



# 2024 STEPPING STONES IMPACT REPORT

IMPROVING THE EDUCATION AND GENERAL  
WELFARE OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN IN CHINA

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# Overview

## Empowering Under-Served Students with Essential 21st-Century Skills

In 2024, Stepping Stones continued its work to empower under-served students across China by equipping them with the essential skills they need to thrive in school and beyond. With a strong focus on English, digital literacy, and social-emotional learning, our programs reached 7,786 students through the dedicated support of 1,263 volunteers, who delivered 9,346 lessons across 71 program sites and directly into students' homes via online platforms.

Thanks to this collective effort, the average number of lessons per student increased from 16.3 in 2023 to 21.2 in 2024, allowing for deeper learning and greater impact. Students made meaningful progress not only in language and digital competencies, but also in emotional awareness, confidence, and resilience.

As China continues to navigate rapid social and technological change, these programs meet a growing need: preparing disadvantaged children with 21st-century skills that will enable them to communicate, adapt, and succeed in an increasingly complex world. Our 2024 report reaffirms the importance of our efforts and the transformative potential of every child when equipped with the appropriate tools and support.

## Assessing Impact and Progress

To ensure our programs remain effective and responsive to students' needs, we pair delivery with careful evaluation. Each year, we conduct impact evaluations to better understand the effectiveness of our programs and measure the changes they bring about in students' learning journeys.

In 2024, we continued this process by distributing baseline (pre-program) and follow-up (post-program) surveys to a sample of student participants across our English, Digital Literacy, and Social-emotional Learning programs. These surveys assessed students' skills, confidence, knowledge, and attitudes before and after participation, allowing us to evaluate progress and identify areas for improvement. In the English program, additional pre- and post-speaking assessments were used to measure students' oral language development. Student feedback was also gathered to ensure that their voices remain central in shaping how our programs evolve. Through this rigorous process, we aim to ensure our interventions remain relevant, inclusive, and impactful.

# English Program

Stepping Stones has been delivering English teaching programs in China for over 18 years, reaching thousands of children each week across a dozen provinces. The primary goals of these programs are to enhance students' motivation and confidence in using English, thereby better preparing them for academic success and future career opportunities. As part of a carefully designed bespoke curriculum, interactive activities such as games, phonics, songs, and movie dubbing are used to actively engage students in language learning and make English both accessible and enjoyable.

To evaluate the impact of our English programs this year, we administered pre- and post-program surveys to a sample of 337 students. These surveys, consistent with those used in previous years, focused on students' attitudes toward school and key academic subjects – particularly English – as well as their perceptions of the Stepping Stones programs in which they participated. In addition, we conducted pre- and post-program speaking assessments with 147 students to evaluate their progress in spoken English.

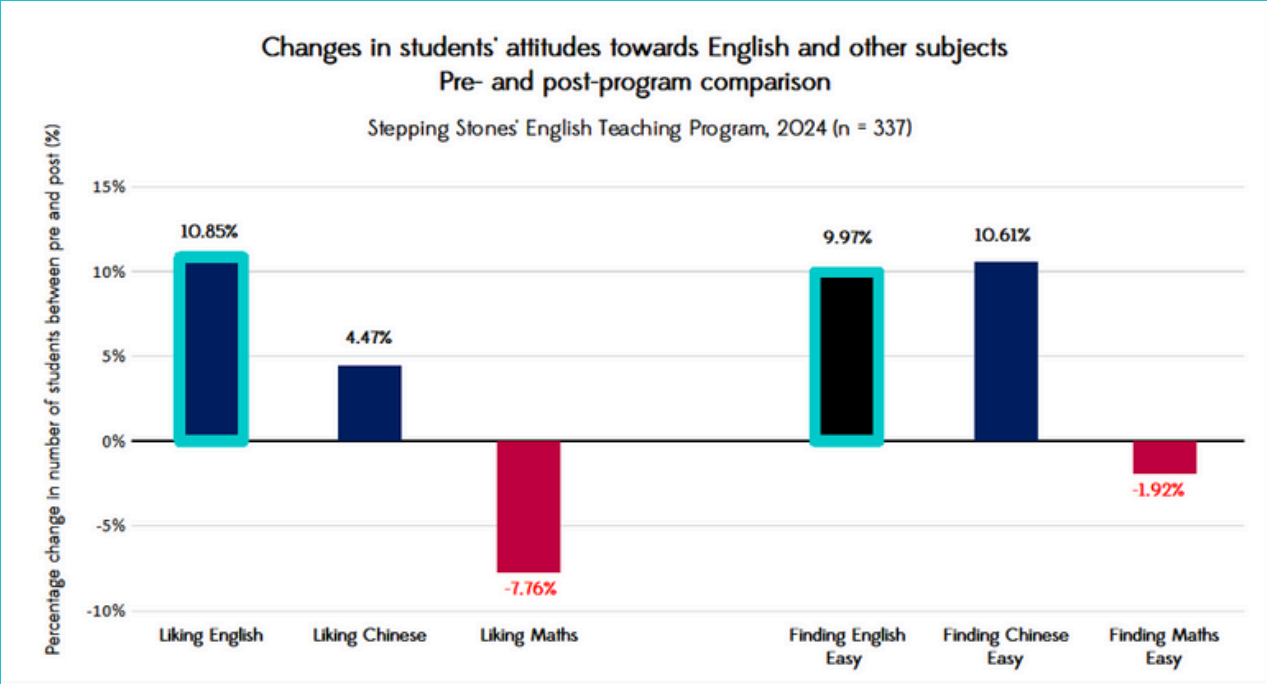
## 1

### Improving Students' Attitudes Toward English

To determine whether the program successfully enhanced students' motivation and interest in English, participants were asked about their attitudes toward English, Chinese, and mathematics. Specifically, they were asked how much they liked each subject and how difficult they found them, using a four-point Likert scale ranging from "dislike" to "like very much," and from "very difficult" to "easy."

In line with surveys from previous years, the results shown in the figure below indicate that the most substantial improvement in student attitudes occurred in English – the target of our intervention. The percentage of students who reported strongly liking English increased by 10.85% (from 45.77% to 50.74%), while those who found English easy rose by 9.97% (from 57.75% to 63.50%).





By comparison, the percentage of students finding Chinese easy increased by 10.61%, while the figure for mathematics actually declined slightly by -1.92%. In terms of enjoyment, English showed clear positive gains. Chinese saw only a modest increase of 4.47% in students who strongly liked the subject, and mathematics showed a notable decline of -7.76%.

This contrast underscores the specific positive impact of our English intervention. It also suggests that the lack of similar support in subjects like mathematics may contribute to stagnation or even a decline in student engagement. These findings reinforce the effectiveness of our English programs and indicate that expanding similar initiatives to other subjects could produce broader academic benefits.



