Mapping the Whole School Approach in social and emotional learning and wellbeing: a bibliometric review with implications for social work and education

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Abstract. The focus of this study is to conduct bibliometric research of relevant publications on the whole school approach (WSA) in relation to social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing from the Web of Science Core Collection until May 2025. An analysis of 503 publications was undertaken with VOSviewer to discover patterns of co-occurrence, conceptual clusters, and citation networks. Four dominant thematic areas emerged: systemic implementation and school ecology; health promotion and psychosocial wellbeing; behavioral risk prevention and student connectedness; and teacher competence, policy, and inclusion. Data indicates a trend towards behaviorist and preventive models to more inclusive holistic frameworks that center on resilience, participation, transformation, and relational aspects of systems. There is still an overwhelming concentration of research from high-income countries, with a stark absence of the Global South, and under-explored integration of practitioner and student perspectives, despite increasing global adoption. By identifying these gaps, this study aims to assist literature by mapping contemporary trends, gaps in policy and practice and forecast strategies for the future. It calls for integration of whole school approaches that is multi-level, culturally attuned, participatory, digitally focused, and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords. whole school approach, social and emotional learning, wellbeing, inclusive education, school systems, educational policy

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the role of schools in supporting not only academic achievement but also the holistic development and wellbeing of learners has gained significant prominence in educational research, policy, and practice. This shift reflects a growing consensus that social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing are not peripheral concerns but essential components of a quality education system. To this end, the entire school approach (WSA) has emerged as a key integrative model, addressing systemic change through collaborative action from all stakeholders—students, teachers, families, and the wider community (Weare, 2013; Wyn et al., 2000).

Based on ecological and systems theories of development, WSA offers an integrated model that folds SEL and wellbeing into the culture, curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, policies, and relationships of the school (Rogers, 2000; Rowe & Stewart, 2011). Moving beyond single-funnel interventions to coordinated and collective effort, whole school change fosters enduring change at both individual and institutional levels. It is congruent with universal interventions with the potential to offer differentiated responses to students with unique social, emotional, or mental health needs (Nielsen et al., 2015; Hui, 2002; Heinrichs, 2003).

It has demonstrated efficacy in many areas. Meta-analytic evidence exists in its impact on student social-emotional development (Goldberg et al., 2019), school attachment (Rowe et al., 2007; Rowe & Stewart, 2009), staff well-being (Lester et al., 2020), and bullying and disruptive behavior reduction (Richard et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2011). In particular, WSA is aligned with several of the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through promoting inclusion, empowerment, and institution resilience (Shallcross & Robinson, 2008; Mogren et al., 2019).

In practice, the WSA has been used in a variety of different contexts. For example, MindMatters in Australia is the ideal method of how mental health promotion can be integrated into school structures (Wyn et al., 2000), whereas in Hong Kong schools, restorative practices have been focusing on dealing with bullying through community-based methods (Wong et al., 2011). In Europe, WSA has been a central component within education for sustainable development, connecting environmental values and institution reform (Mogren et al., 2019; Bosevska & Kriewaldt, 2020). Further, the model has been effectively adapted for prevention of early literacy (Crevola & Hill, 1998), gifted education (Robinson & Campbell, 2010), and policy integration into school health programs (Hunt et al., 2015).

Despite the overall school approach having conceptual attractiveness and relevance, the literature remains methodologically diverse and terminologically heterogeneous. Research varies in discipline orientation—ranging over psychology and education, public health, and sociology—and in some instances, they lack a uniform operational system (Rowe & Stewart, 2011; Marian et al., 2024). Integrative reviews and knowledge mapping studies that reflect on the scope and evolution of WSA compared to SEL and wellbeing are also missing. The absence of such an integration limits the ability of researchers, instructors, and policymakers to identify effective models, replicable strategies, and strategic priorities.

This study aims to fill that gap by providing a bibliometric overview of the scientific literature for the whole school approach to social and emotional learning and wellbeing. Bibliometric analysis enables systematic and data-driven summary of publication patterns, leading authors, thematic patterns, and research fronts (Marian et al., 2024; Čopková, 2024). Specifically, the objectives of this current study are:

- To ascertain the most significant thematic and methodological concerns of WSA-related literature concerning SEL and wellbeing;
- To investigate the geographical and institutional variation of research activity;
- To map areas of untapped territory and research gaps, guiding future applied and empirical enquiry.

By presenting an in-depth overview of how WSA is theorized and practiced in schools, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between school systems, psychosocial development, and wellbeing. In line with the purpose of this Special Issue, the study invites reflection upon the interdisciplinary edges of SEL and wellbeing and

invites the building of resilient, inclusive learning architectures that serve the needs of learners and teachers alike.

2. Materials and Methods
2.1. Data source and search strategy

With the intention to provide an overall overview of the whole school approach (WSA) scientific field in social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing, a bibliometric analysis was conducted on the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection database. The database was selected because of its multidisciplinary composition and rigorous indexing standards, which ensured the inclusion of peer-reviewed and high-impact literature relevant to both educational sciences and psychological research.

The search was run in May 2025, with a goal of all publications up to May 2025, a period that covers the consolidation and international dissemination of WSA programs in schools. The search term "whole school approach" was run in All Fields search mode to capture the broadest array of academic writing—including titles, abstracts, keywords, and institutional affiliations. This approach was formulated to provide optimum sensitivity to differences in how WSA is spoken about and implemented within varied education systems and theoretical traditions.

