Review Article

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Creating an Inclusive and Safe Educational Environment in Educational Institutions: The Psychological and Pedagogical Aspect

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Abstract

The study aimed to identify and explain the interconnected psychological, social, pedagogical and organisational conditions that contribute to an accessible, supportive, and safe environment in which diverse groups of students can participate. The study was conducted as an integrative review of research literature with conceptual and thematic synthesis; the review examined a purposively selected, non-random sample comprising 35 English-language peer-reviewed publications from 2021–2026. As a result of content coding, nine interconnected components were identified: accessibility of learning, psychological and social safety, school and classroom climate, a sense of belonging to the community, supportive relationships, social and emotional learning, prevention of bullying and cyberbullying, trauma-informed practices, as well as teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy and professional development. The synthesis organised these components into four functional levels: individual psychological, interpersonal, pedagogical and organisational. The synthesis highlighted risks at the connections between levels, especially when stated rules are not supported by daily practice, supportive relationships are not accompanied by accessibility of learning, and universal programmes insufficiently take into account the needs of vulnerable groups. It was determined that meaningful student participation is supported when there is consistency among organisational norms, teaching methods, interpersonal interaction and the subjective sense of acceptance and belonging. The practical contribution is an integrated approach to educational planning that combines Universal Design for Learning, teacher support, mechanisms for preventing and responding to bullying, student participation in decision-making and regular assessment of school climate.

Keywords: school climate, social belonging, Universal Design for Learning, social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, trauma-informed practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

An inclusive and safe educational environment is increasingly understood as an integrated feature of educational provision in which accessible learning, psychological well-being, social acceptance, and student safety are coordinated through everyday institutional practice. It therefore extends beyond a collection of separate organisational measures. Such an approach requires simultaneous consideration of pedagogical practices, the nature of interpersonal interaction, attitudes towards diversity and the institution's ability to prevent discrimination, bullying and social exclusion. Margas [1] shows that an inclusive classroom climate is an important link between inclusive teaching and inclusion outcomes, while Baumsteiger et al. [2] emphasise the multidimensionality of the concept of school climate and the heterogeneity of approaches to its assessment.

A significant component of a safe environment is the sense of belonging to the educational community. Allen et al. [3] established a connection between school belonging in adolescence and later mental health indicators, and Allen [4] focuses on the gap between the accumulated evidence of the importance of school belonging and everyday educational practice. At the same time, psychological safety cannot be reduced only to emotional comfort. Wilson-Ching and Berger [5] show the importance of trusting interpersonal relationships in trauma-informed educational approaches, while Bakshi [6] draws attention to the ethical boundary between care and excessive avoidance of challenging experiences, which potentially limits students' autonomy and resilience.

A further challenge concerns teachers' preparedness to implement inclusive education. Dignath et al. [7] show that teachers' attitudes, their self-efficacy and professional training are important for the implementation of inclusive education. Donath et al. [8] also report positive effects of professional development on teachers' knowledge, skills and beliefs concerning inclusive learning. At the level of specific practices, Almeqdad et al. [9] identify the potential of Universal Design for Learning for expanding the accessibility of learning, while Badger et al. [10] identify the need for adapted anti-bullying approaches for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

Despite the significant body of work, inclusion, psychological safety, school belonging, pedagogical support, trauma-informed practices and bullying prevention are mainly conceptualised as largely separate areas of inquiry. Their interconnection within a shared educational environment requires further explanation, particularly because safety concerns not only the absence of threats, but also meaningful participation, acceptance of diversity, supportive interaction and accessibility of learning. This fragmentation creates a theoretical gap between studies of individual components and a complete understanding of the conditions under which inclusion and safety mutually reinforce each other in the educational process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary research on an inclusive and safe educational environment is gradually moving beyond the traditional understanding of inclusion as the physical placement of students with special educational needs in the general classroom. The quality of social relationships, the sense of acceptance, the possibility of full participation and psychological safety have become increasingly important. In this context, school climate is one of the broadest constructs, although its operationalisation remains heterogeneous. Gonzálvez et al. [11], having analysed 37 instruments for its assessment, identified significant variability in domains and psychometric characteristics. Thus, the formally identical concept of a "favourable school climate" in different studies may cover different psychological and organisational phenomena. García-Rodríguez et al. [12] specify the interpersonal dimension of this problem: the quality of teacher–student relationships is associated with emotional regulation, behavioural adaptation, peer acceptance and academic functioning. At the same time, Lenkeit et al. [13] showed that in an inclusive classroom, climate and social integration depend on both formal conditions and the cognitive and affective attitudes of teachers and students themselves.

