



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Alli Cipra,
Governors State University, United States

REVIEWED BY

Amy Vujaklija,
Governors State University, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE

Jeena Joseph
✉ jeenajoseph005@gmail.com

RECEIVED 12 April 2025

ACCEPTED 09 June 2025

PUBLISHED 23 June 2025

CITATION

P. J. J., Antony RV, Joseph J, George A and Jacob G (2025) Emotional literacy as curriculum: a new paradigm for resilient classrooms. *Front. Educ.* 10:1610746. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1610746

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 P. J., Antony, Joseph, George and Jacob. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Emotional literacy as curriculum: a new paradigm for resilient classrooms

Jaya P. J.¹, Rinu V. Antony², Jeena Joseph^{3*}, Aneeta George⁴ and Gibin Jacob⁵

¹Department of Education, Mount Carmel College of Teacher Education for Women, Kottayam, Kerala, India, ²Department of Commerce Education, SNM Training College, Ernakulam, Kerala, India, ³Department of Computer Applications, Marian College Kuttikkanam Autonomous, Kuttikkanam, Kerala, India, ⁴Master of Education Department, St. Thomas College of Teacher Education, Pala, Kerala, India, ⁵Department of Commerce, St. Paul's College Kalamassery, Kochi, Kerala, India

KEYWORDS

emotional literacy, resilience, social-emotional learning (SEL), affective learning, curriculum reform

1 Introduction

The post-pandemic classroom has become an emotional battlefield. Educators report rising levels of anxiety, isolation, and burnout among students across age groups. Standardized tests, remote learning fatigue, and performance pressures have exposed the systemic gaps in how we address the emotional needs of learners (Yang, 2021). It is no longer enough to advocate for mental health support at the margins of the curriculum. We must reimagine emotional literacy not as an extracurricular benefit, but as the curriculum itself. This article argues that emotional literacy should be embedded across disciplines, ages, and assessments, shifting the paradigm from performance-based education to resilience-based learning. As educators, psychologists, and policymakers reflect on the purpose of education in the twenty-first century, a critical realization emerges: the ability to manage one's emotions, collaborate empathetically, and persevere in the face of setbacks is not a "nice to have"—it is a necessity (Quílez-Robres et al., 2023; Nalipay et al., 2024; Savina et al., 2025). Emotional literacy is not just about emotional awareness; it is about survival, sustainability, and success in an unpredictable world (Zeidner, 2013). In the face of ecological crises, artificial intelligence, and socio-political instability, students need emotional tools as much as they need academic knowledge (Popa, 2024). Yet our systems continue to treat these tools as optional. This calls for an urgent and systemic shift in how we integrate emotional tools into educational practices.

Although Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks have gained traction globally, most implementations remain fragmented—delivered as weekly modules, isolated programs, or reactive interventions rather than foundational curriculum components. Previous studies have explored SEL as an adjunct to academic learning (Newman and Dusenbury, 2015; Zieher et al., 2024), but few have argued for emotional literacy as the central curricular paradigm across all subjects, age levels, and assessments. This paper addresses that critical gap by proposing an integrated, cross-disciplinary model where emotional literacy is not a support system, but the structural core of educational practice. Furthermore, while existing literature focuses on SEL outcomes or teacher competencies, this article expands the discourse to include systemic reform, cultural responsiveness, family engagement, and global policy inspiration (e.g., Bhutan's Gross National Happiness, UNESCO's Happy Schools). It aims to reframe emotional literacy as a necessary and measurable academic standard—shifting the educational narrative from performance to resilience.

2 The case for emotional literacy in education

Often treated as an adjunct to “real” academic content, emotional literacy has been mischaracterized as a soft skill—important, perhaps, but secondary. Such a dichotomy is not only inaccurate but potentially detrimental to educational outcomes. Emotional literacy, defined as the capacity to recognize, understand, express, and regulate emotions, is foundational to learning. While emotional literacy focuses on the ability to recognize, understand, express, and regulate emotions, it is often conflated with related terms such as Social Emotional Learning (SEL), emotional intelligence (EI), and emotional learning. Each has its own scope and purpose. SEL is a structured educational framework aimed at developing social and emotional skills through programs and curricula. Emotional intelligence refers to an individual’s capacity to manage emotions effectively and is often viewed as a measurable trait, especially in adult and professional contexts (Mayer et al., 2004). Emotional learning, meanwhile, is a broader process that encompasses both formal and informal ways we acquire emotional understanding (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2007). Emotional literacy stands apart in its emphasis on language, expression, and critical awareness of emotions within social and cultural contexts. It is foundational and ongoing, not tied to specific programs like SEL or assessments like EI. While SEL can provide the framework and EI the skillset, emotional literacy is the communicative and reflective process that underpins them both (Price, 2009). Recognizing these distinctions allows educators to more deliberately embed emotional literacy across disciplines and ensure it is not reduced to a one-size-fits-all model.

