

Prosocial Classroom Climate Through Awareness Integration Theory: A Culturally Relevant Educational Approach for Marginalized Students

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Introduction

The developmental period between 6 and 12, referred to as ‘middle childhood,’ universally marks a distinctive period between major developmental transition points. Many theories have established distinct features for middle childhood, such as Erik Erikson's psychosocial theoretical framework, which emphasizes the development of a sense of industry, and Harry Stack Sullivan's interpretation of the importance of interpersonal relationships during the same period. Freud believes this age group



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experiences the latency stage, where a halt and retrogression in sexual development is replaced by the child's desire for social connection. Jean Piaget, a Swiss developmental theorist, states that the significant psychological accomplishments of middle childhood are in the realm of intellectual competence stemming from the child's need to develop a logical model of intellectual functioning in an engaging, integrating, interactive organism with its environment. The focal point of all the above developmental theories, and many more alike, is the significance of middle childhood's developmental needs to connect, engage, and mediate socially and intellectually (Collins, 1984; Rogoff et al., 1975).

Middle childhood is transformational as children emerge from early childhood and realize that many requirements and expectations are now being placed upon them. Entering elementary school brings more responsibility and accountability, from playfulness to serious endeavors, while physical growth prepares the child for socialization and looking for personal interactions and contacts. This growth changes progress toward maturity (Jafari et al., parenting book). Playing, doing homework, doing housework, gardening, and sports are essential for children in middle childhood. These activities provide the time and space for children to use their abundant energy and learn from their experiences; it is also a time for parents, teachers, and caregivers to share their ideas and values and let the children know they are cherished. Teachers, educators, and parents must recognize that children are at different levels of cognitive development. As children develop intellectually, they can suggest, discuss, and debate rationales, alternatives, consequences, and compromises. Parents should foster this type of explorative thinking.

Traditional curricular SEL has yet to show reasonable efficacy and steady successful results since teachers are vulnerable to experiencing compromised social-emotional competency (SEC). Current research suggests an inverse relationship between SEC and teacher burnout. Consequently, intervention efforts should be made to support teachers' SEC through stress reduction and mindfulness programs. A teacher who has developed SEC can be instrumental in students' SEL training—addressing the potential efficacy of intervention strategies to promote teacher social-emotional

competency and improve student learning outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). It is time for the SEL curriculum to be revamped and for a new generation of this essential educational program to be revitalized with consideration for addressing marginalized students for inclusivity, cultural competency, and teacher's effectual training.

Research Methodology

For this narrative review/opinion article, we searched PsychINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Web of Science databases to identify relevant articles on topics such as "marginalization," "SEL," "prosocial," "cultural competency," and "emotional regulation." To eliminate duplicity and maintain uniformity in the definition of SEL, academic achievement, and various contributory factors, the authors exercised extreme caution to prevent unintentional bias. The initial search for scientific peer review in relevancy to research produced 120 articles, which were screened again for inclusion and exclusion criteria. Among the 120 initial articles reviewed, the authors concluded the search by selecting 23 articles that met the criteria for this paper's research objectives.

Since this paper is NOT a systematic review, as a literature review methodology, the researchers used keywords such as SEL and academic achievement in the title or abstract of any peer-reviewed study published by high-impact publications. The selected keywords were grouped into two main categories: 1) A group of keywords was set to identify articles whose goal of the study was to investigate the SEL programs, such as outcome, applicability, and cultural appropriateness. 2) The next category was groups of keywords used to describe or highlight the multifactorial and extraneous variables, such as the language and/or ethnicity role as obstacles in securing a successful SEL program. See Figure 1 below.