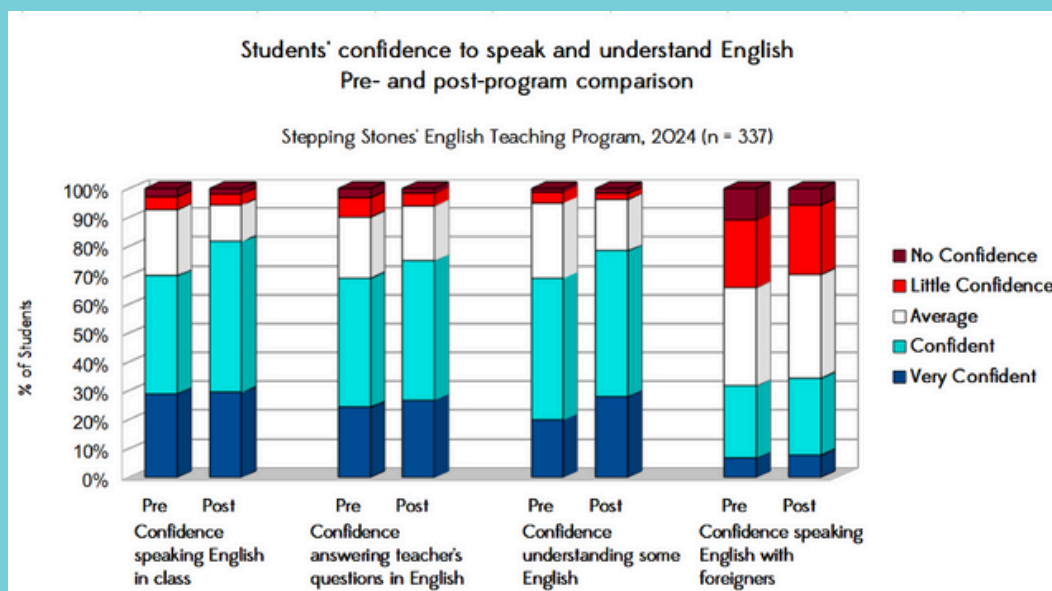
## 2

## Increasing Students' Confidence in English

One of the core objectives of our English programs is to foster students' confidence in using the language. Confidence plays a vital role in second language acquisition, as it encourages students to engage more fully in the learning process – by speaking up in class, asking questions, and taking risks without fear of making mistakes. This increased participation can support academic improvement over time. The survey explored students' confidence in both speaking and understanding English.

As highlighted in the figure below, the 2024 results are especially encouraging, with a notable rise in students' confidence across several English language skills. The percentage of students who felt confident speaking English in class increased by 17.05% (from 69.72% to 81.60%), while confidence in answering teachers' questions in English rose by 8.78% (from 68.94% to 78.39%). Similarly, the percentage of students who felt confident understanding some English improved by 13.70% (from 68.94% to 75%). Confidence in speaking to a foreigner in English also saw a rise of 8.50% (from 31.67% to 34.36%).





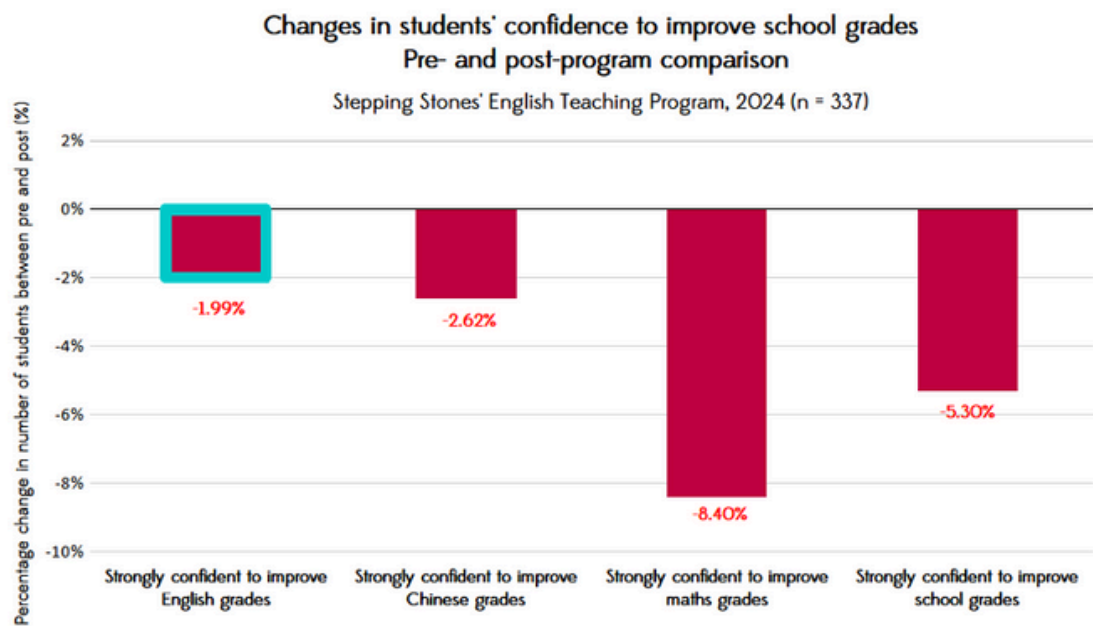
These gains suggest that students are becoming more comfortable using English in live communication settings – an essential step toward improving both language skills and academic outcomes. When students feel more confident, they are more likely to engage actively in class, complete assignments, and persist through challenges. This growing willingness to participate supports not just language development but also broader educational engagement. By nurturing a learning environment where students feel supported and encouraged, our programs are laying a foundation for continued progress, both linguistically and academically.