Neuroscience affirms that emotional states directly impact cognitive processing, memory, and decision-making (Naqvi et al., 2006). Emotional regulation is a prerequisite for deep and sustained learning, as emotional disturbances hinder cognitive engagement. Consider a child facing test anxiety. No matter how well the material has been taught, that child’s ability to retrieve and apply knowledge is compromised by emotional overwhelm. Similarly, a student navigating family conflict may find it difficult to engage in collaborative tasks without tools for self-regulation or conflict resolution. Such experiences are not exceptions but have become routine challenges encountered in classrooms across the globe. By teaching emotional literacy as a cross-curricular competency, schools can equip students with the tools to manage stress, build relationships, and navigate conflict. Emotional literacy should be viewed not as an isolated program, but as a lens through which all content is taught and experienced.

3 Shortcomings of current SEL practices

Although numerous schools have incorporated Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks, they are more frequently used as short weekly sessions or standalone modules, separated from the academic curriculum (Zieher et al., 2024). Teachers,

also already stretched, are responsible for conveying content for which they are not adequately trained (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). The consequence? SEL is a checkbox, not a transformative experience. In addition, most of these assessments still test rote memory, neglecting emotional intelligence altogether. This patchwork design sustains the notion that learning and feeling are distinct undertakings (Barłózek, 2014). In other instances, SEL is boiled down into scripted curricula, removing authenticity, turning emotional engagement into a mechanical task (Newman and Dusenbury, 2015). The problem lies not in the intent of SEL but in not treating it as a foundation. Without embedding social-emotional objectives into learning objectives, lesson planning, and school culture, SEL can never realize its full potential. It then exists as a side track, separate from the everyday rhythm of school.

Resilience, often defined as the ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity, is deeply intertwined with emotional literacy. By cultivating emotional awareness, regulation, and empathy, students develop the inner strength to navigate stress, setbacks, and uncertainty—hallmarks of resilience. This aligns with core goals of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which research has shown to significantly improve students’ emotional wellbeing, academic performance, and long-term success (Newman and Dusenbury, 2015; Yang, 2021). Widely recognized SEL models, such as the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework, emphasize five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Ross and Tolan, 2018). These competencies not only support academic learning but also foster resilience by equipping students with lifelong tools for emotional navigation and interpersonal effectiveness. Integrating such frameworks into daily classroom practices transforms SEL from isolated sessions into a cohesive strategy for building both emotional literacy and resilience.

4 Curriculum integration across disciplines

What would have integrated emotional literacy look like? In English class, students would not just analyze plot and character but also emotion arcs and empathy. They might write a journal entry from a character’s point of view in order to gain a better sense of emotional awareness. In math class, a study of frustration tolerance and problem-solving tenacity could be incorporated into every topic. How does a student feel when they become stuck on a problem? How do they get through it? Science courses might also involve explorations of ethical questions and the affective impact of discovery. Think in terms of the affective aspects of climate science—grief, hope, fear. Teachers might not sidestep these, but instead make room for them, in addition to developing critical thinking, also developing students’ affective strength (Nair and Bhandare, 2024). There’s a similar potential for physical education. There’s a natural platform in sports for affective regulation and empathy in teamwork. How students respond when losing, playing with less experienced teammates, or enduring frustration are rich fields of affective learning.

5 Pedagogical shifts toward emotional engagement

Pedagogically, this calls for a shift from the transmission of content to design of experience. The classrooms must become fields of experimentation with emotion—places where failures are okay, self-knowledge is cultivated, and creativity is nurtured (Guinard and Lanne, 2023). Project-based learning, reflective journaling, role-playing, and collaborative design challenges all can be employed as a means of integrating emotional exploration with intellectual rigor (Bolon et al., 2024). Teachers are not necessarily psychologists, but they do require a mindset shift: from a focus on control of behavior, in this sense, to a focus on awareness. Emotional check-ins, class norms of respect and compassion, and reflection prompts in assignments can all become part of a new pedagogy of emotion.

