

Online ISSN: 3107 – 7676

Impact Factor (RSIF): 6.70

IJMR 2025; 1(6): 73-80

2025 November - December

www.allmultiresearchjournal.com

Received: 02-10-2025

Accepted: 03-11-2025

Published: 05-12-2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMR.2025.1.6.73-80

The Role of Education in Shaping Social Identity, Emotional Intelligence, and Psychological Resilience

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Abstract

Education influences development beyond the academic realm by helping individuals to understand their social membership, interpret emotions and understand how to deal with challenging situations. This article analyzes the integrated roles of social identity, emotional intelligence and psychological resilience in educational situations. It uses an integrated review of the peer-reviewed literature and authoritative sources published between 2020 and 2026 and a descriptive synthesis of publicly available data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022, the U.S. Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) 2023 and the OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills 2023. The evidence suggests that, inclusion and positive relationships between teachers and students and amongst peers, and integrated social and emotional learning (PSEL) help to foster positive emotions and functioning and develop effective coping mechanisms. In the PISA 2022 survey, 74% of students in OECD countries felt that they belonged at school, and 79% in a group of higher-belonging systems. In the 2023 U.S. YRBS, 55% of students felt close to people at their school, and this varied across student groups. The article presents evidence from a recently published meta-analysis that positive and short-term changes in resilience school-based interventions are observable. It suggests that emotional and social development be considered as central educational outcomes. It acknowledges differences across nations, measurement approaches, and research and design strategies.

Keyword: Education, Social Identity, Emotional Intelligence, School Belonging, Social-Emotional Learning, Psychological Resilience, Inclusive Schooling

1. Introduction

Schools help children build knowledge and develop in numerous other ways. Examples include exposure to various values, opportunities to make friends, receive feedback and learn to collaborate. These all build children's sense of self and where they belong. The type of relationships children have at school influence how children learn to distinguish their feelings, express disagreement and assert their need for help. Academic performance is just one dimension of the relationship between a school and child. Others include child wellbeing, social connections, and feelings of self and belonging, etc. (OECD, 2021, 2024b) [6, 9].

Social identity is defined by where and whom a person belongs to. This includes family, culture, communities, social groups and more. This sense of identity can be positively affirmed at school through inclusion and participation. However, the sense can be negatively affirmed through bullying and inequity. At school, the sense can also be positively or negatively confirmed through the materials being taught. Students are more willing to participate if they can personally identify with the experiences being taught. However, if students feel they are being stereotyped, they are less willing to engage socially.

The UNESCO (2020) [13] global report on inclusion argues that, instead of framing issues of diversity and inclusion as peripheral considerations in the education sector, they should be incorporated as the core, particularly in planning and managing the education system. This suggests that school climate is central to both the personal development and educational equity of the student.



Aaron Truth (2022), Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Students_doing_project_work_together.jpg

Fig 1: Inclusive peer learning as an illustrative educational setting

Psychological resilience encompasses how individuals demonstrate positive changes in response to adversity, disruption and/or persistently high demands. It doesn't mean eliminating negative emotions. Resilience shouldn't be interpreted to mean that students must be strong and manage adversity on their own. Instead, resilience should be understood to include adequate response and support from teachers, parents, and other school staff, combined with personal and social resources. Schools can also help by providing children and adolescents with predictability and reliable routines, and strengthening their relationships with the school through caring and effective teaching (Llistosella *et al*., 2023; World Health Organization *et al*., 2026) [5, 16]. In this article, we place our three areas of interest together and cover them as integrated, rather than discuss them as separate, unrelated objectives in education.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Background

2.1 Education and Social Identity

Social identity includes the meaning people assign to their group memberships and the level of value they associate with those memberships. Educational institutions affect this process in a variety of ways. Formal curricula highlight rules about group participation. Less formal practices highlight what teacher expectations are and how to participate to be recognized. Celebrations, performances, and athletics help define a school's value structure. Student leadership opportunities are important to developing an identity as an effective leader. Recent longitudinal studies of Black and Latinx adolescents found that school belonging helped mediate the effect of other identities on some outcomes of behavior and emotional adjustment to school (Song *et al*., 2024) [12]. This research shows school belonging is better modeled as a relational process as opposed to a personal trait of an individual.