The initial search yielded a total of 503 publications. No filters for document type, language, or subject category were applied at this stage, in order to keep the dataset rich and varied. Publications covered a wide range of thematic areas, including school mental health promotion (Wyn et al., 2000), connectedness and inclusion (Rowe et al., 2007; Rowe & Stewart, 2009), bullying prevention (Wong et al., 2011; Heinrichs, 2003), education for sustainable development (Mogren et al., 2019), restorative practices (Richard et al., 2012), and teacher wellbeing (Lester et al., 2020). This series bears witness to the conceptual generality of WSA and its ability to embrace SEL and wellbeing in whole-school, system-wide methodologies—core concerns of this Special Issue.

2.2. Bibliometric analysis procedure

The exported dataset was analyzed with VOSviewer (version 1.6.20), a commonly used computer program for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks. VOSviewer enables the generation of co-occurrence maps, which provide systematic examination of conceptual structures, collaboration patterns, and the evolution of research fields over time.

Three types of bibliometric maps were generated in this paper:

•	Keyword co-occurrence analysis, using author keywords and keywords plus, with full counting strategy. Out of 1,914 unique keywords, 137 met the minimum threshold of five occurrences, allowing for the identification of overarching themes and conceptual clusters within the literature as a whole on the whole school approach. Several thematic clusters, each containing a minimum of 20 key words, were generated by the clustering algorithm, which were then examined and interpreted in qualitative terms.

•	Co-authorship analysis for identification of high productivity researchers, institutions, and global collaboration patterns. Among 1,565 authors, 47 fulfilled the inclusion criterion of having contributed to three or more publications in the dataset. This analysis highlighted the scholarly networks driving WSA and wellbeing research.

•	Citation analysis, to distinguish most-cited papers, authors, and journals for highest conceptual contribution to the WSA evidence base. This layer of analysis put high-

impact studies such as those by Goldberg et al. (2019) and Hunt et al. (2015) within the context of wider SEL and whole school wellbeing debate.

Common thresholds were applied across analyses to reduce noise and focus on ubiquitous, analytically useful patterns. The VOSviewer clustering procedure grouped co-occurring terms together into thematic aggregates that reflected a distinct strand of research in the topic area. The aggregates were then examined against this Special Issue's crucial themes—i.e., applying SEL frameworks, creating universal and inclusive wellbeing interventions, and integrating mental health promotion into educational system reform.

With the use of this mixed-method bibliometric approach, this research provides a systematic data-driven mapping of the intellectual landscape of the whole school approach. It sheds light on how intellectual emphasis on SEL and wellbeing has become more diverse, converged, and evolved across educational contexts over the past 25 years.

3. Results
3.1. General publication trends

The bibliometric analysis revealed a research interest spread globally and dynamically evolving across the entire school strategy to social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing from 62 countries. The increase in published outputs during the two-decade period suggests an increasing interest among scholars and policymakers in systemically focused, equity-driven education reform to support psychosocial development alongside academic achievement.

Among the most effective writers, heading the list is the United States with 48 documents, 2,097 citations, and 43.69 average citations per document, underlining not just the volume but also the visibility and scholarly influence of its written output. This is evident in countries such as England (121 publications, 2,703 citations), Australia (110 publications, 1,821 citations), and Canada (21 publications, 663 citations), where there are strong national policies, targeted funding on school wellbeing, and integration of SEL into teacher preparation and curriculum standards.

In Europe, countries such as Sweden (20 publications), the Netherlands (18), Germany (12), and Spain (14) show high activity with the whole-school approach, often across interdisciplinary lenses—merging inclusion, sustainability, and support for mental health. The Netherlands attained the highest normalized citation impact (2.01), reflecting high-quality and conceptually significant research in terms of modest production. This attests to the Dutch tradition for context-responsive and evidence-informed educational research.

Ireland, Scotland, and Wales have also demonstrated successful contributions, commensurate with their established models for promoting student wellbeing and emotional literacy within inclusive school communities. Their above-average normalized citation scores bear not only the stamp of scholarly excellence but also the applied usefulness and transference value of their models, especially in postcolonial and multicultural school systems.

Inter-culturally, one should mention that education systems and new economies—India (5 publications, 230 citations), South Africa (17 publications), and Portugal (7 publications)—have progressively begun re-fashioning and re-interpreting the whole school approach in context-responsive paradigms. These changes tend to focus on problems like resource limitations, socioeconomic inequalities, or reconciliation following conflict, requiring culturally embedded interventions that diverge from Western SEL models.

The recent Nepalese, Kenyan, Cambodian, and Philippine efforts, although remaining in single-paper form (2023–2024), are the first harbingers of a new research phase—where the whole school intervention is being examined with regard to non-Western values, collectivist

community organization, and indigenous education priorities. This expansion not only aligns with the global aspirations of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) but also problematizes the dominant discourses by promoting epistemic diversity and decolonial ways to school change.

What emerges is a two-stage pattern: as the highest-income countries continue to dominate the construction of the academic literature by maintaining high levels of production and strong citation power, there is a noticeable increase in low- and middle-income country contribution, enriching the field with fresh new voices, viewpoints, and culturally informed models. This is the globalization—and in doing so, the contextualization—of the whole school approach, legitimizing it as a continuous process in use not as a fixed model, but as a flexible framework enhancing emotional and social health across different areas of educational terrain.

3.2. Co-occurrence keyword analysis

To analyze the conceptual landscape of literature on the whole school social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing approach, a VOSviewer co-occurrence analysis of keywords was conducted. This enables the visualization of clustering of themes based on keyword frequency of occurrence and co-occurrence across 452 publications. A minimum frequency of five was applied, and from that, a network of highly interconnected terms that were spread across four broad clusters was created. Each cluster corresponds to a different line of inquiry, such as theoretical, methodological, and contextual variation in the use of whole school models.