### 3 Building Confidence to Improve Test Scores

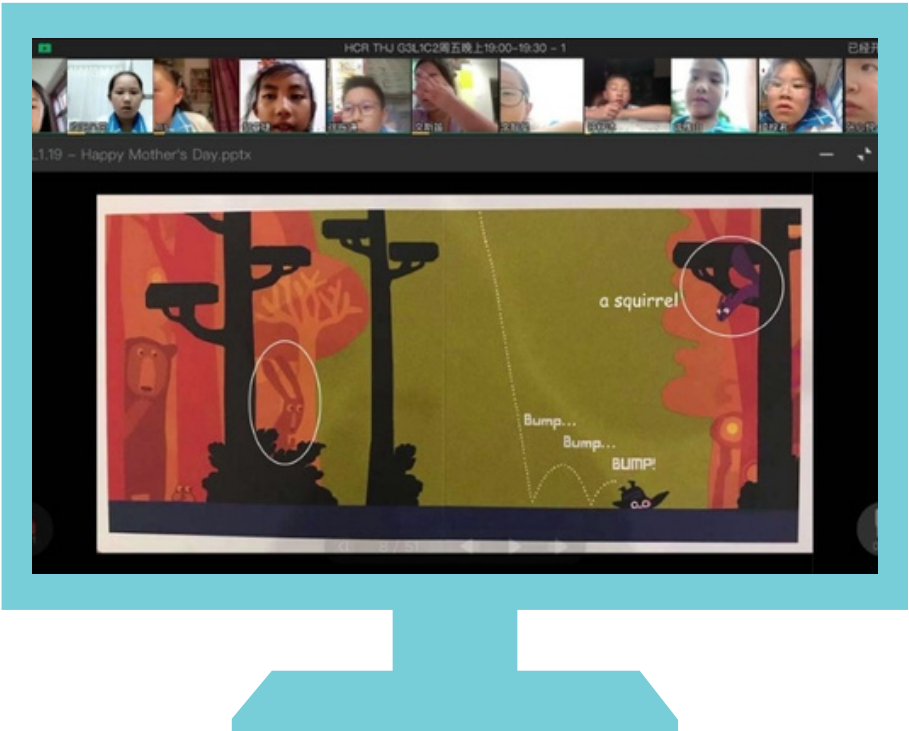
While the primary focus of our lessons is to boost students' motivation and confidence in English, a key underlying goal is to help them feel more capable of achieving better academic results, especially in English.

As highlighted in the figure below, despite overall improvements in English-related confidence, survey results showed a slight decline in the percentage of students who felt 'very confident' about improving their English grades, which dropped by -1.99% (from 32.39% to 31.75%). This was accompanied by larger declines in perceived confidence for mathematics (-8.40%) and Chinese (-2.62%), as well as a -5.30% drop in students' general confidence in improving their overall school grades.





While these figures suggest that students are struggling with academic confidence more broadly, they also highlight the stabilizing influence of our English programs. The relatively small drop in confidence in English, compared to more severe declines in other subjects, underscores the importance of targeted support. These findings suggest that when students receive consistent support – such as that offered by our English program – they are more likely to retain confidence in their academic potential. In China’s competitive education system, strong performance in English is often a key gateway to higher education and better future opportunities.

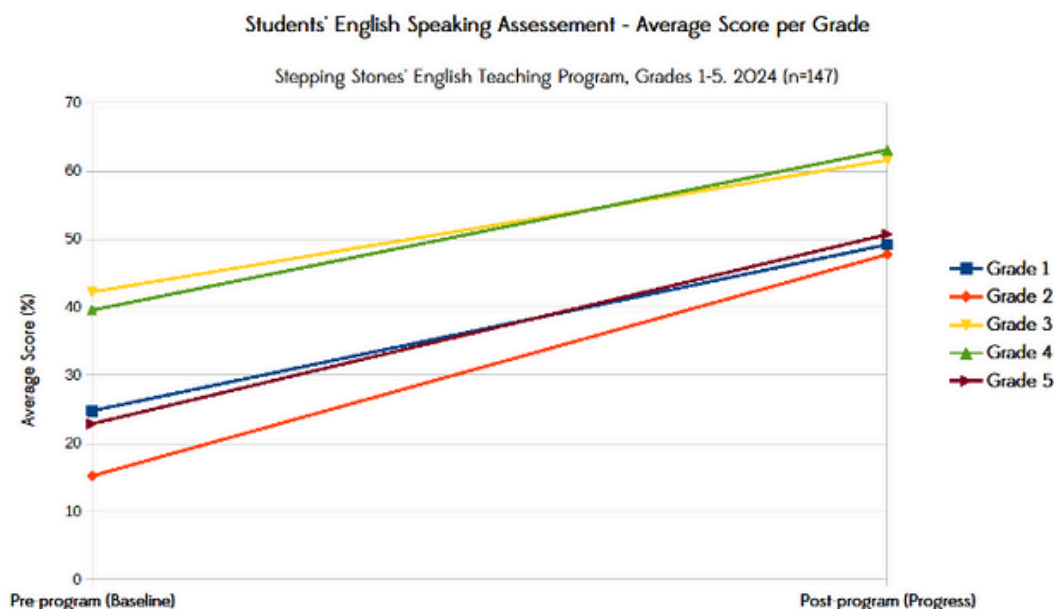




## 4

## Acquiring English Speaking Skills

To assess students' progress in spoken English, we conducted pre- and post-program speaking assessments with 147 primary school students across four sites in Shanghai. The assessments focused on basic conversational English, with questions increasing in complexity from Grade 1 through Grade 5. Students were evaluated on both comprehension and their ability to express themselves verbally in English. Each question was scored on a scale from 0 to 3, with 3 indicating complete proficiency (equivalent to a score of 100%).



The results show significant improvements in speaking ability across all grade levels. Students in Grade 2 and Grade 5 showed particularly strong progress, with their average scores increasing by 32.52 and 27.81 percentage points respectively. These gains reflect the effectiveness of consistent exposure to spoken English in a supportive, interactive environment. They also suggest that younger and older students alike are responsive to volunteer-led instruction, demonstrating the potential of the program to strengthen oral communication skills at key stages of language development. These improvements are consistent with findings from previous years, confirming that students are acquiring tangible, lasting language skills that enable them to express themselves more effectively and understand spoken English with greater ease.

## 5

## Student Feedback and Experience

In addition to evaluating changes in students' attitudes, confidence, and English proficiency, the survey also assessed student satisfaction with the program through both closed and open-ended questions. The results show a notable increase in students' enthusiasm for having our volunteer teachers: by the end of the program, the percentage of students who said they liked being taught English by our volunteers rose by 9.20%, from 86.01% to 93.92%. This improvement reflects not only a sustained interest in the program but also the growing appreciation students have for the teaching approach and classroom atmosphere.

Students were asked what they liked most and least about the English classes led by volunteers. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Many students highlighted the volunteers' clear pronunciation, their patient and encouraging teaching methods, and the fun, engaging atmosphere they created. A recurring theme was how much students appreciated being encouraged to speak in class – something they are not typically used to in their regular learning environments. One student noted, “I like how the teacher encourages me to speak. It makes it easier for me to try.” This emphasis on encouragement helped build confidence and made students feel more comfortable taking risks in English.

