

Awareness Integration Theory: An Evidence-Based and Transformative Educational Model for Middle Childhood Self-Regulatory Skill

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Introduction

Research findings indicate that a prosocial classroom emphasizes the importance of social and emotional competency (SEC) and overall well-being in building and maintaining supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and successful social and emotional learning program implementation (Skinner et al., 2009). SEC involves specific emotional regulation skills that contribute to a classroom environment conducive to learning and positive student developmental outcomes. Additionally, current research suggests a link between SEC and teacher burnout and explores intervention efforts to support teachers' SEC through stress reduction, mindfulness programs, professional development, and peer support. The article also proposes a research agenda to assess the effectiveness of these intervention



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strategies in promoting emotional regulation competency and improving student learning outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

A crucial aspect of emotional regulation is social and emotional learning (SEL), a developmental process that begins at birth and continues throughout life (Weissberg et al., 2015). SEL assists individuals in developing the skills necessary for healthy relationships, encompassing self-awareness, self-regulation, social and emotional competency, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving in a balanced state of mind (Weissberg et al., 2015). However, not all students enter the academic arena equipped with social-emotional awareness and self-regulatory skills. Research supports that integrating social and emotional learning into curriculum, instruction, and school climate can enhance academic achievement, well-being, and life outcomes and reduce teacher burnout. SEL is a powerful tool for prevention and resilience (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

The strategic model's high efficacy is crucial to increasing the sustainability of such a prosocial classroom, as it advocates teacher-student interpersonal relationships vital to academic outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Research on the AIT model's efficacy for applying social-emotional learning, emotional regulation, and competency has been consistently positive. AIT's strategic model for emotional regulation provides the framework and foundations for developing self-regulation skills and social-emotional competency.

Awareness Integration Theory Strategies for Self-Regulation Skills

Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) is a comprehensive, multi-modality psychological and educational approach designed to enhance self-awareness, resolve psychological barriers, and cultivate a positive, growth-oriented mindset. Teachers equip students with the tools and skills to lead effective, productive, and successful lives. AIT integrates critical elements from established psychological and developmental theories to foster holistic personal development. (Zeine, 2021).

Research has shown that Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) is effective in reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD while also improving self-esteem, self-

efficacy, and overall well-being. The Personal Growth Institute conducted a study on AIT-based face-to-face therapy and found a 76% reduction in depression and a 60% reduction in anxiety. Additionally, self-esteem increased by 43% and self-efficacy by 20% (Zeine, 2016). Another study on separated or divorced individuals participating in a six-hour AIT workshop showed a 27.5% improvement in depressive symptoms, a 37% decrease in anxiety, a 15% boost in self-esteem, and a 13% increase in self-efficacy (Zeine et al., 2017). Telehealth has also proven to be an effective medium for AIT, with studies reporting a 50% reduction in anxiety and a 60% increase in self-esteem (Madani, 2022). In one telehealth case study, depression decreased by 66%, anxiety by 75%, and PTSD symptoms by 66% (Zarbaksh, 2023).

A study on the American college student population using the Awareness Integration Theory in a hybrid modality at the California State University Long Beach showed an overall 68% decrease in depression and a 21.72% decrease in anxiety (Zeine et al., 2017). Due to this revelation, the “Foojan” app was developed as a cutting-edge telehealth platform that utilizes the principles of Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) to provide personalized, affordable, and accessible mental health support globally. The app offers a holistic approach by integrating various psychological and emotional regulation interventions to drive transformative change. Data from the “Foojan” app from 280 users from 2/2023 to 7/2024 has shown that users have an average of 65% improvement in various areas of life, including career, intimate relations, relation with family members, self, and finances (Zeine, foojan.com, 2024).