Positive educational identity is formed by incorporating school norms and rules. Students can positively identify as a learner and incorporate relevant aspects of their family, cultural and community identity. This helps students make sense of their learning and affirm who they are. A focus is placed on helping students critically examine their identity in relation to school and the community rather than on developing students to accept the school's value system as their own. Meaningful participation in learning is associated with students' recognition of their identity as a learner and positive engagement (UNESCO, 2020) [13].

2.2 Emotional Intelligence and Social-Emotional Learning

The OECD defines emotional intelligence as involving the following skills: Emotional regulation, collaboration, engagement, open-mindedness and the performance required to complete a task. Emotional regulation encompasses stress management, emotional control and optimism, and collaboration encompasses empathy and trust. The OECD Social and Emotional Skills Survey (SSES) measures these skills in 10- and 15-year-old students and explores how they relate to students' experiences in school and at home and students' future outlooks (OECD, 2024b, 2025) [9, 10]. Researchers have identified several key skills that empower and give meaning to students' lives, including their interactions with educators and other school personnel. A focus on students' emotional needs helps relieve anxiety and distress and creates space for educators to interact with students in ways that

allow students to identify emotions. Educator's help students learn to name emotions and manage distress through teaching and practice.

2.3 Resilience as a Relational and Developmental Process

A resilience-focused approach asks which resources support learners to continue, recover or adapt when circumstances become challenging. There are individual strategies such as flexible thinking and problem solving, and while they are important, the chance to use them relies on the context. A student cannot reasonably be expected to deal with continuous harassment using individual strategies. As such, protection-focused education and training builds skills and provides legal and/or institutional protection (e.g. counseling, psychotherapy, and/or reliable relationships; institutional procedures and practices) against bullying. Reviews of research have found positive results for some school-based resilience building programs, but note the variance in results and the need for a longer follow-up period (Pinto *et al*., 2021; Llistosella *et al*., 2023) [11, 5].

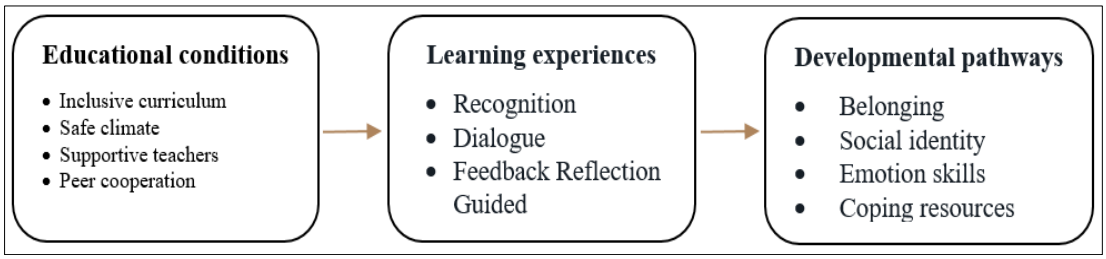


Fig 2: A conceptual model linking educational conditions with identity, emotional development and resilience

3. Research Objectives

- Analyze the role education and the school environment play in students' sense of social identity and belonging.
- Analyze emotional intelligence of students in the context of various educational experiences and classroom interactions, as well as the role of the teacher-student relationship.
- Analyze the role of education in the development of psychological resilience of students and their adaptive coping skills.
- Identify research on psychological resilience and social emotional skills in students, using recently published studies, and analyze the results based on students' experiences.
- Synthesize educational practices and social-emotional learning approaches designed to develop students' sense of social identity and belonging as well as psychological resilience and emotional intelligence.