6 Systemic reforms for sustainable implementation

For curricula to include emotional literacy, there must be systemic reform. Teacher training courses must espouse pedagogical competence in emotion alongside subject matter competence. Emotional awareness and regulation must be incorporated into teacher training, not achievement. There must be funding in environments—physical, as well as psychological—of belonging, safety, and open-mindedness. Curriculum standards should include affective learning outcomes as concrete and quantifiable as academic ones (Nix et al., 2022). For instance, in addition to academic skills such as “examine a primary source,” we can include “exercise empathy for diverse historical perspectives.” The way we assess affective outcomes is through reflective writing, peer feedback, and observations of behavior—not grading the students, but informing student development.

7 Global models and policy implications

Models for UNESCO’s Happy Schools Project, for example, or for Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness curriculum, present us with visions for how emotionally responsive schooling can be scaled (Schuelka et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022). What these models illustrate is that wellbeing is not a by-product of schooling but a purpose. Nations such as Finland, where schooling focuses on student agency, trust in teachers, and development of emotion, are demonstrating that academic achievement and wellbeing are not in tension with each other; they are reinforcing (Jääskelä et al., 2021). This change also demands a reframing of success. Rather than aiming solely for grades, schools should create comprehensive portraits of students—measuring emotional strengths, interpersonal development, and self-knowledge. Report cards may feature stories of a student’s perseverance, collaborative spirit, or taking charge of his or her own emotional growth.

Both UNESCO’s Happy Schools Project and Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) curriculum serve as pioneering

frameworks demonstrating the potential of emotional literacy integration across academic settings. The Happy Schools Project, which originated in the Asia-Pacific region, emphasizes learner wellbeing as central to quality education. It provides a holistic model based on three pillars—people, process, and place—that foster a positive learning climate. Empirical reports from participating schools indicate enhanced student motivation, better classroom relationships, and increased engagement in academic tasks due to a reduction in stress and a heightened sense of belonging (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Bhutan’s GNH-based education system, on the other hand, embeds emotional, spiritual, and communal wellbeing into formal education. Teachers in Bhutan are trained not just in cognitive development but also in cultivating compassion, mindfulness, and resilience in students. Studies show that students under the GNH framework demonstrate improved attention, empathy, and collaboration—attributes directly linked to academic success (Schuelka et al., 2019). These models underscore that emotional literacy is not a trade-off with academic rigor but a catalyst for it. They validate the idea presented in paragraph four of our article, where integration of emotional awareness into disciplines such as English, math, and science results in richer, more engaged learning experiences. By equipping students with tools to navigate frustration, ethical dilemmas, and teamwork, these models exemplify how emotional development enhances not only social outcomes but also measurable academic progress.

8 Cultural and community dimensions of emotional literacy

No discussion of emotional literacy in schools can take place without reference to families and the role they must be involved in. Emotional learning starts in the family and is influenced by social norms, cultural values, and child-rearing approaches (Gonzalez et al., 2023). Educators, therefore, need to work with families as allies—not merely through parent-teacher interviews but through workshops, channels of information, and community activities with a shared emotional vocabulary. Teachers should also be mindful of cultural difference in the expression of emotion (Kozina et al., 2025). What is understood by one culture as emotional intelligence can be quite different in another. Emotional literacy needs to be culturally responsive, leaving enough space for diverse norms of emotion while maintaining a shared set of principles of empathy, respect, and self-regulation.

Community groups, mental health experts, and even artists can contribute to emotionally rich learning. Collaborations among schools and outside stakeholders can introduce new tools, insights, and arenas for emotional exploration—whether in theater, peer mentoring, or storytelling sessions. One might contend that placing emphasis on emotional literacy could weaken academic standards. Conversely, studies demonstrate that safe spaces are most likely to support more in-depth learning, creativity, as well as academic achievement (Danial and Hidayatullah, 2024). Emotional intelligence is not a replacement for academic skills—it is where they flourish. Instead of replacing academic toughness, emotional literacy transforms it. It dispels the myth that achievement is a matter of speed, perfection, or compliance. It values the

emotional process leading up to every success: the frustration before understanding, the bravery of questioning, the vulnerability of trying, then getting it wrong, and trying again. By integrating emotional literacy, disruptions in behavior, burnout among teachers, and absenteeism decrease—producing a better learning environment for everyone. The schools that invest in emotional education actually save time and funds in the long run. Research substantiates these claims. For example, a meta-analysis by [Durlak et al. \(2011\)](#), which involved more than 270,000 students, reported that classroom behavior improved significantly, and conduct problems and academic achievement improved through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs ([Durlak et al., 2011](#)). In a similar context, [Jennings and Greenberg \(2009\)](#) identified that supportive classroom climates facilitated by SEL decrease burnout and stress of teachers by enhancing student-teacher relationships and cooperative classrooms ([Jennings and Greenberg, 2009](#)). These findings underscore the transformative potential of emotional literacy not only for student outcomes but also for educator wellbeing.