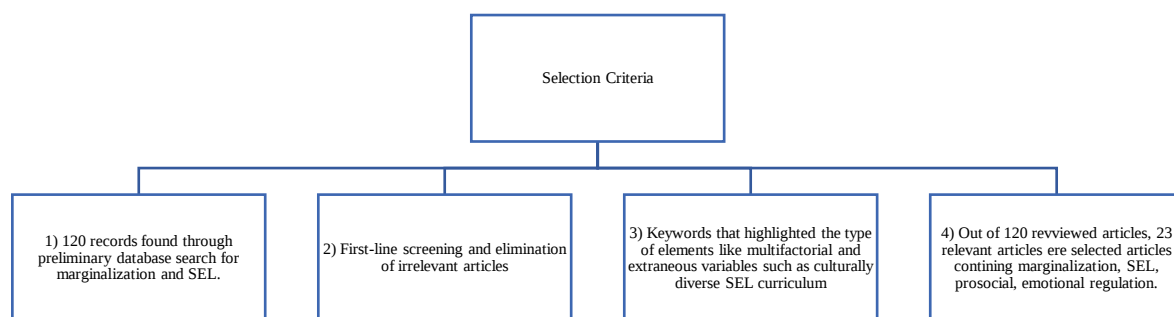


Figure 1. Research Studies Selection Criteria

Factors Contributing to Marginalization

Many factors may contribute to marginalization, for instance, poverty (UNICEF, 2014), socio-cultural practice, education, social status and power (Devkota, 2018), race, ethnicity or disability (Slee, 2013), gender or sexual orientation, linguistic, and cultural minorities (Khanal, 2017), religion (Smith & Barr, 2008) and personal circumstances such as being displaced, migrants or refugees (Shapira, 2011; UNCHR, 2018). Marginalization, in this sense, is a relational and intersectional phenomenon (Pihl et al., 2018) that is experienced and recognized at different levels in different contexts.

Children who live within a migrating family are particularly vulnerable to transitioning during middle childhood and prone to becoming marginalized as they arrive in a new country. Learning a new language, finding new friends and family connections, and maintaining academic performance can be particularly challenging for them. Transitioning to school, some migrant children might quickly adapt; however, many more might struggle with new and unfamiliar challenges, and others, particularly marginalized students, may need skill-building and strategies to optimize social-emotional learning and interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

Developing a culturally diverse and inclusive classroom environment is essential since an integrative learning atmosphere helps marginalized students feel accepted and included while cognitively and emotionally preparing for academic success (New Zealand Government Report (2022)). Educational ‘marginalization’ is a complex issue characterized by biased, favored, or deliberate misdistribution of resources to educational tools, opportunities, accessibility, or opportunities aimed at particular groups such as SES, gender, geography, ethnicity, or individual characteristics or circumstances (Mission, 2013). According to Mowat (2015), this complexity is evident in the low participation of disadvantaged or excluded student communities in mainstream education.

Prosocial Behavior and Social-Emotional Learning

As defined by Eisenberg (1986), prosocial behavior is voluntary and intentional behavior intended to benefit another, including acts of kindness, helping, sharing, and comforting, as well as behaviors enacted for diverse reasons. The early signs of prosocial behavior, observed in toddlers as young as 12 to 24 months, are particularly intriguing. These young children often show a spontaneous spirit of attempting to help, give comfort, share, and cooperate with others (Brownell, 2013). Gonzalez-Mena explains that socially aware educators conduct classrooms in promoting a dynamic of reflecting on equilibrated power in relationships, discouraging competition as a motivator, encouraging appreciation, giving reasonable choices, and modeling and teaching a non-violence learning environment. Teachers are trained and well-versed in social-emotional learning models, such as behavior, explaining their actions, encouraging student peer cooperation and problem-solving, and avoiding punishments as a deterrent or behavioral compass that may lead to misbehavior.

The Mechanism of Social-Emotional Learning

The SEL developmental process starts at birth and continues throughout life (Weissberg et al., 2015); it helps the individual develop and foster the skills needed for healthy relationships. Self-awareness, self-regulation, social self-cognizance, relationship skills, and the ability to make complex decisions are essential components

of an effective SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015). Integrating social and emotional learning into teaching curriculum, instruction, and school climate leads to academic achievement, enhances well-being, positively impacts life outcomes, reduces teacher burnout, and promotes resilience (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

Due to experiencing adversity, stress, and unfavorable treatment, individuals in a marginalized group may encounter higher mental health challenges. Teaching social-emotional learning (SEL) skills is instrumental in providing the necessary tools to navigate these challenges and improve their well-being. Social-emotional learning (SEL) provides the framework and strategies for promoting the development of self-regulation skills (Lereya et al., 2024). Teaching students to recognize and understand, learn regulation skills, manage behavior, and make responsible decisions. SEL helps individuals develop the self-regulation skills necessary for success in school and life.

Awareness Integration Theoretical Model for SEL

Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) is a theoretical framework designed as a comprehensive, multimodal psychological and educational approach to boost self-awareness, eradicate psychological and emotional obstacles, and promote a growth-oriented mindset. Individuals of any age can learn AIT's comprehensive tools and lead fulfilled and successful lives. As a holistic personal development approach, AIT integrates critical elements from established psychological and developmental theories and creates an accessible and applicable learning experience (Zeine, 2021).