3.1 Research Questions

- How does school influence the social identity, self-perception, and sense of belonging of students within the school environment?
- What are the effects of classroom experiences, peer interactions, and teacher-student relationships in the development of emotional intelligence of students?
- How does the school environment influence the psychological resilience and development of coping strategies of students?
- What are the recently published data and empirical studies on the differences in school belonging, emotional intelligence, and psychological resilience of students?
- Which educational interventions and school practices best promote social identity, emotional intelligence and psychological resilience of students and what are the gaps in the research evidence?

4. Methodology

This article uses an integrative literature review and a descriptive secondary-data synthesis. It is not a primary survey or experiment, and it is not a formal systematic review. Sources are included based on relevance to identity, belonging, school-based social-emotional learning and resilience. They are also included based on publication in the 2020-2026 period, and based on their scholarly or institutional publication. The research base includes peer-reviewed studies and meta-analyses, OECD, UNESCO, CDC and WHO publications. The focus is on studies with measurement clarity, definition of study populations, and public accessibility of reports. Theory that informs more recent ideas is presented in modern terms without relying on older references in bibliographies.

Three complementary numerical sources illustrate different aspects of the concept. The 2022 PISA report contains items for school belonging for 15year olds in participating countries. The 2023 National U.S. YRBS contains items on perceived closeness to people at school for different student groups. The study by Huttunen *et al*. (2025) [4] describes a social emotional skills profiles for 2,452 adolescents in Helsinki.

Values are copied from published tables and figures. New participants were not recruited. Individual-level datasets were not downloaded. No statistical tests or causal estimates were performed for this article.

5. Education as a Context for Social Identity Formation

Creating a secure social identity requires students to see their schools as communities where they are understood and respected. Learning groups can extend social networks and help students recognize different family and cultural backgrounds and views. Working with peers to test ideas requires teachers to create fair and balanced participation structures. The opportunity to be recognized and legitimate helps students construct identities as valuable, contributing members of the class community. Fair and balanced participation structures help avoid stigma from social comparison and promote class cohesion. The OECD PISA 2022

report acknowledges school belonging as an important indicator of students' sense of well-being and belonging. That sense of belonging has important implications for students' motivation and emotional well-being. School belonging promotes students' sense of self-worth, which in turn makes students less vulnerable and supports them in participating in classroom activities and interacting with their peers. Feeling unappreciated and isolated has an adverse effect on students' sense of well-being and self-worth; this is the case even for students with consistently high academic achievement and attendance.

The 2023 CDC survey indicates that we cannot assume that belonging is equally distributed. Some groups reported far less closeness to others at school. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024) [1] These differences indicate areas of focus; they do not show that emotional challenges are caused by the identity category itself.

Addressing discomfort with each other must also be addressed through practice. Schools can enable students to make decisions, teach about various communities and groups, use teaching/learning materials that promote social inclusion, and respond effectively to discrimination, educate for inclusivity and counter discriminatory behaviour. Positive peer mentoring and mixed-group activities and projects may promote trust and mutual respect, and be strengthened through supportive, safe and collaborative relationships among learners, peers and school personnel. School leaders' practices and priorities may contribute to bringing about inclusivity in professional development, services and resources. Strengthening partnership, teamwork and leadership is one of the key foci of the UNESCO review of educational leadership (2024) [14].

6. Education and the Development of Emotional Intelligence

Understanding emotions happens naturally with previous experiences. Reading literature helps with taking others' perspectives; discussing historical events encourages thinking about moral dimensions; and scientific group work requires interaction with peers despite disagreements. Reflection after a conflict gives students the opportunity to think about others' feelings and change their assumptions. These all work best if the teacher provides a good example through communication and feedback. Students are generally afraid to make mistakes, and in a class with a teacher who communicates in a threatening manner, students may conceal their emotions rather than practice emotional self-regulation.