For children, AIT facilitates the development of an emerging understanding of how their perceptions of the world influence their decision-making and self-identity. The theory supports children in gaining deeper insights into their interactions with others and their behavioral patterns. AIT cultivates essential qualities such as respect, acceptance, responsibility, and accountability, which are critical for building self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy (Jafari et al., 2022). Children select their friends at this stage, typically of the same gender. Often, these friendships can be characterized by hostility or rejection, with statements like "You are not my friend!" or "I do not like you!" being typical. They engage in competitive games and exhibit

various behaviors when interacting with adults, such as being demanding, sociable, hesitant, helpful, or charming. Conflicts, arguments, and occasional aggression may arise with peers, siblings, and adults, especially parents. Social pressures from parents, peers, and teachers can trigger intense emotional reactions, including tantrums, jealousy, dependency, or aggression (Jafari et al, 2022).

During this time, children begin to grasp the essential social "dos and don'ts" needed for functioning in society, often displaying extreme behaviors as they learn. They typically lack group loyalty and are easily excited. Social situations can be challenging for them, and they tend to be highly eager to participate, often insisting on being first in everything. Children in this group may also exhibit bossy or argumentative behavior, tease or bully others, or even frighten and hit their peers or siblings. When things are unexpected, they may react by threatening to leave, quarreling, name-calling, or fighting (Jafari et al., 2022). Children are guided to recognize the connection between their behaviors and cognitive/emotional experiences. After a child demonstrates a specific behavior, teachers help them reflect on the emotions they are feeling, the thoughts they are having, and how these internal processes shape their actions. Teachers may take every opportunity to educate children about the impact of their behaviors on themselves and those around them lovingly and compassionately (Jafari et al., 2022).

Common emotional traits at this age include dissatisfaction, frequent complaints, blaming others, sulking, and mood swings. Typical fears emerge, such as fear of death or injury, failure, ridicule, and imaginary threats like those associated with darkness, thunder, and lightning. Nervous habits may also appear, such as nail-biting, stuttering, tugging at ears or clothing, shifting from side to side, nervous tics, or facial distortions. Children in this age group are easily embarrassed, especially when they fail to meet expectations or perform poorly on tasks like homework. Bullying has become a prevalent issue in both schools and society. Children may be targeted due to factors such as their religion, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or simply because they are different. While some may view bullying as a regular part of childhood, the emotional impact on those affected can be profound and damaging. AIT encourages

and rewards children for demonstrating compassion, empathy, and understanding toward others. They are taught to care for all living things, be aware of their emotional needs, and act appropriately to pursue their desires. In applying the AIT model, teachers deliberately engage students in collaborative work, actively involving them in daily activities. Children develop valuable life skills by working alongside their teachers and peers, including responsibility, teamwork, and a sense of belonging to their community (Jafari et al., 2022).

Teachers promote independent exploration and discovery, encouraging students to develop problem-solving skills by considering situations from multiple perspectives. This approach helps children understand how solutions or actions can be reached by examining a problem through different lenses, fostering a well-rounded and critical-thinking approach to challenges.

The Awareness Integration Theory Nine Foundational Principles

The AIT model is based on nine comprehensive principles that create a foundation for its structure, mechanism, applicability, and execution. These principles explain and support why the design of AIT as a theoretical learning model is practical, universal, versatile, and applicable to any area of human development and self-improvement, resulting in learning life skills and empowering proficiencies. Here is the narrative of the nine principles:

1. The observer's reality is subjective, shaped by their beliefs, emotions, and behaviors.
2. Human beings have the potential to acquire skills needed for a functional and successful life.
3. These skills are developed through physical and psychological growth and parental and environmental mirroring.
4. Perception of information and experiences enables the assignment of meaning, allowing the development of a personal identity through categorization and generalization.

5. Experiences, including trauma, are stored cognitively, emotionally, and somatically. Traumatic experiences become compartmentalized and await reintegration for healing.
6. Healing and reintegrating these unintegrated belief-emotion-body states result in a neutral or positive attitude.
7. Completing this process allows for the conscious creation of intentional choices regarding values, thoughts, feelings, actions, and outcomes.
8. Skills can be learned and sustained in neutral environments, guiding intentional results.
9. A clear and conscious vision, goal setting, effective planning, and actionable steps increase the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes (Zeine, 2016).

This model aims to promote self-awareness, integrate various aspects of the self, and create a clear vision for the future. It encourages setting solid goals and action plans, is supported by external feedback loops, and ensures a sustainable and fulfilling life.