Teachers' attitudes are among the most extensively studied conditions for inclusion, although the findings concerning them remain mixed. The meta-analysis by Dignath et al. [7] showed that teachers' attitudes, their emotional appraisal of inclusion and self-efficacy show, on average, considerable scope for development, and special training is associated with more positive beliefs. However, the problem is not reduced to a lack of knowledge. Lindner et al. [14] established that primary school teachers show mainly neutral or ambivalent attitudes, with readiness for inclusion depending on the types of educational needs and disabilities considered. A more recent review by Lindner et al. [15] identifies similar ambiguity in secondary education as well, where inclusion is often perceived as a right of particular groups of students rather than an unconditional principle. Professional development may help address these difficulties: Donath et al. [8] found larger effects of professional development on teachers' knowledge than on their beliefs. This difference suggests that increasing competence in itself does not guarantee the transformation of everyday inclusive practice.

An important area of psychological and pedagogical practice is social and emotional learning (SEL). The large-scale meta-analysis by Cipriano et al. [16], which covered 424 studies from 53 countries, confirmed positive results of universal SEL programmes regarding social and emotional skills, behaviour, relationships, academic functioning, school climate

and safety. However, the general positive effect does not mean equal accessibility of these advantages for different groups. Cipriano and McCarthy [17] emphasise that there is substantially less knowledge about SEL outcomes for marginalised groups than knowledge about the general effectiveness of programmes. This problem was confirmed by Cipriano et al. [18], who identified insufficient representation and inconsistent consideration of disability and race in studies of universal SEL programmes. Similarly, Daley and McCarthy [19] established that only a small proportion of studies separately analysed the outcomes of students with disabilities. Hassani and Schwab [20] identified mainly positive but small effects for students with special educational needs, while the heterogeneity of samples and programmes complicated generalisation. Even the more recent meta-analysis by Cipriano et al. [21] confirmed the effectiveness of SEL, but recorded insufficient representation of a number of marginalised groups and insufficient evidence of a consistent overall long-term effect after the programmes had ended.

The safety of the educational environment, in turn, cannot be assessed only through subjective well-being, since it implies a real reduction in the risk of victimisation and social exclusion. Hensums et al. [22], based on individual data from almost 40,000 children and adolescents, confirmed the general effectiveness of school-based anti-bullying programmes, but the effects were small and depended on participant characteristics. This calls into question the universality of standardised preventive solutions. Furthermore, the boundaries of the safe environment already extend beyond the physical space of the institution: Li et al. [23] established a negative association between school climate and cyberbullying victimisation, but the strength of this connection differed depending on the level of education. Thus, psychological safety is formed simultaneously in offline and digital systems of interaction.

A separate area is the support of children with experiences of trauma. The meta-analysis by Cafaro et al. [24] showed that teacher-delivered trauma-based and trauma-informed interventions are associated with a reduction in trauma-related symptoms among students, and teachers' participation in relevant training increases their knowledge of trauma-informed practices. At the same time, the authors themselves indicate the limited evidence concerning the broader organisational effects of trauma-informed schooling. Thus, the evidence base is more convincing regarding specific psychological outcomes than regarding how such practices transform the educational environment as a system.