9 Conclusion

With climate anxiety, digital saturation, and global instability on the rise, today's students urgently need a crucial literacy: resilience. This article contributes to the ongoing discourse by reframing emotional literacy not as an optional enrichment, but as the structural core of education. By advocating for its integration across disciplines, alignment with pedagogical practices, and inclusion in systemic reforms, the paper offers a new perspective on how emotional development can be central to educational success in the twenty-first century.

The review emphasizes that emotional literacy should be recognized as an academic standard rather than a supplemental skill. It extends the conversation beyond traditional SEL frameworks by exploring how emotional literacy can be woven into subject-specific content, embedded in classroom culture, and supported through teacher training and institutional practices. Moreover, the article draws attention to often-overlooked dimensions such as culturally responsive approaches to emotional development and the essential role of family and community partnerships in fostering emotional wellbeing in students.

These discussions open important pathways for future research. Further empirical studies are needed to examine how integrated models of emotional literacy operate in diverse educational settings, how educators can be effectively equipped to implement such models, and how educational policy can evolve to support

emotionally inclusive schooling. Research into culturally grounded and context-sensitive assessment of emotional competencies would also add depth to this emerging field.

Ultimately, education must move beyond preparing students for exams to preparing them for life. Emotional literacy, when treated as foundational, equips learners not only to withstand challenges but to face them with clarity, courage, and compassion. In embracing this shift, we do not merely adapt education to a changing world—we empower students to shape a better one.

Author contributions

JP: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RA: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JJ: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AG: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. GJ: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

- Barłózek, N. (2014). "Qualitative evaluation of emotional intelligence during conversation classes," in *Studying Second Language Acquisition from a Qualitative Perspective*, eds. D. Gabrys-Barker and A. Wojtaszek (Cham: Springer International Publishing), 91–107. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-08353-7_7
- Bolon, M. K. T., Diansyah, A., and Megawati, I. (2024). Improving history learning activities and outcomes with the project-based learning model. *ALACRITY J. Educ.* 4, 96–105. doi: 10.52121/alacrity.v4i3.411
- Danial, M., and Hidayatullah, S. (2024). The influence of curriculum reforms on teaching practices and student learning outcomes in educational development. *Educia J.* 2, 72–81. doi: 10.71435/610419
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., and Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Dev.* 82, 405–432. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