Efficacy of AIT in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Emotional Regulation

AIT emphasizes self-awareness by helping teachers and students recognize their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns. This deepened understanding is a critical component of SEL, enabling individuals to manage emotions effectively and make responsible decisions. Through the phases of AIT, participants explore how experiences and core beliefs shape their feelings and interactions, fostering emotional regulation and competency. AIT encourages individuals to reframe negative thoughts and beliefs that contribute to emotional dysregulation. By addressing these thought patterns, AIT promotes healthier emotional responses, essential for developing emotional regulation skills. As individuals learn to connect thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, they gain the tools to manage stress and emotional triggers, aligning with SEL frameworks focused on emotional management (Zeine, 2016).

AIT fosters the development of social awareness, another core pillar of SEL, by helping individuals understand how their internal projections and assumptions affect interpersonal relationships. As participants become aware of their impact on others and learn to empathize, they enhance their social skills, improving relationships and reducing conflict in personal and school settings. AIT provides structured phases that target the root causes of emotional difficulties, promoting competency in managing emotions and improving social interactions. This competency is consistently reinforced through personalized interventions, helping individuals develop lifelong emotional skills, thereby enhancing the efficacy of SEL initiatives (Jafari et al., 2022).

AIT Techniques for Elementary School Teachers to Promote Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Middle childhood is critical for developing emotional regulation, social skills, and personal responsibility, and AIT offers a structured and practical approach to fostering these skills. Below are the keyways AIT supports SEL for teachers in this context.

Enhancing Teacher Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation

AIT emphasizes self-awareness and emotional regulation, helping teachers manage their emotional responses in the classroom. By reflecting on their cognitive and emotional patterns, teachers can avoid burnout and remain calm and composed, even in challenging situations. Teachers who have mastered emotional regulation through AIT can be powerful role models for students. By demonstrating how to handle stress, frustration, and interpersonal conflicts healthily, they teach students by example how to manage their own emotions.

Supporting Teachers in Facilitating SEL Skills in Students

Belonging and feeling safe to express thoughts and feelings are crucial to students; overall, learning and teachers play a vital role in creating such an atmosphere. Learning environments for effective SEL where 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). AIT equips teachers to

recognize students' emotional and cognitive patterns, especially in distress or conflict. This insight allows teachers to intervene early and guide students in developing better emotional regulation strategies. Teachers can tailor SEL lessons through AIT to meet their students' emotional and cognitive needs. For instance, they can provide personalized support to students struggling with anxiety or self-esteem issues, helping them build emotional skills at their own pace.

Encouraging Healthy Teacher-Student Relationships

Social and emotional learning (SEL) starts at birth and, as a developmentally important process, continues throughout life (Weissberg et al., 2015), resulting in skills needed for recognizing, developing, and fostering development and fostering the skills needed for healthy relationships. AIT fosters empathy in teachers, allowing them to understand better and respond to their students' emotional needs. This can strengthen teacher-student relationships, creating a supportive environment that encourages emotional growth. AIT also provides teachers with tools to guide students through conflicts by addressing the root causes of emotional reactions and teaching healthy communication and problem-solving skills. Understanding the fundamentals of emotional reactions and regulations helps teachers promote a classroom culture of respect, understanding, and emotional regulation.

Developing Social Awareness and Interpersonal Skills in Students

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). AIT helps teachers guide students in developing social awareness by encouraging them to reflect on how their actions affect others. This is critical in elementary school ages 7 to 12, where peer relationships become increasingly important. Students learn to recognize their impact on others and develop empathy, a key component of SEL. AIT teachers can effectively teach emotional regulation strategies, helping students identify their emotions and develop coping mechanisms for stress, anger, or anxiety. This helps students manage their emotions in social interactions and fosters a more positive classroom environment.

Promoting Long-Term Emotional and Academic Success

A 'transformative 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). Research shows that students with strong SEL skills perform better academically. Teachers use AIT to build students' emotional intelligence to help them become more focused, resilient, and engaged in learning. AIT equips students with emotional regulation and social skills that extend beyond the classroom. These skills are essential for personal well-being, relationships, and future success, making SEL a critical investment in their development.