This systemic nature is particularly evident in whole-school approaches. Berti et al. [25] show that active student participation may vary from passive receipt of adult-designed activities to meaningful participation in decision-making, while secondary school studies remain comparatively few, and the fidelity of programme implementation is often insufficiently assessed. Forshaw and Woods [26] also connect the effectiveness of co-creating well-being strategies with the balance of power, group composition and sustained participation, emphasising the lack of data on long-term outcomes. Finally, Higgins and Booker [27] identified a broad range of facilitators and barriers to implementing whole-school approaches to mental health, which shows the dependence of the outcome on the organisational context, and not only on the content of a specific programme.

Thus, the international literature has accumulated a significant body of evidence concerning individual components of a favourable educational environment: teachers' attitudes, SEL, "teacher–student" relationships, school climate, bullying prevention, trauma-informed practices and student participation. At the same time, these directions mainly develop in parallel, use heterogeneous conceptual and measurement frameworks and often assess effectiveness through isolated outcomes of individual programmes. The interconnection of inclusion and psychological safety as properties of a single educational environment remains insufficiently conceptualised, as does the role of pedagogical relationships, student participation, social and emotional support and organisational conditions in their simultaneous formation. This fragmentation supports the need for an integrated psychological and pedagogical synthesis of existing approaches and the establishment of a system of interconnected components that support meaningful inclusion through the safe, accessible, and socially supported participation of all students.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in September 2026 as an integrative review of research literature using conceptual and thematic analysis. The review design aimed to identify psychological and pedagogical characteristics that are associated in contemporary educational research with the creation of an inclusive and safe educational environment, and to explain conceptual relationships among these characteristics. The review was conducted remotely using published research materials, without involving respondents, conducting experiments, applying psychological assessment instruments or using special equipment.

The review material comprised a purposively selected, non-random sample of 35 English-language peer-reviewed research publications from 2021–2026. Publications were identified through a purposive thematic search for English-language publications using combinations of concepts corresponding to the subject of the study: inclusive education, safe educational environment, school climate, classroom climate, school belonging, social and emotional learning, teacher attitudes toward inclusion, teacher self-efficacy, anti-bullying, cyberbullying, trauma-informed education, Universal Design for Learning and whole-school approach. Initially identified publications were checked by title, authors, year, journal and

digital object identifier; bibliographic information was clarified using publisher websites and digital object identifier links. Following relevance checks, only publications whose content directly concerned psychological, pedagogical or socio-psychological characteristics of the educational environment were included in the final selection.

The inclusion criteria were: publication in a peer-reviewed international academic journal; English language; publication date within 2021–2026; study of educational institutions, educational interaction or pedagogical practices; availability of results concerning at least one component of inclusion or safety; availability of sufficient bibliographic data and a digital object identifier. Duplicates, non-peer-reviewed materials, works with an exclusively clinical or medical focus without a direct connection with the educational environment, as well as publications in which inclusion or safety had only contextual significance, were excluded.

The unit of analysis was an individual publication, and the unit of content coding was a result, conclusion or association identified within the publication that was relevant to the characteristics of an inclusive or safe educational environment. For each work, the educational context, studied group, design, key results and limitations were recorded. Content coding was conducted according to the categories of inclusion and accessibility, psychological and social safety, school and classroom climate, school belonging, pedagogical support, SEL, bullying prevention, trauma-informed practices, teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy and professional development. Barriers, facilitators, contradictory results and methodological limitations indicated by the authors were recorded separately.

At the final stage, the coded findings were compared across four levels of the educational environment: individual psychological, interpersonal, pedagogical and organisational. This comparison supported an integrated interpretation of findings that had initially been presented separately across the selected publications. No pooled effect sizes or new statistical significance tests were calculated, because the review did not combine participant-level data or re-estimate effects across primary studies.

The review was purposive rather than exhaustive. Its selection procedure does not establish that every eligible publication within the stated period was retrieved. No reproducible database-specific search strings, screening flow counts, formal source-level risk-of-bias ratings, or independent coding-agreement estimates are available in the study documentation, and these procedures are not claimed here. The synthesis therefore identifies recurring relationships and implementation concerns within the selected literature; it does not estimate the prevalence of these concerns across all schools or establish a hierarchy of intervention effectiveness. Empirical findings, interpretations offered by the reviewed authors, and the integrative propositions developed in this article are treated as distinct forms of evidence.