Findings in OECD's Social and Emotional Skills (SES) Survey for 2023 (OECD, 2024b) [9] emphasized the associations between social-emotional skills (e.g. self-awareness, self-regulation) and academic outcomes, life satisfaction, and lower levels of test or class anxiety. The results also showed inequalities based on age, gender and socioeconomic background. Some students demonstrate a high level of empathy, but are also highly stressed. Others demonstrate confidence in social situations, but struggle to persevere on difficult tasks. A youth study in Helsinki (Huttunen *et al*., 2025) [4] found that an empathic-stressed group, in general, reported positive educational aspirations and well-being, but also relatively high anxiety. These findings illustrate the danger of oversimplifying emotional competence.

Teacher and peer relationships appear to impact different dimensions of development. The OECD (2024a) [8] noted that teacher relationships influenced student persistence, motivation and curiosity, while peer relationships influenced student trust and sociability, and emotional regulation. Generally, positive teacher relationships support student development, and therefore, improvement initiatives should consider the whole social environment of the school. Programs that help students develop more effective ways of coping with stressful situations may be valuable, particularly if they address hostile and punitive social environments.

There is strong evidence to support structured Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. Cipriano *et al*. (2023) [2] conducted a review of 424 studies from 53 countries involving 575,361 students, and found improvements to social and emotional skills, as well as school behavior and function compared to control conditions. The review highlighted the importance of the context in which the programs were implemented. Effective practice therefore requires an understanding of student needs, an ability to adapt programs, and training and monitoring of teachers rather than assuming that a single lesson sequence will address the host of emotional issues teachers face.

7. Education and Psychological Resilience

Resilience can be enhanced when students are challenged appropriately. Well designed challenges with relevant, timely feedback and flexible assessment can be a useful tool in helping students understand that they can learn to manage the challenges they face and that these challenges, more often than not, are temporary. Resilience is more appropriately enhanced when we take an ethical approach. As previously stated, there are a myriad of challenging circumstances students face outside of school and attempts to strengthen and build resilience by means of motivational strategies often do not succeed. Herein, it would be more appropriate to take an ethical approach and offer practical help or a referral. The goal is to address the underlying concerns students are facing, as framing the inability of students to achieve in school on individual failing is unethical.

The evidence surrounding these interventions is encouraging and somewhat positive. Llistosella *et al*. (2023) [5] conducted a systematic review and included 16 of the 27 school-based resilience building interventions targeting adolescents in a meta-analysis. They reported a pooled standardized mean difference of 0.58 after intervention, with a 95% confidence interval of 0.29 to 0.87.

Results for at-risk groups and early adolescents were particularly strong. Long term generalizability was still uncertain. One meta-analysis of resilience programs for children and adolescents reported an overall post-intervention SMD of 0.48 (Pinto *et al*., 2021) [11]. These effect sizes are summaries of different studies and should not be averaged or interpreted as percentage improvements.

8. Secondary-Data Findings and Interpretation

8.1 School Belonging across PISA Education Systems

PISA 2022 assessed school belongingness via students' endorsement of statements concerning friendship, acceptance and isolation. Table 1 presents six item-level percentages for the OECD average and a comparison set of 23 education systems with above-average scores on the overall belonging index. Responses to individual items are not to be summed; each captures respondents' assessment of one statement. They illustrate the gap between positive and negative aspects of school connectedness (OECD, 2023) [8].