The ensuing network visualization of the network (Figure 1) and overlay visualization (Figure 2) revealed four overarching thematic clusters based on the strength and frequency of keyword co-appearance. The clusters revealed the dominating paradigms, disciplinary relationships, and intercultural contrasts in the literature.
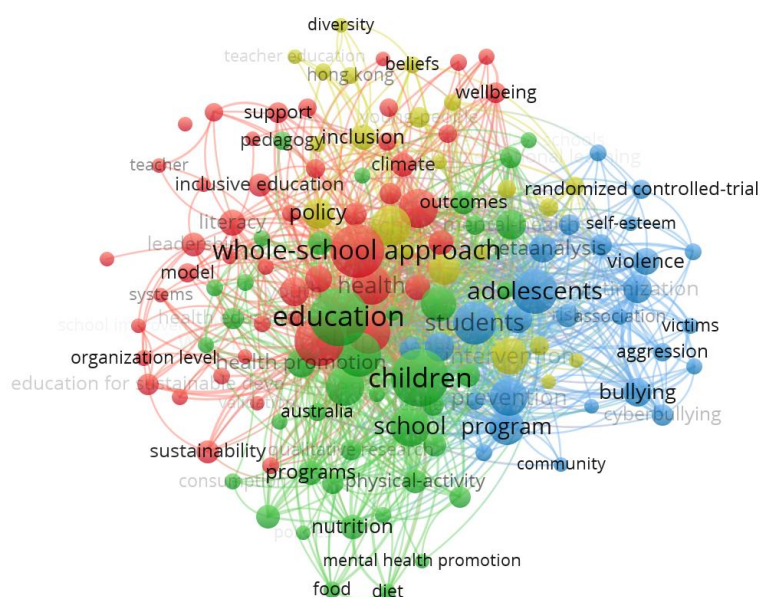

Figure 1. Network visualization

Figure 1 displays the keyword co-occurrence network of the whole school literature on social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing. The network, generated using VOSviewer, maps the interrelations among high-frequency keywords, with node size indicating frequency of occurrence and edge thickness depicting strength of co-occurrence. The color-coded clusters demonstrate the conceptual organization of the field, which corresponds to the four general thematic areas discussed in detail above. The red cluster maps to Cluster 1 – Systemic Implementation and School Ecology, with keywords such as school culture, leadership, inclusive education, and policy, reflecting a focus on institutional and ecological change. The green cluster, mapping to Cluster 2 – Health Promotion and Child-Centered Interventions, includes such terms as health promotion, mental health, nutrition, and programs, reflecting a focus on the integration of public health and preventive wellbeing initiatives in the school context. The blue cluster is a mirror image of Cluster 3 – Risk Behaviors, Prevention, and Social Belonging with keywords such as bullying, violence, adolescents, and peer victimization, which points to an interest in the research field of student behavior, safety, and school climate. The yellow cluster is a mirror image of Cluster 4 – Teacher Competence, Curriculum, and Diversity with an emphasis on teacher education, inclusion, diversity, and wellbeing. The central position of keywords like whole-school approach, education, and children suggests their role as conceptual fulcra that bridge these adjacent thematic spaces, revealing the interdisciplinary and systems nature of the field.
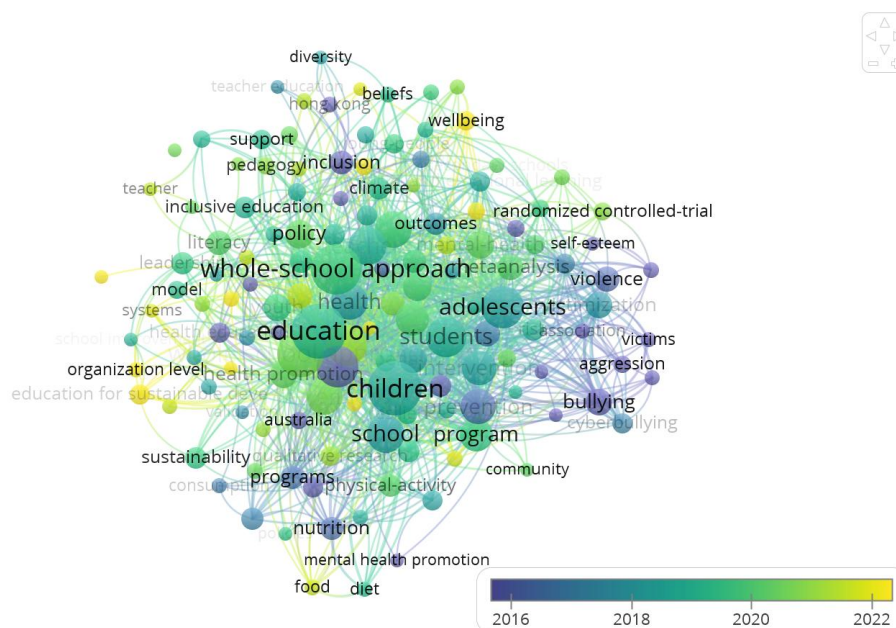

Figure 2. Overlay visualization

Figure 2 illustrates the overlay visualization of term co-occurrence within the literature of the whole school approach, social and emotional learning (SEL), and wellness. This picture enhances the prior structural map by incorporating a temporal dimension, with each node's color representing the average publication year of publications containing the keyword. The color gradient—from dark blue (older research, about 2016) to yellow (more current, circa 2022)—facilitates the distinction between emerging and established study subjects.

The fundamental terms whole-school approach, education, and children are prominently featured and largely highlighted in green, signifying ongoing study interest over

time, especially concentrated between 2018 and 2020. Conversely, the blue-hued phrases on the right, including bullying, peer victimization, and cyberbullying, signify previous focal points in the literature, illustrating the prevalence of risk reduction and behavioral prevention paradigms (Cluster 3) throughout the mid-2010s.