4. RESULTS

Conceptual and thematic analysis of the selected publications indicated that inclusion and safety of the educational environment are interrelated areas of educational practice. Across the reviewed publications, they intersect through accessibility of participation, the nature of pedagogical interaction, social integration, the sense of belonging and the ability of the educational institution to prevent situations that create a psychological or social threat. Accordingly, inclusion appeared broader than the formal involvement of students with special educational needs, while safety was not limited to the absence of physical danger or bullying. The coding results provided grounds for treating both characteristics as interconnected properties of the educational environment that are manifested through the conditions of participation, the quality of relationships and the practical accessibility of support.

At the first stage of synthesis, the categories specified in the review procedure were compared according to their functional roles. This comparison distinguished three aspects: characteristics of the environment itself, pedagogical mechanisms that support its development, and outcomes that reflect students' experiences of participation and support. The summary of the thematic coding is presented in Table 1.

The distinctions in Table 1 separate access, relationships, support practices, and students' experiences while showing why none can serve as a complete substitute for the others. The final column identifies possible implementation concerns; these are analytical indicators drawn from the literature rather than validated diagnostic thresholds.

Within the inclusion category, a recurring distinction was identified between "adapting the student to existing learning" and proactively designing accessible learning experiences for students with different needs. This distinction was particularly apparent in studies of Universal Design for Learning. The results of Almeqdad et al. [9] identify the potential of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for supporting inclusion, although the heterogeneity of the included studies limits the possibility of treating it as equally effective under all educational conditions. Zhang et al. [28], in turn, focus not only on the advantages, but also on the complexity of the actual implementation of UDL. As a result of the synthesis, accessibility was defined not as the availability of a separate adaptation for a particular student, but as a property of pedagogical design that provides in advance for variability in ways of engaging with learning, processing instructional material, and demonstrating knowledge and understanding.

At the same time, accessibility in itself does not guarantee social inclusion. The synthesis of classroom climate studies showed that a student may formally participate in shared learning and at the same time remain a peripheral participant

in social interaction. Margas [1] conceptualises an inclusive classroom climate as an intermediate link between inclusive teaching and broader inclusion outcomes. This is consistent with the results of Lenkeit et al. [13], in which the attitudes of teachers and students are connected with social integration and classroom climate. Thus, within the structure developed in this review, classroom climate serves an integrative function rather than merely providing background context: it is at the level of daily interaction that it becomes visible whether formal inclusion is experienced as meaningful social participation.

Table 1. *Results of Conceptual and Thematic Coding of the Psychological and Pedagogical Components of an Inclusive and Safe Educational Environment*

Coding category	Integrated content of the category	Function in the educational environment	Sign of insufficient implementation
Inclusion and accessibility	Possibility of participating in learning regardless of individual educational needs and differences	Ensures real rather than only formal inclusion	Restrictions on participation, a single inflexible learning format, dependence of access on the student's ability to adapt
Psychological and social safety	Predictability of interaction, absence of humiliation, discrimination and threats	Creates conditions for activity without fear of negative social consequences	Avoidance of participation, concealment of difficulties, victimisation
School and classroom climate	A set of norms, relationships, expectations and practices that determine the daily experience of being in the institution	Connects individual experience with the general culture of the institution	Gap between declared principles and everyday practice
School belonging	Sense of acceptance, a sense of being valued, and belonging to the educational community	Reflects the subjective result of inclusion in the social environment	Alienation, peripheral participation, weak identification with the institution
Pedagogical support and relationships	Trust, respect, accessibility of help, sensitive teacher response	Turns organisational principles of inclusion into the student's daily experience	Formal support without stable supportive relationships
SEL	Development of emotional regulation, interpersonal interaction and social and emotional competences	Increases the ability to act constructively in the social environment	Difficulties with emotional regulation, interaction and conflict resolution
Prevention of bullying and cyberbullying	Prevention, early identification, response and support for vulnerable students	Reduces direct social threats to inclusion and well-being	Repeated victimisation, social isolation, normalisation of aggression
Trauma-informed practices	Predictability, supportive relationships, sensitivity to experiences of trauma	Reduces the risk of repeated psychological traumatisation	Responses that increase stress or treat trauma-related difficulties solely as disciplinary problems
Teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy and professional development	Readiness to recognise diversity and ability to implement inclusive practices	Determines whether inclusive policy passes into pedagogical practice	Positive declaration of inclusion without a corresponding change in teaching methods

