of leadership modeling. Keser et al. (2022) found that when leaders embody and promote learner profile attributes like reflectiveness and open-mindedness, teachers are more likely to observe these qualities in classroom practice. This is because implementing SEL requires shifts in relational norms and emotional climates, making leadership modeling crucial for institutionalization.

Practitioner discussions reinforce this trend. EARCOS leadership conferences in 2023 (“Creating Safe Harbors”) and 2024 (“Belonging and Becoming”) emphasized psychological safety, identity, and well-being as key leadership responsibilities (EARCOS, 2023, 2024), showing a sector-wide recognition of SEL as a central leadership domain.

For schools that follow the British Columbia (BC) curriculum, the Core Competencies framework supports this stance. The Personal and Social competency spans K–12 learning, emphasizing SEL-related skills as fundamental rather than optional (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2024). This curricular integration provides institutional legitimacy amid increasing pressure on academic performance.

Theme 2: Distributed Leadership as a Condition for Sustainability

While visionary leadership initiates change, distributed leadership also helps sustain it. Schools where SEL leadership responsibilities are shared among administrators, such as teacher leaders, counselors, and student services staff, show more durable implementation (Liu et al., 2021; Mifsud, 2023).

Ghamrawi et al. (2023a) found that, during and after COVID-19, teachers assumed more leadership roles, including supporting well-being and adjusting the curriculum. Schools that supported these roles built stronger well-being cultures, especially in international schools where leadership often shifts. Morrison (2025) reported an average head tenure of 4.2 years across about 177 schools, with governance tensions often leading to departures. Therefore, distributed leadership functions as a systemic safeguard against cultural discontinuity.

At the systemic level, UNESCO’s GEM Report (2024/25) estimates that principal and teacher leadership together account for more than one-quarter of the variation in school learning outcomes. Emerging governance models, such as the vice-principal structure in some Chinese international schools (Liu & Koh, 2024), demonstrate how the distribution of leadership can support institutional coherence across diverse cultural and regulatory contexts.

Theme 3: Cultural Responsiveness as a Structural Requirement

The literature shows that SEL frameworks created in Western settings need to be adapted for Asian international schools. Shen et al. (2024) found that primary students in Hong Kong exhibited high social awareness but lower self-management skills, reflecting Confucian cultural norms that value relational harmony and restraint. Bai et al. (2024) identified self-management as a key factor linking awareness and achievement, highlighting the need for culturally responsive approaches to developing competencies.

International schools are often described as “postcolonial sites” where Western ideas are applied in predominantly local contexts (Gibson & Bailey, 2023). Morrison’s (2025) demographic data reveal that most international school leaders identify as white, even as student populations become more local. These findings raise important questions about whose norms influence school culture.

Wright et al. (2024) explain that changes in China’s education policies require schools to better align with Confucian values-based moral education. This means school leaders must be able to balance global SEL approaches with local education requirements rather than focusing on just one.

The BC curriculum’s Positive Personal and Cultural Identity competency offers a resource that recognizes cultural identity as an essential part of learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2024).

Theme 4: Managing the Academic–Well-Being Tension

A recurring theme was the tension between the rhetoric of holistic education and the pressures to achieve academic performance. When left unaddressed, this conflict results in symbolic endorsement of SEL without structural support. The IB's 2023 decision to stop publishing data on the number of students achieving the maximum Diploma score was partly framed as a well-being consideration (IBO, 2023). However, literature clearly shows that academic workload in IB contexts remains a stressor for some students (Dickson et al., 2018). Leaders play a crucial role by organizing school schedules, assessment methods, and teachers' workloads to align with their commitment to well-being.

Bailey and Gibson (2024) found that schools with clear well-being systems were more resilient and handled challenges better during COVID-19, while schools where SEL was not prioritized had more difficulty adapting. This indicates and confirms that structurally integrating SEL improves organizational resilience.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that SEL-focused culture in international schools across Asia is guided by leadership in four interconnected areas: vision articulation, leadership distribution, cultural responsiveness, and alignment between well-being and academic priorities. No single leadership model is enough. Instead, effective SEL leadership combines a transformational vision with shared implementation, cultural responsiveness, and strategic governance management.

The complexity of the international schooling system across Asia sets this context apart from domestic systems. Leaders must learn to navigate global frameworks (e.g., CASEL), international curricula (e.g., IB, BC), host-country regulations, and diverse parent expectations. Successful leadership seems to involve identifying strengths across these frameworks, for example, aligning Confucian relational ethics with SEL competencies like social awareness.

The BC Canadian Curriculum Core Competencies framework acts as a practical foundation, integrating SEL into curriculum design and offering institutional support for emphasizing personal and social growth. Leadership tenure data highlights the importance of succession planning and the development of middle leadership. If lasting cultural change requires several years of effort, then brief headship tenures should promote shared ownership of SEL priorities.

Finally, the literature shows a significant gap. International school leaders work within complex governance structures but lack formal training in culturally responsive SEL leadership (Gibson & Bailey, 2021). Considering UNESCO's (2024/25) findings on leadership's impact, it emphasizes the need for preparation in SEL implementation, and cultural intelligence is a crucial area for development.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how leadership shapes SEL-focused culture in international schools across Asia by reviewing research articles, practitioner documents, and curriculum policy materials. Four themes emerged from these findings: the importance of visionary leadership, the necessity of distributed leadership for sustainability, the structural role of cultural responsiveness, and the need to actively manage tensions around academic well-being.

In this context, SEL integration fundamentally depends on leadership that involves strategic alignment, organizational design, and ongoing commitment. Rapid sector growth, demographic shifts toward majority-local student populations, and an increasing focus on well-being at the institutional and policy levels underscore the importance of this challenge (Wright et al., 2024; Gibson & Bailey, 2023).

However, for practitioners, implications include integrating SEL into curriculum policy, professional development, scheduling structures, and leadership practices. For schools following the BC curriculum, the Personal and Social Competency provides a formal institutional foundation for this initiative.

For researchers, the study highlights the urgent need for primary empirical research in specific international school settings in Asia, longitudinal studies during leadership transitions, and cross-cultural comparisons. Such efforts would go beyond document analysis to offer deeper insights into actual leadership practices.

Overall, the evidence suggests that an SEL-focused school culture is achievable in international schools across Asia. However, it can be most effectively achieved when leadership intentionally aligns vision, structure, culture, and policy to support holistic student development.

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