Recent research trajectories—illustrated in yellow and light green—are linked to keywords such education for sustainable development, student engagement, health literacy, resilience, and teacher training. These phrases manifest at the network's peripheries and correspond with the development of Cluster 1 (Systemic Implementation) and Cluster 4 (Teacher Competence and Diversity), indicating a modern transition towards comprehensive, participative, and forward-looking educational methodologies.

Cluster 2 (Health Promotion and Child-Centered Interventions) exhibits temporal breadth: foundational concepts such as health promotion and nutrition are represented in green or blue, whereas more contemporary terms like mental health promotion, physical activity, and public health signify a diversification of health-related frameworks in school-based research since 2020.

Figure 2 visually underscores the evolutionary trajectory of the field, illustrating the gradual shift in research focus from individual behavioral interventions to comprehensive, inclusive, and preventive models that integrate sustainability, teacher wellbeing, and youth engagement—especially in response to post-pandemic educational challenges and global policy frameworks like the SDGs.

Cluster 1 – Systemic implementation and school ecology
This cluster, as can be seen in such words as "implementation", "health", "engagement", "leadership", "inclusive education", "education for sustainable development", and "school culture", mirrors the institutional and ecological features of whole school approaches. It addresses the question of how schools embed SEL and wellbeing into institutional systems across inclusive practices, staff development, and environmental adaptation. The attention given to keywords like "climate", "classroom", "support", and "collaboration" reflects a whole-school comprehension of the school as an ecosystem community (average year of publication: 2019.7), with awareness of internal dynamics and external partnerships. The inclusion of "gender", "efficacy", and "professional development" reflects a concern with equity and capacity-building amongst staff. Interculturally, this group resonates with efforts in the Scandinavian, Dutch, and Australian education sectors where whole-school approaches prioritize sustainability, empowerment, and democratic participation.

For example, Goldberg et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis that demonstrated that schools that employed a whole school approach significantly enhanced SEL results by establishing a positive school climate and collective responsibility of the staff for leadership. Similarly, Mogren, Gericke, and Scherp (2019) demonstrated the way whole school sustainability education connects pedagogical reform with other school improvement strategies. This body of work is strongest in European educational models like those of Sweden and the Netherlands that are grounded in inclusive leadership and participatory governance.

The intercultural transferability of the cluster comes directly to the fore in studies such as Wong et al. (2011), where a restorative whole-school intervention was used to Hong Kong with success in demonstrating the applicability of WSA models to divergent sociocultural systems.

Cluster 2 – Health promotion and child-centered interventions

Cluster 2, characterized by predominant phrases such as "mental health," "children," "education," "interventions," "health promotion," "nutrition," and "resilience," underscores the preventive and promotive health rationale inherent in school activities. This domain integrates public health, education, and school-based social work. Keywords such as "health-promoting schools," "health literacy," and "food" indicate a cohesive dialogue around childhood welfare, particularly with socio-behavioral outcomes. This cluster, with an average publication year near 2020, demonstrates methodological rigor through the utilization of terminology such as "qualitative research," "policies," and "framework." Regionally, it exemplifies policy developments in nations like Canada, Portugal, and India, where educational institutions function as centers for community-oriented health projects. The cluster connects Western and Global South viewpoints on education as a tool for psychological empowerment.

Adi et al. (2007) performed a systematic evaluation on universal mental health promotion in primary schools, determining that whole-school models surpass focused programs in attaining long-term wellbeing outcomes. Similarly, Moore et al. (2025) assessed the "Nourish" study in Northern Ireland, demonstrating the correlation between enhancements in the school food environment and the subsequent changes in dietary habits and student welfare.

This cluster signifies an intersection of public health, educational psychology, and child development, with significant contributions from nations such as Canada, Portugal, and India. It also mirrors global initiatives such as the WHO's Health-Promoting Schools program, tailored to different contexts with differing resources and goals.

Cluster 3 – Risk behaviors, prevention, and social belonging

This cluster focuses on significant terms including "bullying," "prevention," "violence," "students," "behavior," "peer victimization," and "risk." It pertains to behavioral management, safety, and school connectedness, sometimes viewed through the prism of preventative science. The simultaneous presence of terminology such as "meta-analysis," "randomized controlled trial," and "systematic review" indicates empirical strength in this body of work. This research area has significantly impacted Anglo-American and East Asian cultures, concentrating on evidence-based initiatives to tackle aggression, peer conflict, and mental health vulnerabilities in teenagers. The cluster encompasses "self-esteem," "school climate," and "victimization," indicating initiatives to foster prosocial behavior and student agency within inclusive educational settings. Its intercultural significance is evident in localized initiatives—spanning restorative practices in Hong Kong to anti-bullying frameworks in Nordic nations.

Highly cited studies, such the randomized controlled trials examined by Wong et al. (2011) and the meta-analytic research conducted by Durlak and Wells (1997), underscore the significance of proactive, universal interventions in mitigating aggression, cyberbullying, and emotional distress among teenagers. Peer-related challenges, such as victimization and self-esteem, are particularly prominent in North American and Asian research, where student mental health is a pressing issue.

The cluster's intercultural profundity is evident in initiatives tailored for post-conflict or transitional nations, such as Bhutan (Jamtsho, 2017) and South Africa (Mbelu, 2024), where WSA is utilized to restore trust, advance justice, and foster inclusive belonging.

Cluster 4 – Teacher competence, curriculum, and diversity

Cluster 4 is thematically centered on "teachers," "teacher education," "policy," "curriculum," "inclusion," and "well-being." It emphasizes the significance of educators,

teacher training, and policy frameworks in executing whole school systems. Terms like "diversity," "sexuality education," "parental involvement," and "knowledge" signify the changing responsibilities of educators in promoting inclusive, culturally sensitive educational settings. This cluster strongly emphasizes "policy integration" and "teacher wellbeing," especially in the post-pandemic context. It holds significant importance for multicultural educational systems, such as those in the UK, Ireland, and South Africa, where teacher readiness is essential for addressing socio-educational complexity and demographic variety. The intercultural aspect is significant, as educator identities and belief systems converge with matters of gender, ethnic diversity, and educational justice.