At the same time, a small number of students – despite generally enjoying the classes – reported struggling to fully understand the spoken English. These difficulties sometimes made them feel uneasy when called upon to respond unexpectedly. One student shared, “I like how fluently the teacher speaks, but I don't like being called on to answer.” Another admitted, “Sometimes I don't understand, but I still like the way they teach.” These comments underscore the fact that while the volunteers' native or fluent English delivery was valued, it could also be intimidating for some students with lower comprehension levels. Nonetheless, these concerns were relatively isolated and often expressed alongside positive remarks, suggesting that students remained motivated and appreciative even when faced with linguistic challenges. We will continue to remind our volunteers to use a language level appropriate to the children's ability to help them better support students who may feel less confident in understanding or responding in English.

In conclusion, the 2024 English program demonstrated strong outcomes across several key areas. Students not only made measurable progress in their English speaking skills, but also showed increased confidence in using the language – both inside and outside the classroom. Feedback from students reflected high levels of satisfaction with volunteer-led lessons, particularly praising the encouragement and engaging teaching methods. These gains in skill and confidence were accompanied by more positive attitudes toward English as a subject, suggesting that students are more motivated and better equipped to succeed academically. Overall, the program continues to deliver meaningful impact, helping students build a stronger foundation in English and a greater sense of self-assurance in their learning journey.



# Digital Literacy

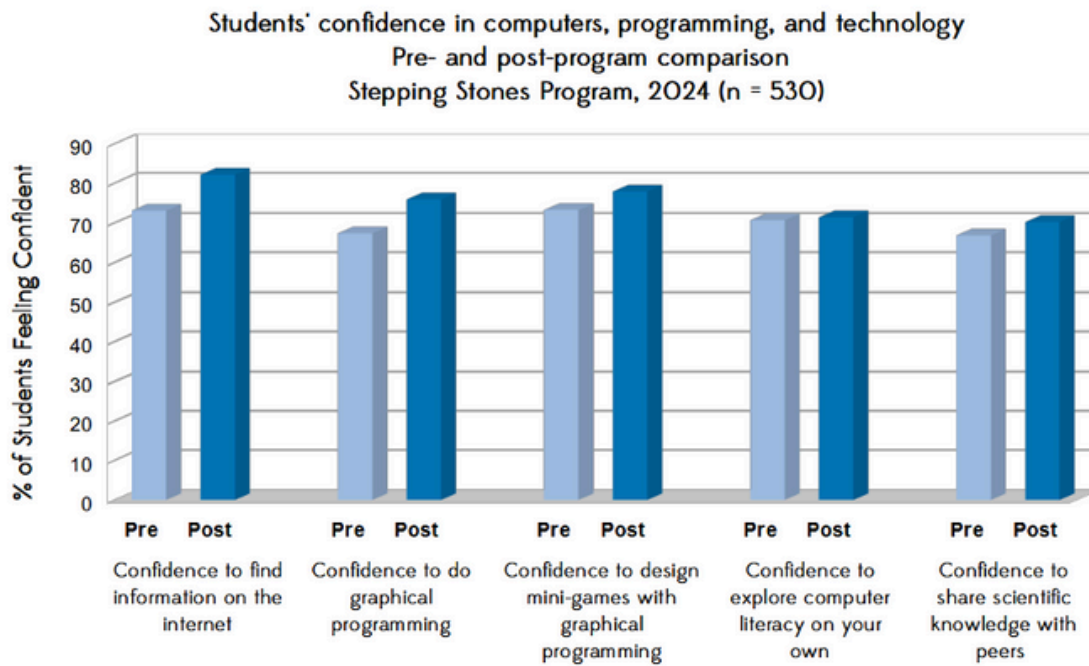
The Digital Literacy Program aims to improve students' digital competencies while building their confidence, self-esteem, and critical thinking abilities. By equipping students with these foundational skills, the program supports their future access to further education and employment opportunities. Many beneficiaries – particularly those with limited prior exposure to technology – experience a transformative shift in how they see themselves as learners and problem-solvers. In 2024, the program was delivered across a range of both online and offline sites. To evaluate its impact, 530 students completed both a pre-program (baseline) and a post-program (follow-up) survey, providing a comprehensive data set to assess growth in digital skills and changes in attitudes toward technology.

## 1 Strengthening Digital Skills

A key component of the program is project-based learning, which allows students to engage in meaningful, hands-on activities such as coding, programming, internet research, and using basic computer software. These activities are designed not only to improve technical competence but also to encourage creative thinking and problem-solving. By completing real-world projects, students gain practical experience in applying digital tools, fostering a sense of achievement and autonomy that many had not experienced in traditional classroom settings.

As shown in the figure below, the percentage of students who felt confident in key digital skills increased after completing the program in 2024. The number of students confident in finding information online grew by 12.52% (from 73.02% to 82.16%), while those confident in using graphical programming tools increased by 12.75% (from 67.36% to 75.95%). A smaller increase of 1.19% was observed in students confident in exploring digital literacy independently (from 70.58% to 71.43%). Confidence also improved in communication and creative application of knowledge. The percentage of students who felt confident sharing scientific knowledge with peers rose by 5.10% (from 66.81% to 70.22%), and confidence in designing mini-games using programming tools increased by 6.38% (from 73.20% to 77.88%). These results reflect a clear rise in the proportion of students who completed the program feeling capable and self-assured in their digital skills.