The mechanism of AIT in teaching social-emotional learning (SES) is based on six easy-to-follow and practical phases customized to the learner's comprehension level. Its six phases help individuals cultivate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and professional growth, ultimately improving their job performance and overall satisfaction. Teachers can be trained on AIT through various modalities such as in-house customized training, online classes, in-house workshops, and/or by working on the "Foojan" app as an ongoing tool in various life areas. After the initial training, teachers can use "Mira"- an AI companion in the Foojan app for supplemental skill building (Zeine, foojan.com, 2024).

Teacher Training on Social-Emotional Competency Training

The review of existing literature on students' social-emotional competency highlighted that teachers' low levels of social-emotional competency and burnout factors, lack of curricular inclusivity, and considerations for marginalized students' needs are correlational to children's overall mental health well-being. Teachers' sensitivity and competency are significant in creating and incorporating a prosocial classroom environment. Sustainable social competency programs that can be adjusted to students' developmental or cultural needs. To incorporate these crucial elements in a prosocial classroom, genuine teacher-student interpersonal relationships are vital to academic outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As demonstrated, social-emotional competency learning is vital to marginalized students' overall developmental needs; the authors will briefly discuss the role of a teacher's cultural competency and prosocial awareness in the following passages as how AIT's social, emotional, and regulation strategies can be instrumental in facilitating teachers' SEL curricula.

- Teacher's awareness of their positive and negative perspectives, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and how their attitudes affect relationships with coworkers, supervisors, students, and parents, which they can replicate and train students through interaction, direct and indirect teaching, and modeling. Teachers can also replicate this process in any interactions with their students. This phase will result in students gaining insight into automatically identifying areas for growth, improving their decision-making, and communicating more effectively within the school environment. (Zeine, 2016).
- Trained teachers in observing and assessing their assumptions about others and how these beliefs influence their behavior. Recognizing and verifying these assumptions fosters healthier relationships and personal growth. A teacher's belief and modeling of this behavior can facilitate AIT's social-emotional competent teaching in the classroom environment, which is a pro-emotional regulation learning atmosphere (Zeine, 2016).

- Teachers who have learned to practice self-emotional regulation can recognize emotions like anger, shame, or hopelessness. They also examine how they treat themselves, noting whether they approach themselves with kindness and compassion or with self-criticism and punitive behaviors. This demonstration in the classroom can act as an exemplary role model for students learning SEL in a conducive classroom environment (Zeine, 2016).
- Socially competent teachers integrate their empowered and vulnerable selves to inspire students to access their full range of strengths. This empowerment enables students to approach situations with confidence and a sense of personal power.
- AIT SEL-trained teachers will learn culturally competent moral understanding and strategies suitable to apply in diverse classrooms. Teachers use these strategies to guide students in setting values and goals for academic achievement, handling homework, and managing relations with peers, siblings, and parents.
- An academic curriculum that values the impact of SEL as much as other curricular vigor will establish a periodic assessment mechanism for feedback, ensuring steady progress toward achieving goals among colleagues and students (Zeine, 2016).

Teachers can be trained on AIT through online classes, in-house workshops, and/or working on "the Foojan" app through various life areas as an ongoing tool. After the initial training, teachers can use "Mira"- an AI companion in the Foojan app for supplemental skill building (Zeine, foojan.com, 2024).

Teaching AIT SEL Curriculum by a Social-Emotional Competent Teacher

The authors propose an SEL curriculum customized by AIT principals to create a prosocial classroom environment for marginalized students. The curriculum starts at the beginning of the year with a pretest assessment specific to identifying the marginalized student's area of social competency needs. After completing the AIT SEL curriculum, a posttest will help educators fine-tune gap areas and reevaluate areas for adjustment. The duration and specifics of each AIT SEL program will be developed

based on the age and needs of the classroom within the demographic in which it operates. The following passages will give a closer look into the proposed classroom prosocial environment conducive to AIT SEL student training.

Phase 1- Relatedness to The World (Mastering Self-Awareness and Mindfulness)

The first phase entails teaching students how to access their self-awareness channel using mindfulness techniques. Through this phase, students are guided to examine their positive and negative perspectives, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Teachers can use this process to explore their own. This process helps the learner identify biases, dualities, and patterns by incorporating these lessons into their curriculum or replicating them in student interactions. As a result, the student will learn how to recognize and regulate their decision-making, communication style, and behavior in the classroom (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 2 - Projection Disguised as Reality (Recognizing Assumption)