Lester et al. (2020) highlighted the significance of staff health and teacher engagement in maintaining WSA projects, indicating that burnout and ambiguity in role expectations frequently compromise implementation fidelity. Research conducted by Rowe and Stewart (2011) underscores the significance of professional development in empowering educators to collaboratively establish inclusive learning environments.

This cluster is notably prominent in multicultural contexts such as Australia, the UK, and Ireland, where diversity, family involvement, and educator identity are crucial for tackling inequality and institutional bias.

Collectively, these four groups illustrate the multifaceted intricacy of the whole school approach in both practice and research. They transcend programmatic interventions to adopt a systems thinking approach, examining not only the efficacy of solutions but also the mechanisms behind their effectiveness and the cultural, institutional, and policy contexts in which they operate. The co-occurrence network illustrates a domain that is simultaneously global and localized, empirical and normative, increasingly motivated by the concept of schools as ecosystems for inclusive growth, resilience, and human development.

3.3. Author, source, and citation analysis

Authorship pattern analysis, citation counts, and publication venues are an advanced interpretation of the intellectual structure and diffusion patterns of the research community of the whole school approach (WSA), and its relative connection with social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing at school. There is a dominant cluster of authors within the co-authorship analysis that constitutes a close research team collaborating within health-promoting schools within the UK and Ireland. These authors include Sarah F. Brennan, Moira Dean, Laura Dunne, Chris T. Elliott, Ruth F. Hunter, Fiona Lavelle, Danielle McCarthy, Patrick McCole, Michelle C. McKinley, Sarah E. Moore, and Niamh E. O'Connell—scholars whose combined efforts have left their impression on WSA scholarship through collaborative, interdisciplinarity-informed research.

Collectively, these scientists co-authored three well-visible studies with 33 citations and a mean of 11 citations per study and normalized citation score at about 0.96, both indicative of enduring scholarly interest and field-standard impact. These works are the strongest evidence for empirical robustness and practical use of WSA models exerted through paradigms of public health, nutrition, education, and behavioral psychology. Moore et al. (2023), for instance, examined school food environment composition and impacts in Public Health Nutrition, uncovering the extent to which institutional aspects such as availability, accessibility, and policy congruence influence students' dietary habits and psychosocial well-being. Brennan et al. (2021) in a collaborating study measured Project Daire—a randomized-controlled, factorial-design cluster trial—published in the International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity. Their findings revealed significant improvements in food literacy and emotional well-

being among students, presenting WSA as a viable strategy for integrated school health promotion. Consequently, Anderson et al. (2025) conducted a process evaluation of the intervention, highlighting some of the most impactful factors on implementation fidelity, such as teacher engagement and contextual adaptation—important considerations when aiming to maximize long-term sustainability of whole-school interventions.

The added value of this collection of authors emphasizes the significance of interdisciplinary, context-dependent research that spans not only theory and practice but also the work of operating to implement WSA at scale. Other than this, the domain is serviced with foundational work that underlies prevailing knowledge on promoting systemic school wellbeing. A seminal article by Ohly et al. (2016) in BMC Public Health integrated qualitative and quantitative findings to evaluate the wellbeing and health outcomes of school gardening interventions. The study is a cornerstone for SEL-emphasizing environmental education, showing how experiential education fosters ecological understanding, psychological resilience, and feelings of community affiliation, tenets of the WSA strategy.

Similarly, the meta-analytic study of Durlak and Wells (1997) set early in the literature the measurement of the effectiveness of primary prevention mental health programming in schools. Goldberg et al. (2019) expanded upon that work more recently with a broad-based meta-analysis published in the European Journal of Psychology of Education that upheld the long-term dividend of WSA-based SEL intervention in improving students' emotional health, social skills, and academic performance. These highly regarded articles continue to have an impact both on theoretical modeling and empirical practice, upholding the strong evidence base for whole-school approaches as an agent of sustainable, wellbeing-centered educational improvement.

The bibliometric analysis of source title indicates a mature and inter-disciplinary research setting to conduct research on whole school approach (WSA) across social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing. Rather than being arrayed in a single disciplinary journal, the literature intersects educational psychology, public health, mental health promotion, curriculum theory, guidance and counselling, and sustainability studies. This distribution serves both to capture the systemic nature of WSA and its variation by alternative institutional, cultural, and policy contexts. The results select a number of core journals that not only evidence a high rate of publication in this area but also count with strong citation rates and thematic focus to the development of whole school approaches in a variety of education settings.

One of the strongest sources is Health Promotion International, with 792 citations among 10 publications and a normalized citation score of 2.13. This journal has been central to conceptualizing schools as crucial locations of public health promotion. A seminal work by Hunt, Barrios, Telljohann, and Mazyck (2015) in this journal had established the manner in which collaborative school health policy and practice development embodies the values of a WSA, as a model of institutional change that blends health, education, and equity. The leading role of this journal in the network suggests its novel contribution in situating schools not merely as schools but as agents of wellbeing and social transformation.

The Advances in School Mental Health Promotion journal is similarly remarkable, with five of its publications receiving an average of 25.6 citations per article and a normalized citation index of 1.38. The journal has been at the center of theoretical and applied conceptualization of WSA from a mental health perspective. These early texts, such as those by Weare (2010) and Domitrovich et al. (2008), offered evidence-based models for developing and testing whole school mental health interventions, highlighting fidelity, stakeholder engagement, and universal availability. O'Mara and Lind (2013) extended this perspective still further

through an investigation of the efficacy of school mental health initiatives with attention to the long-term impact of the implementation of SEL within a systems approach that includes staff development and student voice.