Note: SEL – social and emotional learning; school belonging – a sense of belonging to the school or educational community.
Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the conceptual and thematic synthesis of 35 research publications.

A related pattern was identified for school belonging. Across the selected publications, this category was not reduced to a positive attitude towards the educational institution. It covered acceptance, the value attached to participation, the presence of social connections and the possibility of identifying oneself as a full member of the educational community. Allen et al. [3] connect school belonging in adolescence with later mental health indicators, while Allen [4] shows that the concept of belonging itself remains conceptually heterogeneous and dependent on the social, cultural and structural context. Therefore, within this review, school belonging should be considered as an important interpretive indicator of the extent to which the environment has actually become inclusive and psychologically supportive.

Comparison of the coded findings also allowed the components to be organised across the four levels defined in the methodology. The levels were not treated as a rigid hierarchy: most components were interpreted through connections between levels. For example, teacher self-efficacy is a characteristic of the teacher, but its consequences are manifested in the method of organising learning, the quality of interaction and students' experience. Therefore, the four-level structure should be treated as a model of interdependence presented in Table 2.

The relationships in Table 2 should be read across levels rather than as a fixed sequence of effects. For example, organisational procedures may enable teacher support, while students' experiences can reveal where those procedures fail to provide accessible and trustworthy assistance.

At the individual psychological level, safety was manifested primarily through the possibility of learning and interacting without the constant expectation of humiliation, exclusion or a negative reaction to differences. However, the reviewed findings do not support the treatment of psychological safety as the elimination of any discomfort. In this sense, the distinction between a supportive environment and excessive avoidance of challenging experiences is fundamentally important. A trauma-informed approach performs a productive function when it increases the predictability of interaction, accessibility of support and sensitivity to possible experiences of trauma, but does not turn the student into a passive recipient of protection.

At the interpersonal level, the quality of relationships appeared to be the most stable mechanism. It connected school

belonging, pedagogical support, trauma-informed practices and social integration. Wilson-Ching and Berger [5] show the central importance of relationship building in trauma-informed educational frameworks. In the proposed structure, this makes it possible to treat trust not as an additional psychological resource, but as a mechanism through which the student can report a problem, accept help, and continue participating in learning even in the presence of difficulties.

Table 2. *Four-Level Structure of the Formation of an Inclusive and Safe Educational Environment*

Level	Central components	Leading mechanism	Outcome for the student	Dependence on other levels
Individual psychological	Emotional well-being, self-regulation, sense of safety, belonging	Subjective perception of oneself as an accepted and protected participant	Readiness to participate, seek help and interact	Determined by the quality of relationships and accessibility of support
Interpersonal	Teacher–student relationships, peer support, acceptance, freedom from stigmatisation	Formation of trust and mutual recognition	Social integration, reduced isolation, more stable participation	Depends on pedagogical practices and institutional norms
Pedagogical	UDL, differentiation, SEL, trauma-informed practices, pedagogical support	Transformation of the principles of inclusion and safety into daily methods of teaching and interaction	Accessibility of learning and support for different groups	Depends on teachers' competence, attitudes and self-efficacy
Organisational	School climate, whole-school approach, anti-bullying procedures, professional development, student participation	Institutionalisation of norms, procedures and support resources	Continuity and predictability of the safe environment	Implemented through pedagogical and interpersonal practices

Note: UDL – Universal Design for Learning; SEL – social and emotional learning. A whole-school approach coordinates practice across classrooms, staff roles, and institutional procedures.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the conceptual and thematic synthesis of 35 research publications.