- Gonzalez, J. E., Liew, J., Aguilar, S. D., Sainz, A. D., Sanchez, R., and Bumgardner, R. (2023). "Family literacy practices and the home learning environment of asian and Latino Americans: path to literacy and social-emotional learning," in *Family Literacy Practices in Asian and Latinx Families: Educational and Cultural Considerations*, eds. J. E. Gonzalez, J. Liew, G. A. Curtis, and Y. Zou (Cham: Springer International Publishing), 49–71. doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-14470-7_4
- Guinard, P., and Lanne, J.-B. (2023). Emotions from and beyond the classroom. An experiment in teaching and sharing emotional methodologies in a geography course. *J. Geogr. High. Educ.* 47, 719–736. doi: 10.1080/03098265.2021.1977916
- Immordino-Yang, M. H., and Damasio, A. (2007). We feel, therefore we learn: the relevance of affective and social neuroscience to education. *Mind Brain Educ.* 1, 3–10. doi: 10.1111/j.1751-228X.2007.00004.x
- Jääskelä, P., Heilala, V., Kärkkäinen, T., and Häkkinen, P. (2021). Student agency analytics: learning analytics as a tool for analysing student agency in higher education. *Behav. Inf. Technol.* 40, 790–808. doi: 10.1080/0144929X.2020.1725130
- Jennings, P. A., and Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Rev. Educ. Res.* 79, 491–525. doi: 10.3102/0034654308325693
- Kozina, A., Rožman, M., and Veldin, M. (2025). Teachers' mindfulness following a social, emotional and intercultural learning intervention as a support mechanism for dealing with emotional problems. *Teach. Dev.* doi: 10.1080/13664530.2025.2460596. [Epub ahead of print].
- Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P., and Caruso, D. R. (2004). Emotional intelligence: theory, findings, and implications. *Psychol. Inq.* 15, 197–215. doi: 10.1207/s15327965pli1503_02
- Nair, D. S., and Bhandare, S. (2024). Examining the impact of a strength-based program to enhance teacher-trainees' critical thinking abilities: a pilot study. *Qual. Educ. All* 1, 1–21. doi: 10.1108/QEA-12-2023-0019
- Nalipay, M. J. N., Huang, B., Jong, M. S. Y., Chai, C. S., and King, R. B. (2024). Promoting STEM learning perseverance through recognizing communal goals: understanding the impact of empathy and citizenship. *Int. J. STEM Educ.* 11:17. doi: 10.1186/s40594-024-00471-w
- Naqvi, N., Shiv, B., and Bechara, A. (2006). The role of emotion in decision making: a cognitive neuroscience perspective. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 15, 260–264. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8721.2006.00448.x
- Newman, J., and Dusenbury, L. (2015). "Social and emotional learning (SEL): a framework for academic, social, and emotional success," in *Prevention Science in School Settings: Complex Relationships and Processes*, ed. K. Bosworth (New York, NY: Springer New York), 287–306. doi: 10.1007/978-1-4939-3155-2_14
- Nguyen, N.-P., Le, V.-T., Nguyen, H.-G., and Nguyen, T. T.-H. (2022). Teachers' awareness of happy schools with UNESCO items: a case study of a primary school in Hanoi, Vietnam. *VMOST J. Soc. Sci. Humanit.* 64, 38–47. doi: 10.31276/VMOSTJOSSH.64(2)0.38-47
- Nix, V., Shelton, K., and Song, M. (2022). "Implementing affective learning outcomes through a meaning-centered curriculum," in *ICT and Innovation in Teaching Learning Methods in Higher Education*, eds. E. Sengupta and P. Blessinger (Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited), 65–88. doi: 10.1108/S2055-364120220000045005
- Popa, S. (2024). Towards 2030 and beyond: challenges, constants, and the need to transform education. *Prospects* 54, 507–513. doi: 10.1007/s11125-024-09715-7
- Price, H. (2009). "Emotional literacy in schools: a psychosocial perspective," in *Emotion: New Psychosocial Perspectives*, eds. S. D. Slater, D. W. Jones, H. Price, and C. Yates (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK), 197–211. doi: 10.1057/9780230245136_15
- Quílez-Robres, A., Usán, P., Lozano-Blasco, R., and Salavera, C. (2023). Emotional intelligence and academic performance: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Think. Ski. Creat.* 49:101355. doi: 10.1016/j.tsc.2023.101355
- Ross, K. M., and Tolan, P. (2018). Social and emotional learning in adolescence: testing the CASEL model in a normative sample. *J. Early Adolesc.* 38, 1170–1199. doi: 10.1177/0272431617725198
- Savina, E., Fulton, C., and Beaton, C. (2025). Teacher emotional competence: a conceptual model. *Educ. Psychol. Rev.* 37:40. doi: 10.1007/s10648-025-10018-2
- Schiepe-Tiska, A., Dzhaparkulova, A., and Ziernwald, L. (2021). A mixed-methods approach to investigating social and emotional learning at schools: teachers' familiarity, beliefs, training, and perceived school culture. *Front. Psychol.* 12:518634. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.518634
- Schuelka, M. J., Sherab, K., and Nidup, T. Y. (2019). Gross National Happiness, British Values, and non-cognitive skills: the role and perspective of teachers in Bhutan and England. *Educ. Rev.* 71, 748–766. doi: 10.1080/00131911.2018.1474175
- Yang, C. (2021). Online teaching self-efficacy, social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies, and compassion fatigue among educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sch. Psychol. Rev.* 50, 505–518. doi: 10.1080/2372966X.2021.1903815
- Zeidner, M. (2013). What we know about emotional intelligence. *Dev. Learn. Organ. Int. J.* 27, 161–166. doi: 10.1108/dlo.2013.08127caa.002
- Zieher, A. K., Bailey, C. S., Cipriano, C., McNaboe, T., Smith, K., and Strambler, M. J. (2024). Considering the "How" of SEL: a framework for the pedagogies of social and emotional learning. *Soc. Emot. Learn. Res. Pract. Policy* 3:100030. doi: 10.1016/j.sel.2024.100030