The British Journal of Guidance & Counselling became a forum for argument regarding the evolving role of teachers and counsellors in WSA implementation. With seven publications and 109 citations, this journal includes influential studies such as Hui's (2002) exploration of teacher perceptions of guidance in Hong Kong, as well as more recent contributions from Hearne and Galvin (2015), who examined the role of regular teachers in supporting whole-school counselling efforts in Ireland. These papers highlight that the areas of success of WSA initiatives are in professional identity, workload sharing, and institutional awareness of counseling as a shared responsibility.

Similarly, the International Journal of Inclusive Education is highly influential, with 240 citations across 10 documents and an unnormalized citation rate of 2.18. This journal has been a significant venue for studies on the inclusivity dimension of WSA, particularly among minority groups, students with special needs, and culturally responsive instruction. It upholds the necessity that quality WSAs must be designed to be inclusive, accepting diversity in students in all aspects of school culture, policy, and instruction.

Public health–oriented journals also play an essential role in strengthening the empirical foundation of WSA research. BMC Public Health, Public Health Nutrition, and the International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity have become more prominent vehicles for publishing interdisciplinary scholarship relating health behavior, school policy, and psychosocial development. The Project Daire intervention—described in both BMC Public Health (Anderson et al., 2025) and International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity (Brennan et al., 2021)—gives compelling evidence for the effect of modifying the school food environment as part of whole school strategy on the nutritional literacy and subjective well-being of students. Likewise, Moore et al. (2023) demonstrate in Public Health Nutrition that school-level determinants such as availability of healthy food, staff participation, and student feedback mechanisms are the determining factors for making the outcomes of WSA model sustainable.

Some education-focused journals support theory development and policy dissemination. One is an open-access journal that encourages interdisciplinary as well as international inquiry, which is Education Sciences (MDPI). It has published regarding digital wellbeing, inclusive pedagogy, and systems-level reform in WSA. Its growing visibility over the past few years aligns with the global policy shift towards scalable, evidence-based, and equity-focused education models. Education 3-13, under which Maliotou and Liarakou (2024) recently published a study on school gardening using the WSA framework, embraces the importance of environmental education and participatory learning within primary education. International Journal of Instruction also features, with Leite et al. (2024) releasing a transformative learning-informed case study based on WSA principles from Portugal.

Contributions come from Health Education and Environmental Education Research. Rowe and Stewart (2011, 2009) seminal research on connectedness and influence pathways of institutions has been most crucial in correlating SEL and school climate and advancing mental health. Mogren, Gericke, and Scherp (2019), writing in Environmental Education Research, provided an engaging model that brings WSA into alignment with sustainability education, illustrating how whole-school principles can initiate school development in ecologically responsive ways. Such research attests that WSA is far from being a pedagogy or health tool but rather a means of ethical, ecological, and institutional renewal.

In special education and psychology, peer-reviewed outlets such as School Psychology International and British Journal of Special Education offer educated perspectives on WSA implementation in terms of bullying (Richard et al., 2012), psychological safety (Heinrichs, 2003), and emotional development in children with exceptionalities. These educated perspectives hone our knowledge of WSAs and fitting them to meet vulnerable populations and behavioral nuances.

The depth and breadth of journals releasing WSA-related scholarship confirm the interdisciplinary convergence occurring in this field. If the focus is on teacher development, student welfare, policy integration, or cultural interaction, journals at the center of this knowledge system provide both empirical context and conceptual creativity. The availability of high-impact open access journals like Frontiers in Education and Education Sciences indicates ongoing commitment to worldwide accessibility and local communication, of particular value in lower-resourced and multicultural education systems.

The multidisciplinary scope of journals also indicates a growing recognition that WSA is not a rigid intervention but an adaptive, system-sensitive approach attuned to context, culture, and need. As research inquiry expands in scope—from restorative practice in Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2011) to wellbeing leadership in Bhutan (Jamtsho, 2017), tolerance education in Indonesia (Raihani, 2011), and preventing radicalization in the UK (Gereluk, 2023), the role of academic journals in developing interdisciplinary synthesis, regional representation, and translational policy impact becomes increasingly significant.

The landscape of whole school SEL and wellbeing is rich, richly textured, and globally dispersed. It demonstrates a firm scholarly foundation well-positioned to support rigorous empirical examination and critical policy analysis. Robust journal infrastructure continues to strengthen the field in connecting theory, practice, and innovation in the service of student flourishing and equity in education.

3.4. Thematic evolution and research gaps

The time dynamics in the keyword overlay analysis (Figure 2) mirror the themes' shifting emphasis within the literature covering the entire school approach (WSA), namely its intersection with social and emotional learning (SEL), wellbeing, and institutional inclusion. During the past two decades, the area has grown significantly—from initial foci on behavior control and peer victimization to a wider systemic conceptualization incorporating health equity, teacher well-being, sustainability, and trauma sensitivity. Such thematic expansion shows both international educational policy changes and greater epistemological integration of public health, psychology, and social justice in school reform discourses.

In the early stages of development—years 2000 to 2010—literature was largely behaviorally oriented in its prevention models. The research during these years focused more on controlling students' behavior, reducing bullying (Richard et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2011), and the identification of high-risk groups (Heinrichs, 2003). These were set within a reactive model, typically with a focus on individual behavioral symptoms and not systemic causes of student disengagement or exclusion.