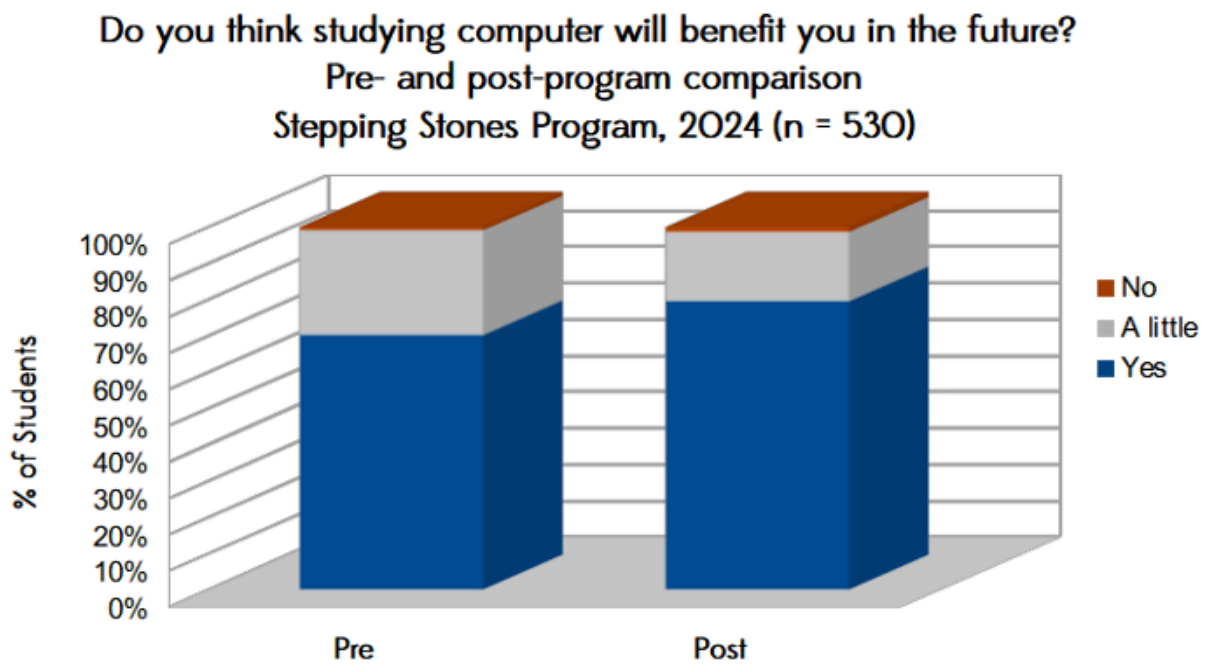




Beyond skill acquisition, the rise in self-reported confidence indicates a deeper impact: students are not only learning how to use digital tools, but also developing the belief that they can apply these skills independently and creatively. This shift is especially significant for students from under-resourced communities, where access to technology and digital education is limited. Improvements in complex areas like programming further suggest that the program is helping students engage in structured thinking and logical reasoning, both of which are highly transferable to other academic contexts. As a result, students leave the program with both the competence and the confidence to pursue further learning and contribute meaningfully in digitally driven environments.



The survey also measured how many students enjoy using computers and believe in the long-term value of studying computer science. Both indicators showed clear improvement. The percentage of students who enjoyed using computers rose by 12.40% (from 75.06% to 84.36%), while those who believed computer science would help them in the future increased by 13.19% (from 70.18% to 79.45%), as shown in the figure below. These results suggest that more students not only feel comfortable with technology, but also recognize its growing importance in their lives and futures.



## 2

## Student Feedback and Experience

Students provided very positive feedback on the Digital Literacy program, emphasizing its engaging and hands-on approach. Many particularly enjoyed programming activities using Scratch to create games and animations, often describing these tasks as the most fun and rewarding parts of the course. Several students expressed pride in their completed projects, highlighting how the program allowed them to explore computers in a meaningful and empowering way for the first time. One student shared, “I liked Scratch programming the most because I could make my own games.” Another commented, “The programming class let me fully show my potential.” A third added, “Computer class brought us joy, and I was proud to gain knowledge that will help me in school and life.”

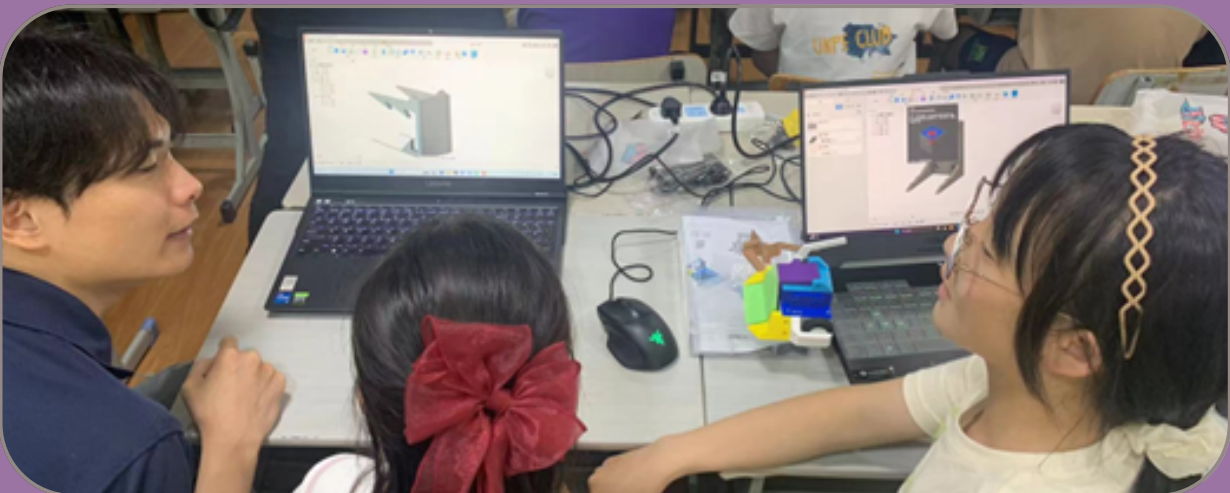
The collaborative atmosphere was also frequently praised, with students valuing the chance to work alongside their peers, share ideas, and receive support from instructors. This interactive environment made the lessons feel dynamic and more connected to real-life applications compared to their usual school experiences.

While the overall response was overwhelmingly positive, some students noted that the class time felt too short, especially during creative activities, and wished the sessions could be extended. A few students found certain aspects, like typing exercises, to be challenging or less enjoyable, particularly for those with less prior experience. Additionally, some mentioned that certain topics could benefit from clearer guidance to aid understanding.

Despite these minor challenges, the enthusiasm for the program was clear. Students consistently described it as inspiring and motivating, expressing a strong desire to continue developing their digital skills beyond the classroom. Many also saw the program as building their confidence and opening new possibilities for their future learning and potential careers in technology. One student summed it up by saying, “This class helped me build confidence. I liked everything about it.” Another shared, “I feel very accomplished when I figure out how to use a new program.” This rich feedback confirms the program’s effectiveness not only in teaching technical skills but also in fostering curiosity, self-assurance, and a sense of achievement among participants.

The 2024 evaluation confirms that the Digital Literacy Program is meeting its core objectives: equipping students with essential technical skills, boosting their confidence, and sparking genuine interest in digital learning. Students reported significant gains in key digital competencies and expressed a stronger belief in the value of technology for their futures. Their feedback revealed not only enthusiasm for hands-on activities like programming and game design but also a sense of empowerment and pride in their achievements.

Looking ahead, the program will continue to evolve to meet the needs of students in an ever-changing digital landscape. In the coming year, we plan to integrate more content on artificial intelligence and advanced programming into the curriculum, ensuring students are exposed to the most current and relevant technological developments. By doing so, we aim to provide an inclusive and future-ready learning experience that keeps pace with global trends and opens new opportunities for all learners.





# Social-emotional Learning

Through our Social-emotional Learning (SEL) Program, we aim to cultivate students' core emotional competencies – including self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness – to help build their self-esteem, resilience, confidence, and interpersonal skills, while also enhancing their overall motivation to learn.