Awareness Integration Theory Intervention Training for Teachers

Teachers' social and emotional competence and well-being in developing and maintaining supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and successful social and emotional learning program implementation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). AIT allows teachers and school staff to focus on specific areas of their lives, such as careers, finances, and relationships with superiors, colleagues, students, spouses, or family members. AIT provides a structured approach to personal development and psychological well-being, which is particularly useful in workplace settings. Its six phases help individuals cultivate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and professional growth, ultimately improving their job performance and overall satisfaction.

Phase 1 - Focuses on cultivating self-awareness and mindfulness. Teachers examine their positive and negative perspectives, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and how their attitudes affect relationships with coworkers, supervisors, students, and parents. This process allows them to recognize biases, dualities, and patterns. Teachers can also replicate this process in any interactions with their students. By gaining insight into automatic reactions and habitual behaviors, individuals can identify areas for growth, improve their decision-making, and communicate more effectively within the school environment (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 2 - Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their assumptions about others and how these beliefs influence their behavior. Individuals can reduce defensiveness and improve interactions by recognizing that they may be reacting based on unverified assumptions, such as believing a boss, other teachers, students, or their parents dislike them. Assumptions often lead to guarded and reactive behavior, limiting open communication and self-expression. Many individuals define themselves based on how they believe others perceive them, which can prevent them from valuing their authentic selves and reaching their full potential in leadership or other capacities. Recognizing and verifying these assumptions fosters healthier relationships and personal growth (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 3 - Individuals identify and alter unproductive cognitive and behavioral patterns related to their self-perception. They distinguish between positive beliefs, which act as strengths, and negative beliefs, which can impede personal and professional growth. Through this process, individuals reflect on their emotions toward themselves—whether feelings of pride, joy, or empathy or negative 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 (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 4 - Highlights the significance of emotional processing and regulation. Emotional regulation involves 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. By linking the emotion to the original life event that caused the emotional trigger, individuals can integrate their vulnerable and resilient selves, fostering empowerment. By learning to process emotions constructively, individuals can maintain a positive outlook, handle setbacks more effectively, and contribute to healthier relationships. Understanding how past experiences, whether personal or professional, shape their responses to tasks and interactions provides valuable insights for growth. For students, learning to name their emotion, locate it in their body, and release the feeling while being conscious of the origination of the trigger will facilitate integration. In this

phase, individuals can confront the root causes of emotional dysregulation and connect with the negative core and generalized beliefs formed about themselves and the world. They also refocus on the strengths they demonstrated, such as resilience, power, and patience, during challenging times. By integrating their empowered and vulnerable selves, individuals gain access to their full range of strengths, enabling them to approach situations with confidence and empowerment. This process involves identifying a limiting core belief, previously explored in Phase Three that holds the individual back. It bridges back to the event where the belief originated, focusing on the resilience displayed at that time. By integrating this inner strength into their present self, they release stored emotions and expand the narrow perspective of their younger self into a broader, more empowered understanding of the present (Zeine, 2016).

Phase 5 - Emphasizes 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 - Establish feedback mechanisms to ensure steady progress toward achieving their goals among colleagues and students (Zeine, 2016).

Teachers can be trained on AIT through 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).

Incorporating Awareness Integration Theory (AIT) in The Classroom

Teachers can effectively implement AIT in the classroom for students aged 7-10 by incorporating its principles into daily activities and fostering an environment that

promotes self-awareness, emotional regulation, and positive social interactions. Here are practical strategies for teachers:

Cultivating Self-Awareness

- **Daily Check-ins:** Start the day with a "feelings check-in," where students use an emotional chart or a simple emoji system to identify their emotions, locate where they feel them in their bodies, and share them with the class in small settings or a dyad with another student in large classes
- **Self-Reflection Journals:** Encourage students to keep a daily or weekly reflection journal where they write or draw about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This will help them connect their attitude with their actions and the impact that their actions have on their lives and those around them.
- **Personalized Statements:** Have students create positive self-affirmation cards or posters using values, beliefs, feelings, and actions they are committed to, such as "I am kind" and "I am responsible," to build self-awareness and a positive self-image.