By the mid-2010s, the practice had shifted conceptually toward prevention by way of positive school climate, teacher involvement, and inclusive administration. It was then that meta-analyses and framework studies reorganized WSA as a comprehensive strategy for promoting both academic success and psychological well-being (Goldberg et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2015). At the same time, growing sensitivity to the ecological nature of school systems is

reflected in terms such as "collaboration," "school culture," and "engagement," which feature more prominently in frequency and centrality within co-occurrence networks.

Recent years (post-2020) depict a further turn towards emergent concepts such as trauma-informed schools, resilience education, and staff wellbeing, in post-pandemic re-prioritization of research and policy. The word resilience became more prevalent over the last five years, typically referring to stressed school systems—either because of global crises, war, or widening disparities. As an instance, the Bhutan study by Jamtsho (2017) puts wellbeing leadership at the forefront as a strategy within an institution as a reaction to social-emotional requirements of post-traditional societies. Similarly, Gereluk's (2023) exploration of youth radicalization prevention within a WSA framework extends these models to the fields of civic education and democratic resilience.

Further, the reference to such descriptors as trauma-informed, equity, diversity, and inclusive education, which began to appear more regularly around 2019–2022, suggests increased sensitivity to intersectional vulnerabilities, particularly in racially and socioeconomically diverse contexts. These developments signal a drift away from universalist models towards context-responsive, culturally positioned whole-school strategies. Yet while inclusion comes to be generally accepted as a normative objective, its operationalisation remains patchy. As implied by research conducted by Hearne et al. (2017) and Hui (2002), teacher role confusion and institutional weak support remain instruments of implementation integrity sabotage in most systems.

Despite this thematic maturity, several areas of research remain untouched. First, there is limited longitudinal research that has explored the long-term impacts of whole school strategies on SEL and mental health outcomes, particularly in non-Western or less resourced educational settings. While research such as Project Daire (Brennan et al., 2021; Anderson et al., 2025) offers rigorous evidence for short-term impacts, longer-term evaluations are rare. Furthermore, student voice, while often referred to, is not well represented in empirical research. The literature tends to privilege adult and institutional perspectives, and few published articles have considered how children and young people experience, negotiate, or co-construct wellbeing in whole schools (Rowe & Stewart, 2009).

A further limitation concerns the integration of digital dimensions. As the pandemic accelerated demand for distant learning and digital wellbeing, even fewer systematically connect WSA principles to digital learning systems or address where blended pedagogies intersect emotional development and social belonging. This is an opportunity lost, particularly within the backdrop of increased student screen time, algorithmic bias, and online peer interaction—all with psychosocial effects on school-based wellbeing.

Finally, while international uptake of WSA models can be observed in the increasing geographical reach of publications—e.g., Bhutanese (Jamtsho, 2017), Indonesian (Raihani, 2011), and Portuguese (Leite et al., 2024) research—the global South is yet woefully underrepresented on both author affiliation and theoretical influence grounds. Most of the literature continues to borrow from Anglo-American epistemologies, which can limit cultural adaptability and continue structural disparities in education research and policy transfer.

In conclusion, thematic evolution of WSA literature presents an observable trajectory from behavior and policy interventions towards holistic, relational, and transformational approaches towards school reform. However, it is urgent to bridge the noted gaps in research—most critically longitudinal evaluation, youth-centered methodologies, incorporation of digital media, and epistemic diversity—to advance the discipline towards more inclusive and contextually relevant applications of whole school thinking within education systems globally.

4. Discussion

The findings of this bibliometric analysis shed light on the structural and conceptual architecture of research on the whole school approach (WSA) to social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing. Through a co-occurrence and citation-based analysis, four significant thematic clusters were established, each denoting distinct—yet interrelated—research streams. These clusters not only indicate the intellectual intensity of the field but also show its evolution from compartmentalized interventions to system-level models according to inclusion, sustainability, and psychosocial development.

The first cluster—systemic implementation, inclusive leadership, and sustainable school environments—shows how schools have come to be thought of increasingly as ecosystems. This environmental setting is particularly clear in works such as those by Mogren et al. (2019) and Bosevska and Kriewaldt (2020), who operationalize pedagogical values, school climate, and transformation sustainability interconnections. The frequency of use of such terms as school culture, leadership, implementation, and education for sustainable development across this cluster indicates maturity of the field towards organizational, multi-level perspectives. Researchers such as Leite et al. (2024) have also endorsed this path, demonstrating how WSA interventions can enact not just SEL outcomes but broader school transformation via participatory, values-based schooling models.

The second cluster connects up health promotion and mental health services with SEL models, emphasizing the growing overlap of schooling and public health. In this area, meta-analyses (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2019; Adi et al., 2007) and empirical research (e.g., Brennan et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2023; Anderson et al., 2025) have yielded robust evidence that interventions at the school level directed at the food environment, physical activity, or teacher education can yield measurable gains in wellbeing. Nielsen et al. (2015) also situate these programs within school mental health systems, showing how small structural changes—like the delivery of guidance services with a wellbeing orientation—can yield long-term psychosocial gains.

The third cluster consists of studies of behavioral control, school safety, and student connectedness. This body of research is based on earlier literature on bullying, aggression, and risk prevention (Richard et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2011; Heinrichs, 2003), but it has moved toward more relational and restorative models. For instance, Rowe and Stewart (2011) emphasize the significance of promoting school connectedness as a mediating variable for SEL outcomes, while Nyoni (2023) calls for integrating trauma-informed principles into WSA models, especially in high-risk or post-conflict schools. Brown (2025) has recently explored how contextual school variables—leadership style, institutional readiness, and teacher mindset—impact the efficacy of mental health interventions embedded in WSA models.