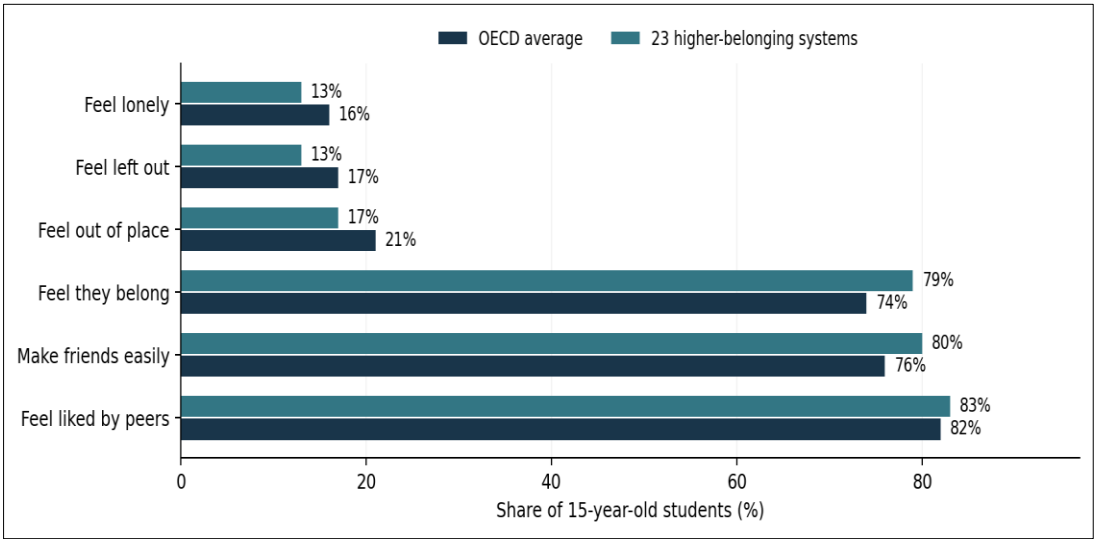
Table 1: PISA 2022 school belonging indicators (% of students agreeing)

School belonging item	OECD average	23 higher-belonging systems
Feel lonely at school	16	13
Feel like an outsider	17	13
Feel awkward or out of place	21	17
Feel they belong at school	74	79
Make friends easily	76	80
Other students seem to like them	82	83

***Source*:** OECD (2023) [8], PISA 2022 Results, Volume II, Figure II.1.3. Values rounded to whole percentages as presented in the figure

Interpretation of Table 1, Across the OECD, about the same number of students reported positive experiences of belonging as reported experiences of loneliness and/or exclusion. In the higher belonging group, loneliness and exclusion were reported by 13% and 17% of students respectively, and feeling out of place was reported by 17% of students. Higher belonging was reported by 79% of students in this group. The findings from the school climate support the attention paid to positive belonging in schools, but cannot prove that differences in positive belonging are a result of a specific school policy.

Interpretation of Figure 3, figure 3 presents three negative social experiences and three positive social experiences. Regarding perceived peer liking, the differences in the experiences were minimal. However, regarding a sense of belonging, exclusion and feeling out of place, the differences in experiences were clearer. This illustrates that a school may have generally positive social experiences; however, this does not mean that every student feels a sense of belonging. School evaluation should include having students express their thoughts; relying on student attendance and/or academic performance may not always be sufficient.



Source: Redrawn from OECD (2023), Figure II.1.3, the bars reproduce published percentages

Fig 3: PISA 2022 school belonging indicators in the OECD average and higher-belonging systems

8.2 School Connectedness in the United States

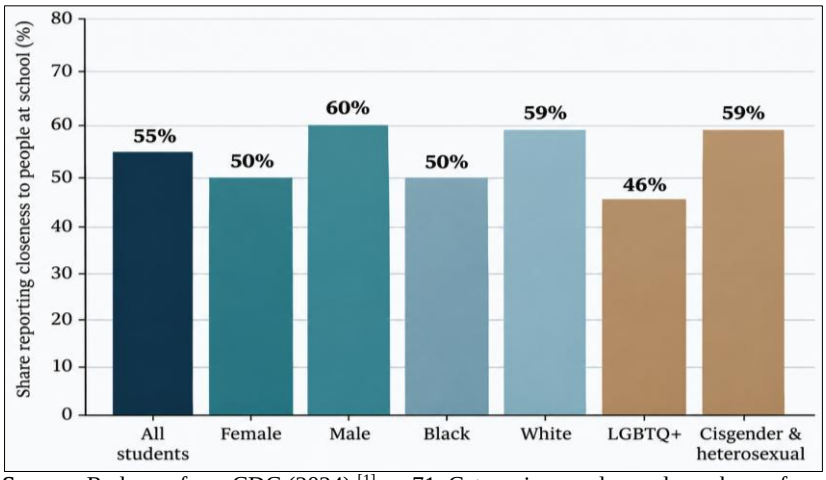
The 2023 National YRBS survey asked students if they feel "Close to People at School". The CDC (2024) [1] indicated that 55% of respondents indicated agreement. Table 2 shows a selection of published sub-group estimates. These categories are overlapping and are derived from different demographic analyses. They should not be combined and should not be interpreted as a subdivision of a total of 100%.