Building Emotional Regulation Skills

- **Emotion Identification:** Introduce a "feelings vocabulary" and use visual aids (like an emotion wheel) to help students name and recognize their emotions.
- **Identify the Source:** Teach students to identify the thought process or the belief that produced and sourced the feeling.
- **Pay Attention to Intention:** Teach the students to define their intention and what they want. Support students in finding the appropriate actions to achieve their goals.
- **Mindfulness and Breathing Exercises:** Incorporate short mindfulness activities like deep breathing, stretching, or guided meditations into the day

to help students calm themselves when they feel overwhelmed or have to accept what is instead of what they want.

- **Personalized Safe Corners:** Create a designated " Safe Space" in the classroom where students can go when they feel upset. Equip it with sensory tools, books, or emotion cards to help them regulate their emotions before rejoining class activities.

Fostering Positive Relationships and Social Skills

- **Collaborative Learning Activities:** Use group projects or peer-learning activities to encourage teamwork, empathy, and respect for one another. Assign reflection time for the students to focus on their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and impact on their peers. This allows students to practice sharing, cooperating, and solving problems together.
- **Role-Playing and Social Stories:** Use role-playing activities to simulate real-life situations where students practice handling conflicts, sharing, and understanding others' perspectives.
- **Conflict Resolution Skills:** Teach basic conflict resolution steps. Students to stop and reflect on their thoughts, feelings, desires, and goals. Practice listening, understanding, and empathizing with their peers. Communicate and negotiate the desired outcome.

Developing a Growth Mindset

- **Mistakes as Learning Opportunities:** Reinforce the idea that making mistakes is part of learning. When a student makes an error, use it as a teaching moment to explore what they learned and how they can improve, promoting a growth mindset.
- **Goal Setting:** Help students set small, achievable goals related to their academic or personal development. Evaluate why they did not achieve the goal and recommit to the same or a new goal.

- **Acknowledging Effort:** Teachers role-model for students to acknowledge their own and their peers' achievements, efforts, and progress. This encourages resilience and perseverance.

Encouraging Reflection on Behavior and Emotions

- **Behavior-Emotion- thought Connection:** After incidents such as conflicts or emotional outbursts, guide students in reflecting on what they were feeling, what thoughts led to the behavior, and what they could do differently next time.
- **Circle Time Discussions:** Regular class meetings where students can discuss their experiences, challenges, and feelings in a supportive group setting. This is encouraged by drawing or painting about their feelings and sharing them with their peers.

Promoting Compassion and Empathy

- **Kindness Challenges:** Create classroom challenges where students perform acts of kindness toward peers, teachers, or even family members. Recognize and celebrate these acts to foster a caring community. Acknowledge the impact of the acts of kindness toward others and self.
- **Empathy Building Activities:** Use books, videos, or stories about different cultures, abilities, or experiences to spark discussions about understanding and respecting others' feelings and perspectives.

Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment

- **Safe Space for Sharing:** Ensure students feel safe expressing their thoughts and emotions without fear of judgment. Promote an open-door policy for students to share their concerns or feelings, as the teacher offers the AIT structure for awareness and resolution.
- **Visual Reminders:** Display posters or charts around the classroom that reinforce emotional regulation strategies, positive affirmations, and