The SEL literature added a further dimension to this interpretation. The meta-analysis by Cipriano et al. [16] showed positive outcomes of universal school-based SEL interventions not only regarding social and emotional skills, but also regarding behaviour, relationships, school functioning, climate and safety. Within the model, SEL therefore occupies an intermediate position: on the one hand, it develops individual competencies of self-regulation and interaction; on the other hand, its effectiveness depends on whether the environment creates real opportunities to apply these competences. At the same time, data concerning marginalised groups, students with disabilities and special educational needs revealed the unevenness of the evidence base. This means that universal programme delivery does not establish equal benefits for every student group.

A separate coding category addressed direct threats to social safety. Anti-bullying studies showed that the existence of a programme alone is not a sufficient indicator of a safe environment. Hensums et al. [22] showed variability in the results of school-based anti-bullying interventions depending on participant characteristics, while Badger et al. [10] identified the limited evidence base regarding specially adapted approaches for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This distinction is important for inclusive education: a school-wide protective mechanism may be formally universal, but insufficiently accessible for groups at greater risk of victimisation. Furthermore, Li et al. [23] showed a negative association between school climate and cyberbullying victimisation. Thus, the boundaries of a safe educational environment do not coincide with the physical boundaries of the institution, since social relationships continue in digital space.

At the pedagogical level, the defining result of the synthesis was the distinction between a positive attitude towards inclusion and the practical capacity to teach inclusively. Dignath et al. [7] show the multicomponent nature of pedagogical beliefs, which cover cognitive assessments, emotional attitudes and self-efficacy. Woodcock et al. [29] also show that teachers with different self-efficacy may share a similar conceptual understanding of inclusion, but differ substantially in their practices. Therefore, within this structure, teacher self-efficacy serves as a "bridge" between acceptance of the principle and its implementation.

Under these conditions, professional development is a necessary mechanism that is insufficient on its own. The results of Donath et al. [8] show a positive effect of professional training concerning inclusive education, but improvements in knowledge, beliefs, and classroom practice do not necessarily occur together or to the same extent. It follows from this that short-term teacher training without organisational support, opportunities for practical application and access to resources has limited potential to change the environment systemically.

At the organisational level, the results of whole-school studies suggested a further pattern: the sustainability of change depends on whether responsibility for inclusion and safety is distributed throughout the educational community. Berti et al. [25] and Forshaw and Woods [26] focus on the significance of students' own participation in whole-school initiatives. Thus, student voice has a practical role in the model that extends beyond symbolic consultation. If safety rules, well-being programmes or response methods are created exclusively by adults, the student remains a recipient of institutional policy. If participation includes the possibility of influencing decisions, it itself constitutes a form of inclusion in practice.

During coding, barriers and facilitators were recorded separately. Their comparison revealed that the most critical obstacles arise not within one category, but at transitions between levels. For example, a positive institutional policy does not ensure inclusion if the teacher does not possess the relevant practices; pedagogical support has a limited effect if peer culture normalises stigmatisation; a universal SEL or anti-bullying programme may not reach vulnerable groups if its design does not take into account the specific nature of their participation. The systematisation of these transitions is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Barriers and Facilitators in Creating an Inclusive and Safe Educational Environment*