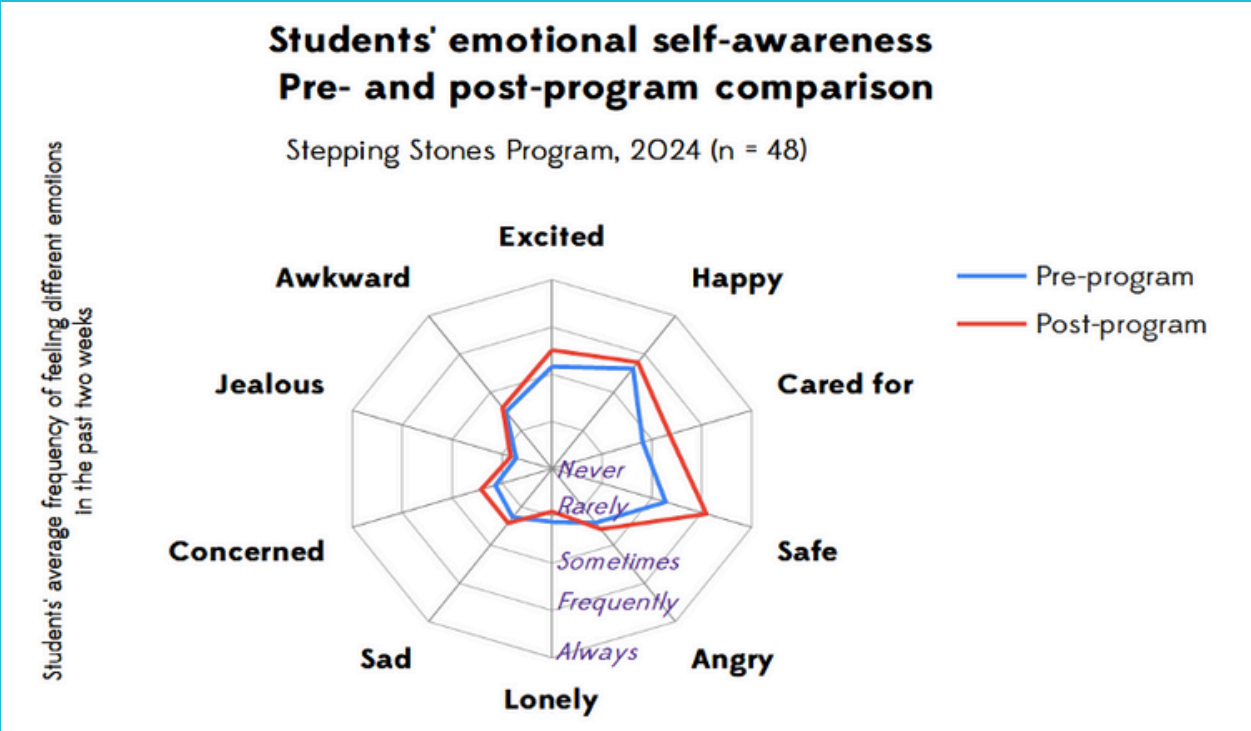
In 2024, we conducted pre- and post-program surveys to evaluate the program's impact on students' emotional well-being. A sample of 48 students participated in the evaluation, which measured changes in emotional awareness, expression, and regulation over time.

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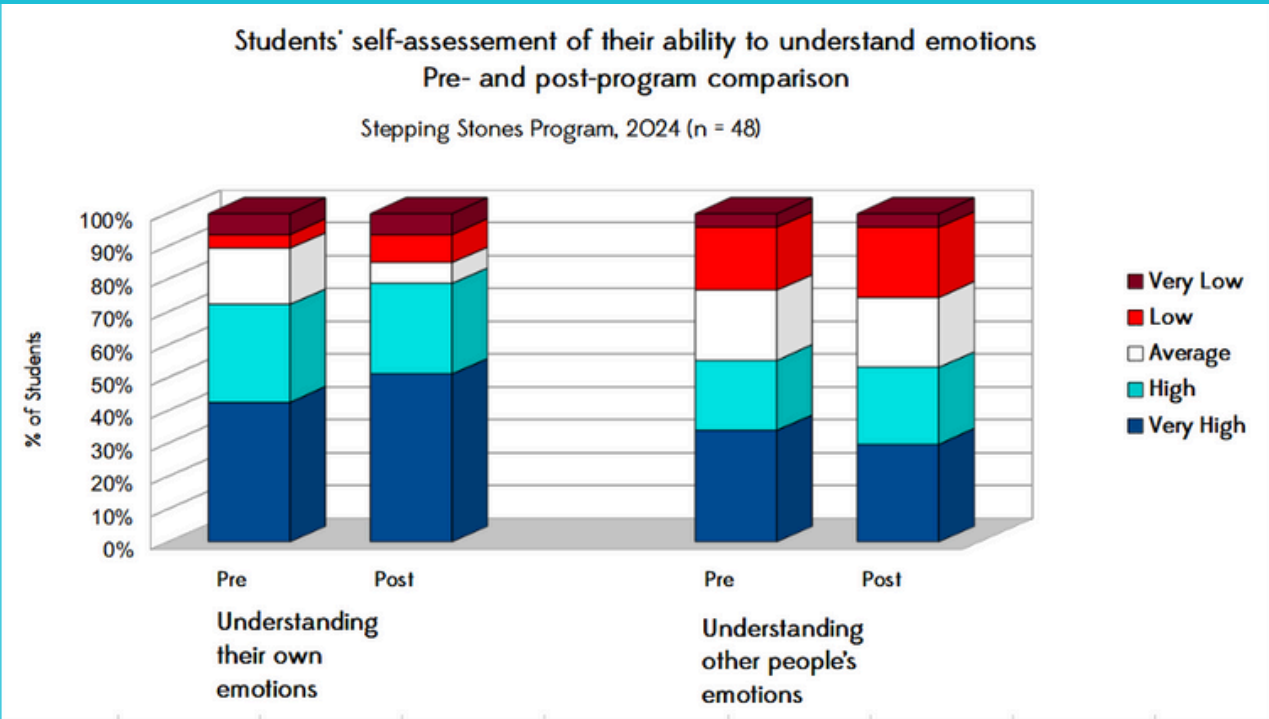
### Growing Emotional Self-Awareness

Throughout the course, our teachers and volunteers led activities focused on helping students identify, understand, and express a wide range of emotions – both positive and negative. Special emphasis was placed on exploring difficult emotions, as many children learn from an early age to suppress or ignore feelings such as sadness, fear, or frustration. The SEL classroom created a safe and respectful space for emotional expression, where vulnerability was treated with empathy and care.