The fourth cluster moves attention towards teacher capacity, policy coordination, and adaptation at the curriculum level. That is where practitioners' active agency in initiating change becomes center stage, although far too often underplayed. Hui (2002), Hearne and Galvin (2015), and Rad et al. (2024) studies demonstrate that teachers' buy-in, institutional autonomy, and organizational culture are important factors in successful WSA implementation. However, as Câmpean et al. (2024) and Redeş et al. (2023) conclude, instructors find themselves as peripheral actors in decision-making structures—paralleledling an ancient dualism between theoretical conceptions of collective responsibility and the actual practice in education systems.

One of the transversal concerns that arises in this bibliometric snapshot is the systematic methodological and contextual imbalance across the literature. Geographically, Western, high-income country studies dominance—most notably from the UK, Australia,

Ireland, and Canada—continues to be a constraint on Global South voices. New contributions from Bhutan (Jamtsho, 2017), South Africa (Mbelu, 2024), Indonesia (Raihani, 2011), and Zimbabwe (Nyoni, 2023) demonstrate the applicability of WSA models to settings but continue to be short in citation networks and theory development. Additionally, the dominance of practitioner-coauthored or authored studies by practitioners accommodates a top-down bias, even as greater recognition is given to the necessity for practitioner voice in sustaining institutional change (Botnariuc, 2023; Brömdal, 2021).

A second overlooked site is including student voices in the planning and assessment of WSA. As Torsdottir (2024a, 2024b) demonstrates, engaging students not only heightens school belonging but also influences more youth-centered, context-dependent program design. Yet, most bibliometric clusters and co-citation maps reveal that such perspectives are barely at the heart of the conceptual support scaffolds of WSA scholarship. This oversight is particularly regrettable given the field's professed concern with inclusion, empowerment, and relational pedagogy.

Finally, the digital dimension of wellbeing remains under-theorised within the WSA literature. Although there has been recent effort by Rad et al. (2024) and Purcar et al. (2024) to support growing attention to how reasoning in the digital, and the embrace of AI, influences learning environments, more empirical effort must still be employed to connect SEL, digital identity, and school-wide technological attunement. This is a gap of critical importance, particularly in relation to post-pandemic models of hybrid schooling and the increasing emotional toll of online existence for educators and learners alike.

In light of this background of gaps, several implications for practice and research in the future are forthcoming. First, additional longitudinal, mixed-method evaluations of WSA interventions conducted in culturally diverse and resource-poor settings are needed urgently. Second, co-design with practitioners and student participation approaches must be methodological imperatives, not extras. Third, future models must bridge the digital divide by expanding the logic of WSA interventions to incorporate digital literacy, cyber-wellbeing, and virtual connectedness. As Seiser (2023) and Karaarslan-Semiz (2025) have illustrated, whole school sustainability approaches thrive when institutional policy intersects with student realities and ecological needs—this must occur now in the digital ecology of learning.

Evidence also calls for refinement of implementation models. Roux (2025) views several conditions for enabling—leadership stability, wellbeing of the staff, and policy coherence—central to sustaining whole-school change. Aindriú (2023) further contributes that even wisely crafted WSA programs can fail under administrative overload, conflicting priorities, or inadequate preparation of teachers. It is therefore imperative that WSA research shift towards an integrative model that views schools as relational and systemic wholenesses— where wellbeing is not something to be manufactured as an output, but a state to be co-designed.

To this end, the whole school approach must be re-framed not only as a technical formulation of interventions, but as a living care infrastructure of culture and collaboration. Resilience here is not an individualized strength, but a shared ability (Gericke, 2022); inclusion is not a procedural requirement, but an ethical aspiration (Meroni, 2023); and wellbeing is not just measured by student behavior, but experienced through the everyday textures of participation, trust, and shared meaning (Tnay, 2022).

Ultimately, the profession is at a crossroads. With ongoing global engagement with mental health, educational justice, and sustainability, the whole school approach has been identified as a compelling vehicle for meeting the demands of 21st-century schooling. However, if it is to live up to its potential for transformation, future scholarship must privilege voices at

the margins, add complexity, and produce culturally attuned, critically informed, and digitally literate models of wellbeing in its schools.

5. Conclusions

This bibliometric analysis gives an overall mapping of the research landscape of the whole school approach (WSA) to social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing and complements the objectives of this Special Issue. According to co-occurrence and citation analysis of 503 sampled articles from the Web of Science Core Collection, four mega-thematic clusters were uncovered through the study: systemic implementation and school ecology; health promotion and psychosocial well-being; prevention of behavioral risk and student connectedness; and teacher competence, policy integration, and inclusion. These clusters identify both the conceptual reach and interdisciplinary emphasis of WSA scholarship, confirming its relevance across educational psychology, public health, and policy in institutions.

The study contributes to the literature by not only identifying dominant themes and leading authors but also foregrounding vital gaps, such as lack of student and practitioner voice, thin empirical scholarship outside of Western contexts, and improving digital wellbeing as a component of holistic whole-school strategies. The results indicate a developmental trajectory in the domain—toward more inclusiveness, relationality, and systematization, and away from early emphases on behavioral interventions and school safety—toward models that highlight resilience, sustainability, and staff–student engagement.

These findings have several practice and education policy implications. First, they reinforce the development of inclusive, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed WSA programs focusing on the wellbeing of all participants in the school community. Second, greater international uptake of WSA principles require investment in implementation science, longitudinal measurement, and participatory co-design with teachers, students, and communities. Finally, in the post-pandemic learning context, the incorporation of digital wellbeing and SEL into national curricula and institution policy is a timely and necessary evolution of whole school approaches.

Through the synthesis of research findings over two decades, this research provides conceptual and empirical grounding for continued work on the whole school approach. As education systems remain plagued by profound challenges—inequality, climate stress, digital overwhelm, and mental health crises—WSA is a robust, scalable, and comprehensive model that can enhance not only learning achievement, but equitable and sustainable school cultures founded upon care, collaboration, and social-emotional development.

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