Table 2: Selected U.S. high school connectedness indicators, YRBS 2023

Student group	Felt close to school peers/adults (%)	Difference from overall (points)
All students	55	Reference
Female students	50	−5
Male students	60	+5
Black students	50	−5
White students	59	+4
LGBTQ+ students	46	−9
Cisgender and heterosexual students	59	+4

***Source*:** CDC (2024) [1] youth risk behavior survey data summary & trends report: 2013-2023, p. 71. Shown in whole percentages. Difference column shows figures calculated from displayed estimates

Interpretation of Table 2. Responses on 'overall connectednesses were provided by more than half of the respondents. With respect to the sexes, the difference in responses between female and male students was 10 percentage points. As for LGBTQ+ and cisgender heterosexual respondents, the difference in responses was 13 percentage points. The reasons for differences illustrate the need to assess school improvement policies for the general school population and the subgroups they cover. The descriptive values are based on the respondents' experiences and do not, in and of themselves, explain the reasons for differences or create individualized risk.



Source: Redrawn from CDC (2024) [1], p. 71. Categories overlap and are shown for descriptive comparison only

Fig 4: Selected subgroup percentages reporting closeness to people at school, U.S. YRBS 2023

Analysis of Figure 4, the bar lengths show variation in the level of reported school closeness within the same national survey. The lowest reported percentage is for LGBTQ+ students (46%), and the percentage for male students is 60%. This does not warrant a view of groups as homogeneous, or the assumption of an identity cause of disconnection. It suggests investigation into safety, and the presence of adult support, if Harassment and Bullying, Access and student voice are also investigated. A separate analysis of 2021 U.S. YRBS data reported lower levels of poor mental health for students with reported high level of school connectedness (22.0%) compared to students with reported low school connectedness (40.1%). The results reinforce the significance of social relations and remain largely observational (Wilkins *et al*., 2023) [15].

8.3 Social-Emotional Skill Profiles among Finnish Adolescents

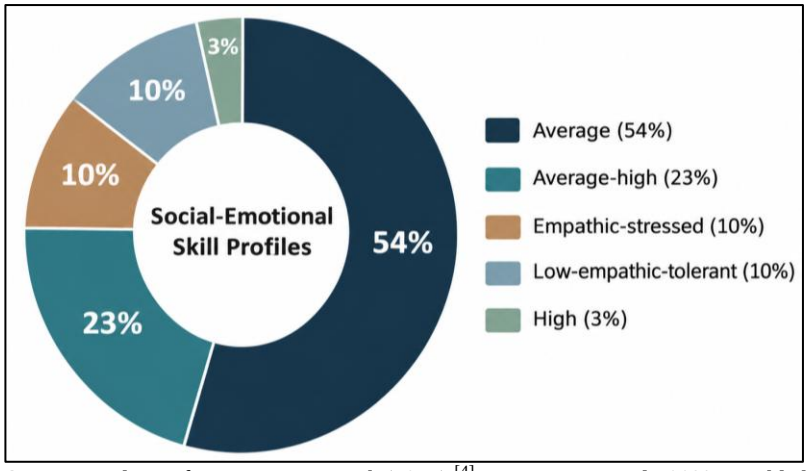
Huttunen *et al*. (2025) [4] draw on data collected by the 2023 OECD SSES and analyzed 2,452 15-year-old students in 53 schools in Helsinki. Five skill profiles were generated. These profiles are specific to a Finnish context and should not be generalized to describe skill prevalence globally. Furthermore, the names given to each of the profiles are statistical groupings rather than definitive groupings based on student identity.