During this phase, students learn to reflect on their assumptions about others and how they can influence their behavior, leading to defensive thoughts and behavior and understanding how one's assumption can lead to misunderstandings and harmful conclusions. Upon completing this phase, students learn to recognize unconscious assumptions and one-sided judgments about teachers. Phase I is a culturally sensitive process, and its success depends on the teacher's cultural competency and elements of inclusivity to put the learner at ease with foundational beliefs. Encouraging students to reflect on their assumptions about others and how these beliefs influence their behavior is of utmost importance for the integrity of this phase. Students can learn this phase by direct teacher teaching or in the frame of the SEL curriculum (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 3 – Identity (Examining Positive and Negative Self-Beliefs)

Individuals identify and alter unproductive cognitive and behavioral patterns related to their self-perception. Students will learn to differentiate between their positive self-beliefs, which act as strengths, and negative self-beliefs, which hinder their personal growth and interpersonal development. Through this phase, they will learn to reflect on their emotions toward themselves—whether feelings of pride, joy, empathy, or

negative emotions like anger, shame, or hopelessness. In this phase, children learn a deeper level of empathy and observe how they treat themselves, noting whether they approach themselves with kindness and compassion or with self-criticism and punitive behaviors (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 4 – Linking/Connecting/Integrating to the Origination of Schemes (Emotional Regulation)

Children learn how to process and regulate their emotions by recognizing, understanding, and accepting emotions while using strategies to manage them in a healthy, adaptive way. This process includes identifying the emotion, where it is felt in the body, and the belief that triggers it, and finally, linking the emotion to the original life event that caused the emotional trigger. An essential step in this phase is to learn how past experiences shape their responses to tasks and interactions and provide valuable insights for growth. Naming their emotion and locating their physiological signs in their body while releasing them enables students to master social interaction and interpersonal skills. Teachers trained in AIT-specific social-emotional learning can model this phase while using peer groups to practice the reciprocal interaction of emotional regulation (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 5 – Future to the Present Integration Process (Deliberate Selection of Belief Systems)

By this phase, students have learned to practice self-awareness, recognize assumptions, examine self-beliefs, and regulate emotions. Now, they are ready to focus on mastery of the deliberate selection of values, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors contributing to positive outcomes. During this phase, individuals set clear and attainable goals for both personal and professional growth. By consciously making these changes, individuals align their actions with their professional goals and core values, fostering growth and success. Teachers support students in setting values and goals for academic achievement, handling homework, and relations with peers, siblings, and parents (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 6 - Sustainability of the Present to the Future (Self-Assessment and Feedback Loop)

In this phase, students learn the importance of establishing a social-emotional loop and feedback mechanism to ensure steady growth of learned skills and proving regressive behavior. They also learn to be mindful of the built-in structure for checks and balances to ensure steady progress toward achieving their goals among colleagues and students (Zeine, 2016).

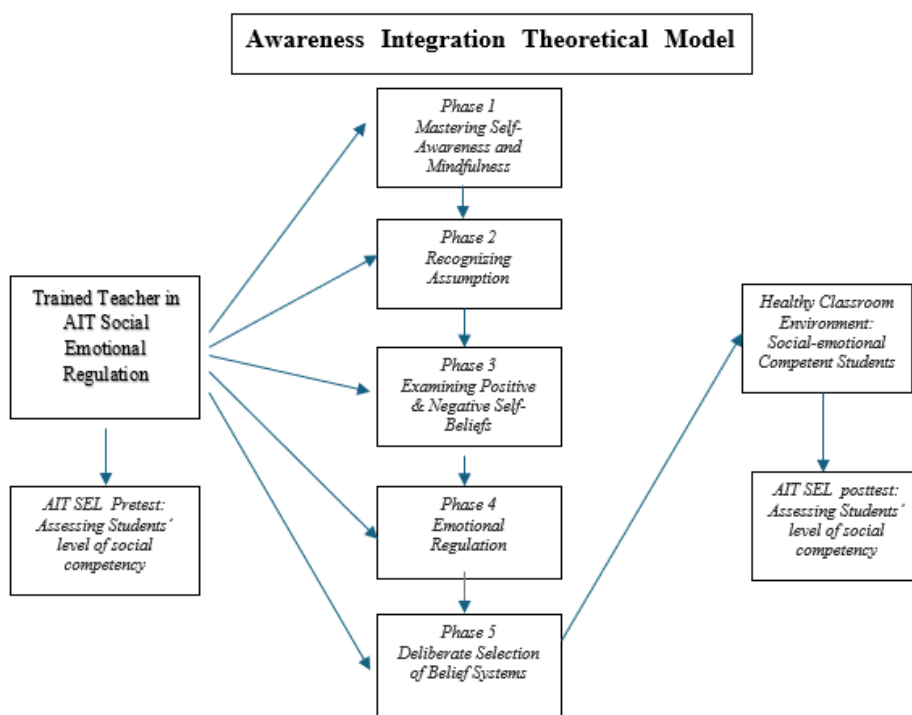


Figure 2. The proposed AIT SEL curriculum process

Gaps in the Literature

A transformative and inclusive SEL framework emphasizes the importance of culturally adaptive SEL opportunities for underrepresented students to support those children's social-emotional and academic skills (Jagers et al., 2019). Williams and Jagers (2020) pointed out that learning culturally relevant topics has become prominent in school education in explaining appropriate child developmental support. Recent transformative SEL research advocates for a balanced cultural education as a