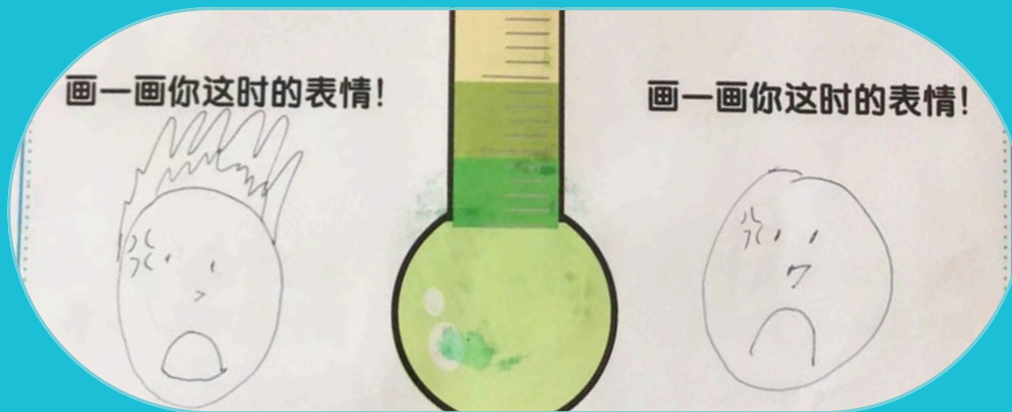
To assess the impact of this work, students were asked to report the frequency of various emotions they experienced over the past two weeks, both before and after the program. As shown in the figure below, after the program, students reported feeling a wider range of emotions more frequently – both positive and negative – with notable increases in feelings of concern, safety, excitement, and being cared for. This suggests that after the program, students not only experienced more emotions but also became more emotionally self-aware, including of difficult feelings they may have previously struggled to articulate or even recognize.



Helping students tune in to their full emotional range, including negative emotions, is essential to developing healthy coping strategies. Accurately identifying and labelling these feelings is a critical first step in self-regulation, and a core objective of our program.



As shown in the figure above, students also rated their perceived ability to understand both their own emotions and those of others. After the program, students who rated their self-awareness as “high” or “very high” increased by 8.82%, rising from 72.34% to 78.72%. However, the percentage of students reporting high awareness of others’ emotions showed a slight decline of -3.85%, from 55.32% to 53.19%. This mixed result suggests that while students are becoming more in tune with their own feelings, recognizing others’ emotions remains a more complex skill that may require extended focus in future programming. Nevertheless, increased emotional insight – especially into one’s own inner state – lays the groundwork for more constructive behaviour and reduces the likelihood of emotional shutdowns or outbursts.