Table 3: Social-emotional skill profiles in a Helsinki adolescent sample

Identified profile	Share of sample (%)	Interpretive description
Average	54	Mid-range skills across domains
Average-high	23	Generally stronger skills
Empathic-stressed	10	Empathy alongside stress
Low-empathic-tolerant	10	Lower empathy with tolerance
High	3	Broadly high skills

***Source*:** Huttunen, Upadyaya, and Salmela-Aro (2025) [4], abstract and results (N=2,452)

Interpretation of Table 3, Seventy-seven percent of students were in the average or average-high profiles. Two other profiles each accounted for 10% of the students. The empathic-stressed profile represents a valuable part of the educational practice, because it shows that sensitivity towards others and the ability to empathize can exist alongside personal anxiety. This profile challenges the tendency to assume that students who show empathy are, by definition, less stressed. Nor does it support assumptions that highly motivated students do not require emotional support.



Source: Redrawn from Huttunen *et al*. (2025) [4]; percentages total 100% as published

Fig 5: Distribution of social-emotional skill profiles among Helsinki adolescents in 2023

Interpretation of Figure 5, the larger, average, profiles are visible. Smaller profiles that remain educationally significant. A uniform intervention, based on average performance, may miss students who have both strengths and difficulties that co-exist. The distribution illustrates a case for flexible, tailored support structures, student self-reflection and differentiated support, while not suggesting that student profile membership be used to label students permanently.

8.4 Evidence from Resilience Programme Reviews

Table 4: Published meta-analytic estimates for resilience programmes

Study	Evidence base	Reported pooled result
Pinto *et al*. (2021) [11]	17 RCTs in review; 13 analysed	SMD 0.48; 95% CI [0.15, 0.81]
Llistosella *et al*. (2023) [5]	27 studies in review; 16 analysed	SMD 0.58; 95% CI [0.29, 0.87]

***Sources*:** Pinto *et al*. (2021) [11] and Llistosella *et al*. (2023) [5]. SMD = Standardized Mean Difference; CI = Confidence Interval. Studies and follow-up methods differ

Interpretation of Table 4, the reviews found the positive average effects of resilience-related programs, meaning that schools can build adaptive capacity through planned interventions. Results from the reviewed studies should not be ranked against competing program scores, as they vary in terms of trials, samples and types of interventions. The reviews also found some limitations due to heterogeneity and risk of bias as well as the length of the follow-up periods. Thus, results provide evidence in support of careful program implementation and evaluation to bring about positive changes for children and youth rather than ensure improvements for all.

9. Discussion

The most apparent common thread in the reviewed sources is that development happens through the interaction of individuals and educational environments. Identity, emotional intelligence and resilience are analytically distinct, but they often use the same pathways. An inclusive classroom can strengthen a student's sense of belonging which can foster and strengthen positive relationships. Positive relationships can aid in the development and practice of emotional regulation and self-help behaviors. These processes occur reciprocally, and students who efficiently manage emotions can fostering and developing positive relationships (OECD, 2024a; Huttunen *et al*., 2025) [8, 4]. There is ample evidence in the data as to why good quality education cannot be equated to academic outcomes. PISA shows a minority of students experience school exclusion, despite the fact that a majority report being accepted and befriended. Although there is high overall school connection in the U.S. YRBS, it masks large group differences. The Finnish profile analysis shows the existence of emotional abilities in multiple combinations and not in a single hierarchy. Taken together these evidences further justify the use of multiple indicators when assessing the success of education.