critical strategy to address the emotional well-being and learning growth of underrepresented students, including those from minoritized cultural or ethnic groups (Jagers et al., 2019; Rivas-Drake et al., 2020). The urgency and significance of providing culturally adaptive SEL opportunities for underrepresented students cannot be overstated. Learning environments for effective SEL where underrepresented students can feel safe and inclusive relate to a classroom climate where peers and teachers can respect differences and encourage plentiful positive interactions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The literature review for this paper revealed several discrepancies in the current student's social-emotional learning. Furthermore, the high rate of failed attempts at incorporating SEL into school curriculum showed correlations to teachers' low levels of social-emotional competency and burnout factors, lack of curricular inclusivity, and considerations for marginalized students. Most literature on the SEL curriculum focused on 'gender' as the primary factor in marginalization; however, a more meaningful analysis of other contributory factors, such as language, culture, ethnicity, demographics, and socioeconomic status, is needed. Our review of global literature indicates that a combination of many factors causes marginalization and that a comprehensive approach is needed to address its pervasive and entrenched nature in most under-resourced contexts. Importantly, further research is needed on the SEL curriculum that focuses on the specific needs of marginalized and underprivileged students, presenting a significant opportunity for future research and development in this field.

Culturally Relevant Educational Approach for Marginalized Students

AIT offers a unique, culturally designed student-centered model linked to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes assessed through an interventional emotional regulation learning with pre-test and post-test built-in to evaluate program efficacy. A student-centered model focuses on students' needs and strengths, linking emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. AIT supports this model by providing tools for

personalized learning and self-improvement. Since the AIT model directly works with the student's grass root belief system, it has a built cultural competency to protect the integrity of the participants' symbolic inheritance as the purpose of its culturally appropriate emotional regulation skill building is to support the student's foundational beliefs not to change or modify them.

Conclusion

The Awareness Integration Theory provides a robust framework for creating a prosocial classroom climate, especially for marginalized students. AIT is a high-efficacy model that incorporates a culturally relevant educational approach, focuses on student-centered outcomes, and offers interventional emotional regulation learning with built-in assessments. Its adaptability to cultural factors ensures that it can meet students' diverse needs, making it a valuable tool for educators aiming to foster inclusive and effective learning environments.

For marginalized students, a culturally relevant educational approach is critical to their engagement and success. The Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) offers a comprehensive framework that can be adapted to meet these needs. This article explores how AIT can create a student-centered model linked to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes, incorporating interventional emotional regulation learning with built-in assessments. AIT's adaptability to cultural factors and its high efficacy in addressing the shortcomings of traditional Social Emotional Learning (SEL) models make it a powerful tool in educational settings.

After reviewing the literature, the consensus is that traditional SES curricula need more cultural inclusivity and trainer diversity competency. The authors propose a prosocial classroom model highlighting the importance of teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC) and well-being in developing and maintaining supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and successful social and emotional learning program implementation.

For marginalized students, a culturally relevant educational approach is critical to their engagement and success. The Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) offers a

comprehensive framework that can be adapted to meet these needs. This article explores how AIT, with its adaptability to cultural factors and its high efficacy in addressing the shortcomings of traditional Social Emotional Learning (SEL) models, can create a student-centered model linked to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes, incorporating interventional emotional regulation learning with built-in assessments. The potential of AIT to revolutionize educational settings is a cause for optimism among educators and policymakers. This model proposes that these factors contribute to creating a classroom climate more conducive to learning and promoting positive student developmental outcomes.

Creating a prosocial classroom climate where students can process and regulate emotions fosters an inclusive and effective learning environment. For marginalized students, a culturally relevant educational approach is critical to their engagement and success. The Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) offers a comprehensive framework that can be adapted to meet these needs. This article explores how AIT, with its adaptability to cultural factors and its high efficacy in addressing the shortcomings of traditional Social Emotional Learning (SEL) models, can create a student-centered model linked to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes, incorporating interventional emotional regulation learning with built-in assessments. The potential of AIT to revolutionize educational settings is a cause for optimism among educators and policymakers.

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