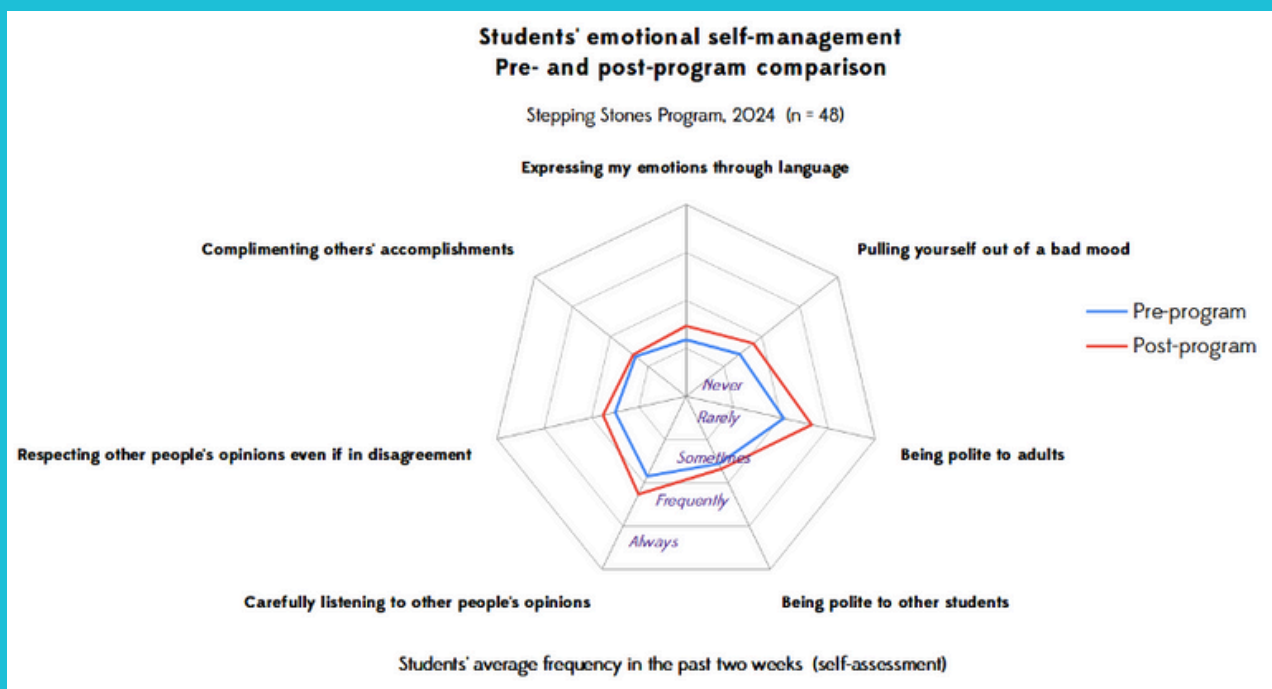


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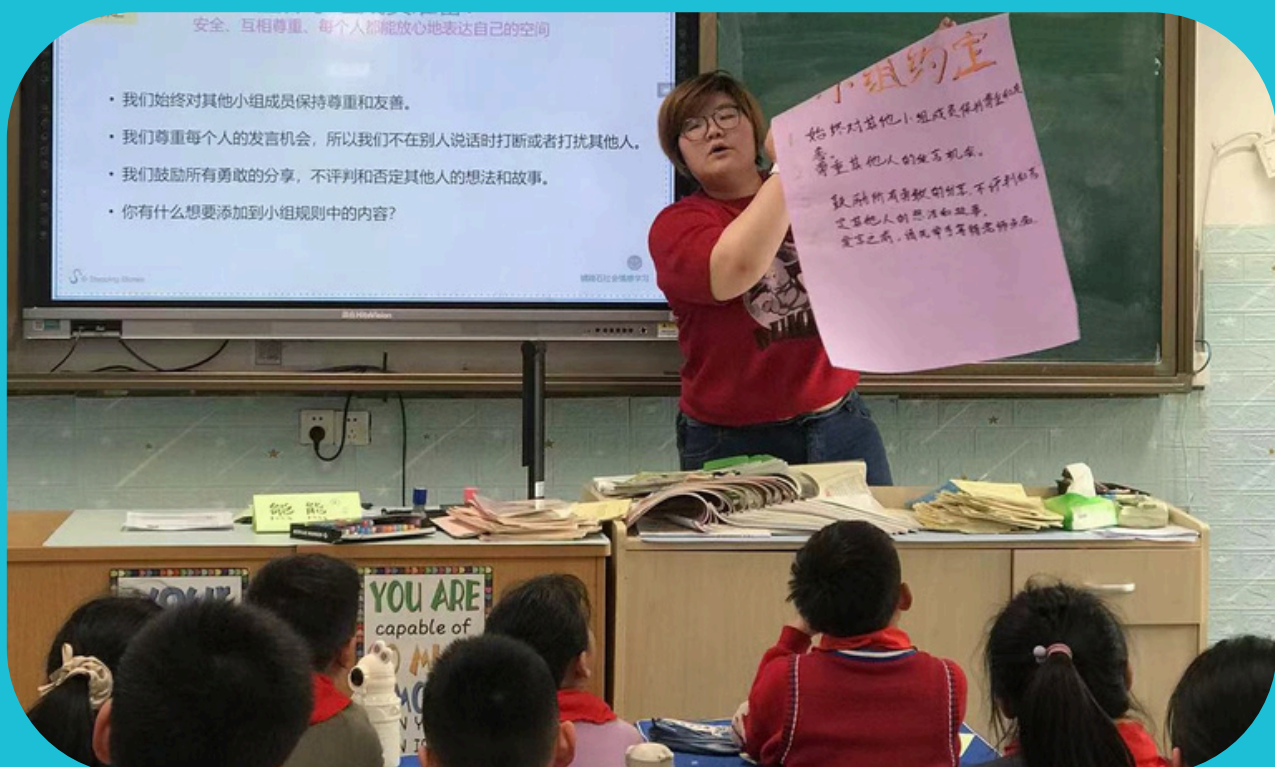
## Enhancing Emotional Self-Management

Beyond understanding emotions, the SEL program also seeks to build students’ capacity to manage stress and express strong feelings appropriately, whether on their own or in group settings.

Survey questions assessed how often students were able to cope with various emotional challenges over the preceding two weeks. As shown in the figure below, post-program responses revealed an increased frequency of behaviours indicating emotional regulation, including expressing emotions through language, being polite to adults, respecting differing opinions, actively listening to others, and pulling oneself out of a bad mood. This includes a greater ability to recover from disruptive emotions such as frustration, anger, or embarrassment.



These encouraging results suggest that the program is supporting students in developing healthier emotional responses and behavioural habits. At the same time, they point to an ongoing need for support in helping children master self-regulation – arguably one of the most challenging emotional skills to develop. Managing emotional impulses, particularly when confronted with stress or conflict, takes time, guidance, and continued practice.





## 3

## Student Feedback and Experience

To better understand the impact of our SEL program from the perspective of our students, we invited all participants to reflect on their experience at the end of the course. The feedback gathered provides a powerful window into how students felt, what they enjoyed, and what they took away from the program.

The overwhelming majority of students said that the SEL course was helpful to them, with many highlighting how it helped them manage their emotions better, feel happier, and relate more positively to others. One student shared, “I think the lessons helped me understand why I feel angry, and what to do about it instead of yelling.” Another simply wrote, “Now I’m not always hitting people any more.”

Students reported that the lessons gave them new tools for handling difficult emotions, particularly anger, sadness, and frustration. Many referred to “calming down” or “expressing” their emotions as major outcomes. One child explained, “Because of the SEL class, when I feel like crying or angry, I remember the things we learned, and I feel better.” Another shared, “I used to not know what I was feeling. Now I can tell someone if I feel upset.”

When asked what their favourite part of the course was, responses varied widely – from class discussions and drawing their emotions, to acting out situations and watching videos together. Some students appreciated the creativity and expression involved: “I loved the drawing and writing time – it made me think about my feelings in a fun way.” Others said they simply enjoyed being together: “Learning with everyone made me happy.” One wrote, “I liked all of it. It was fun and helped me.”

The interactive elements of the program – such as games, acting, or visual storytelling – stood out for many students. One child said, “The acting was the best part because I got to show how I feel without needing words.” Another reflected, “I liked learning about empathy. Now I understand my friends better, and they understand me too.” Several mentioned that they felt more confident because of the program, with one student noting, “It helped me learn that it’s okay to feel, and that other people feel the same way.”

Many students took the opportunity to write heartfelt messages to their teachers. Gratitude and warmth were common themes. “Thank you, teacher, for helping me control my emotions. I won’t forget you.” Another child wrote, “You taught me how to respect others. I will try harder to listen now.” Others simply expressed their joy: “I had so much fun. I hope we can see you again!” or “Thank you for teaching us how to be calm and kind.”

Although most feedback was positive, some students expressed mixed feelings about the timing or intensity of the class. A few wrote that while they found the course helpful, there were times they didn’t feel like participating. These honest reflections are valuable reminders that emotional learning is deeply personal and often complex, and that engaging with topics related to one’s own feelings can sometimes feel challenging – even when the experience is ultimately beneficial. As one student beautifully summed it up: “Every class brought different emotions – happy, sad, silly, thoughtful. It helped me know myself better.” Another wrote, “I hope next time we can learn even more about feelings – and play more games too!”

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The SEL program has meaningfully helped students understand and manage their emotions, develop empathy, and build greater self-awareness. Through creative activities such as storytelling and group discussions, many students reported feeling more confident, calm, and connected to others. As one student reflected: “It helped me know myself better.”

Based on this feedback, in the upcoming year we plan to strengthen the curriculum by incorporating more emotional regulation techniques and introducing early-grade courses to help younger students develop these skills from the outset. The program’s success underscores its lasting impact on students’ emotional growth and overall well-being.

We are deeply encouraged by the 2024 impact evaluation results. Across all three programs – English, Digital Literacy, and Social-emotional Learning – students showed meaningful growth in skills, confidence, and engagement. They not only developed stronger abilities in language and technology but also became more aware of their emotions and better equipped to manage them. These outcomes align with previous years' findings and reinforce the lasting value of our programs. Most importantly, they reflect our ongoing commitment to ensuring that students from under-served communities have the tools, support, and opportunities they need to thrive in school and beyond.

## Our Mission

To improve the education and general welfare of disadvantaged children in China.

## Our Vision

Equal access to a quality education and general welfare for all children in China.

## Our Program Objectives

- To increase students' confidence and self-esteem.
- To optimise students' access to better quality education and work opportunities in the future.
- To connect communities to promote inter-cultural understanding.
- To promote responsible and high impact volunteering.

## Our Values





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