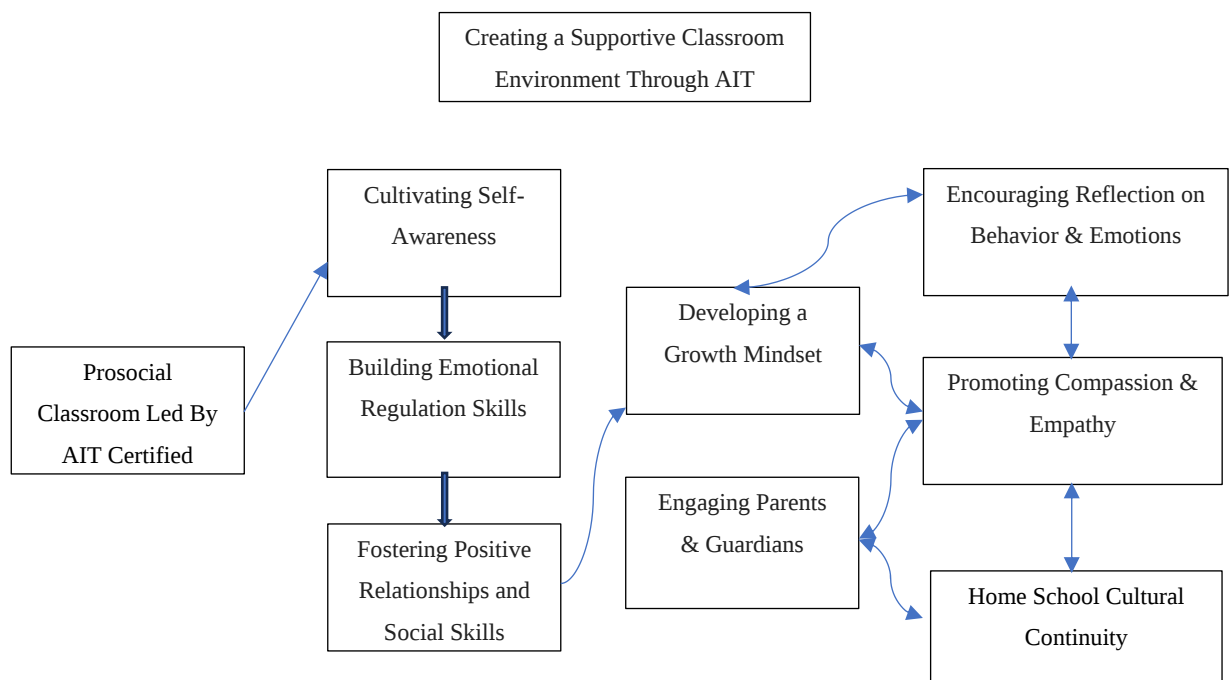
conflict resolution steps. This will make AIT principles visible and accessible.

- **Positive Behavior Reinforcement:** Reinforce positive behavior and emotional regulation through praise, rewards, or privileges when students demonstrate self-awareness, empathy, or emotional control.

Engaging Parents and Guardians

- **Parent-Teacher Communication:** Share the principles of AIT with parents so they can reinforce these concepts at home. This can be done through the "Foojan" App, meetings, and workshops.
- **Home Reflection Activities:** Assign simple reflection activities or conversations that children can have with their parents. This will help bridge the AIT practices between home and school environments.

By incorporating these AIT principles into the classroom for children aged 7-10, teachers can foster an emotionally intelligent and socially aware learning environment, helping students develop the skills necessary for emotional regulation, empathy, and positive self-awareness.



Conclusion

An emotionally regulation-based classroom climate is one in which students feel safe expressing emotions, processing and verbalizing the experience, and effectively resolving the emotional challenge while reaching optimum equilibration. This environment promotes positive social interactions and reduces instances of bullying and discrimination. The key components to creating a prosocially structured learning environment are self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, which enhance students' ability to communicate, collaborate, and resolve conflicts constructively. An educational design that fosters Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can significantly impact the student's positive developmental growth and shape the academic success of school-age children. Research findings show that students who adeptly manage their emotions and thoughts are more successful in retaining information, learning, and adjusting to school life. Educators, counselors, administrators, and policymakers must consider SEL to ensure students' academic and future success. Implementing AIT in the classroom can help educators foster such an atmosphere by encouraging students to develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills.

School-age children must learn, develop, foster, and practice emotional and social regulation, resulting in holistic growth, healthy development, academic success, and life-long well-being. Awareness Integration Theory offers a practical framework for promoting social-emotional learning among elementary school students 7 to 12 years of age by enhancing teacher emotional regulation and self-awareness; AIT helps educators model and teach essential SEL skills, fostering a supportive classroom environment where students can thrive emotionally and academically. The research-backed outcomes of AIT, including improvements in emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, make it a valuable tool in the modern classroom, equipping teachers and students with the skills they need for long-term success.

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