Another important consideration concerns the recognition of and response to inequality. Emotional development programs can be valuable, but a curriculum that builds resilience while accepting discrimination sends a confusing message. Improving structural and relational conditions means tackling the different forms of inequality that exist within the school and educational system, to provide an inclusive, supportive and safe education. Based on the research, some advocate for the inclusion of mental health and wellness programs and discrimination within the school's comprehensive health education curriculum. It is important that programs are founded on appropriate evidence and informed by rigorous, systematic assessment. Mental health challenges and barriers require careful consideration and should be kept distinct from the expectations placed on students and the routine support provided by the school.

Differentiated implementation is important. Younger students may benefit from simple stories, feelings vocabulary, and scaffolded or supported practices for conflict resolution. Older students may require programs and practices aimed at social and academic issues, peer pressure, and expectations. Students experiencing adversity may require additional, differentiated practices and supportive teaching in addition to universal practices. The CDC advocates for the integration of several practices (social-emotional learning and mental health integration, literacy and connectedness). It may be more defensible to take a layered approach (universal and positive school climates, differentiated and additional, and professional assistance for more serious concerns).

10. Educational Implications and Recommendations

A whole-school approach should incorporate the teaching, assessment and support of inclusion, emotional development and resilience, rather than treat them as add-ons. Establishing positive routines in the classroom facilitates respectful dialogue, cooperative problem solving and constructive feedback. Curricula should cover a range of viewpoints, and provide the opportunity for students to connect their personal experiences to issues of a bigger social nature. Student councils, as well as other forms of participation in school decisions should be encouraged.

Teacher education should cover the recognition of distress, and communication and management of classroom conflict as well as appropriate referral. Educators are more likely to trust and implement positive changes in the school setting when they are able to balance reasonable workloads and have support themselves. Belonging to school can be positively changed through implementation and the use of validated measures, and carefully selected emotional-skills and behaviors, as well as disaggregated data. Focus should be on processes rather than results. For resilience, normalizing attainable learning challenges should be incorporated. Such challenges, when paired with timely feedback, give students a sense of agency to effect change, and advocate for themselves to address a situation, while acknowledging and not minimizing systemic inequities.

11. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This synthesis has several limitations. It relied on an integrative review, rather than conducting a preregistered systematic search; therefore, it does not represent an exhaustive literature review. Research indicators reflected in the survey are from a variety of countries and populations, while the Finnish profile study is restricted to one region and adolescents. The visualizations are based

on published aggregate data and do not indicate the direction of causation. Findings from the resilience intervention cannot be generalized to other cultural and educational contexts. Data on social-emotional skills are self-reported and could be influenced by language and cultural norms and response styles. Research on learners in resource-poor settings should be extended to include learners with disabilities and learners with varied first and/or additional languages. There is a need for better, more in-depth studies of resilience in education, specifically research on identity and emotion regulation over time, and how these interrelate. The field would benefit from intervention research with longer follow-up and unintended outcomes; attention to quality and 'implementation science' is needed. Research on positive educational identity should address the need to better differentiate between a positive educational identity and pressure to conform, and address whether average improvements in students' well-being are felt equally by all students.

12. Conclusion

Education shapes more than what students learn. Beyond the curriculum, education promotes social identity, emotional competence and psychological resilience, through relationships, institutional norms, and participation opportunities. Recent international surveys show that emotional skills and a sense of belonging are important but unevenly experienced. Research syntheses also show that well designed school-based programs promote social emotional learning and adaptive coping. The best educational practices point to the importance of inclusion and skilled teachers and supportive peers, as well as the availability of adequate learning opportunities and social services. Educational responses that integrate the aforementioned practices have the potential to contribute to the participation of youth in society and the confidence with which they engage in participatory processes.

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How to Cite This Article
Maity A. The role of education in shaping social identity, emotional intelligence, and psychological resilience. International Journal of Multi Research. 2025;1(6): 73-80.

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