Dimension	Identified barrier	Facilitator	Significance for the integrated model
Accessibility of learning	Inflexible learning design and reactive adaptations	Flexible learning design, UDL, differentiation	Transfers responsibility for accessibility from the student to the organisation of learning
Pedagogical readiness	Gap between positive attitude and practical ability	Professional development with practical application and support	Ensures the transition from declarative to practical inclusion
Relationships	Formality of support, weak trust	Stable supportive relationships, accessibility of the teacher	Increases the possibility of seeking help and participating
Social integration	Stigmatisation, peripheral participation, weak peer support	Acceptance of diversity and peer support	Turns physical inclusion into social belonging
Psychological safety	Unpredictable response, humiliation, repeated traumatisation	Predictability, trauma-informed interaction, access to support	Reduces the psychological cost of participation in the educational process
Bullying prevention	Universal measures without adaptation to vulnerable groups	Targeted consideration of SEND and other vulnerability factors	Combines general safety policy with the principle of equality
SEL	Identical design without checking accessibility for different groups	Inclusive adaptation of SEL and analysis of outcomes of specific groups	Prevents inequality from being masked by an average positive effect
Student participation	Symbolic student voice without influence on decisions	Participation in developing rules and well-being strategies	Makes participation a mechanism rather than only an outcome of inclusion
Organisation of the institution	Fragmented programmes and responsibility of individual specialists	Whole-school approach and consistent procedures	Ensures continuity of practices between classrooms, teachers and situations

Note: SEND – special educational needs and disabilities; SEL – social and emotional learning; UDL – Universal Design for Learning; student voice – meaningful participation of students in expressing their position and making decisions.
Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of the conceptual and thematic synthesis of 35 research publications.

The barriers and facilitators in Table 3 identify points at which an institution can examine the consistency of its practice. Their inclusion does not imply equal empirical support for every proposed response, and local evaluation remains necessary before treating a facilitator as effective for a particular student group.

The analysis of contradictory findings and methodological limitations indicated that the available evidence base has several systemic limitations. The first concerns conceptual heterogeneity. School climate covers different sets of domains depending on the measurement instrument, which complicates direct comparison of results. A similar problem exists regarding school belonging, where Allen [4] records terminological and conceptual ambiguity. Because of this, positive changes in one component cannot always be interpreted as improvement of the environment as a whole.

The second limitation concerns applying overall findings to particular groups at increased risk. SEL studies show general positive potential, but the representation of students with disabilities and other marginalised groups remains uneven. A similar situation was identified in the anti-bullying literature, where there are fewer specially adapted and sufficiently well-assessed programmes for SEND than general anti-bullying interventions. Thus, an average effect at the level of the whole sample does not provide grounds for automatically drawing a conclusion about an equal degree of protection for each group.

The third group of limitations is connected with implementation. In works on UDL, whole-school approaches, professional development and trauma-informed education, the gap between the normative or conceptual attractiveness of an approach and the actual continuity of its implementation is repeated. In particular, trauma-informed interventions show promise regarding psychological outcomes, but Cafaro et al. [24] draw attention to the limited evidence concerning teacher-delivered trauma-informed approaches. This does not allow the mere use of the relevant terminology to be considered an indicator of systemic change in the environment.

Bringing the four levels together informed an integrated psychological and pedagogical model. Its foundation is the institution's capacity to sustain coordinated support: consistent norms, whole-school procedures, professional support for teachers, anti-bullying mechanisms and meaningful student participation. These conditions are put into practice at the pedagogical level through accessible learning design, SEL, differentiation, trauma-informed practices and professionally confident responses to diversity. They are then manifested at the interpersonal level through trust, acceptance, peer support and reduced stigmatisation. Together, these conditions are associated conceptually with a sense of safety, belonging, and readiness to participate fully in the educational and social life of the institution at the individual psychological level.

At the same time, the model does not specify an empirically verified, unidirectional causal chain. The identified connections have a potentially reciprocal character: students' experiences may influence classroom climate, student participation may help change organisational practices, and problems at the interpersonal level signal the need to correct pedagogical or institutional mechanisms. It is for this reason that a safe and inclusive educational environment should be defined not as a fixed set of measures, but as a system of continually coordinated conditions and relationships.

Thus, the main result of the conceptual and thematic synthesis was the establishment that inclusion determines access and meaningful participation, while safety determines the psychological and social conditions under which such participation may be continuous. Ensuring them separately appears insufficient: access without acceptance may leave the student socially isolated, while psychological support without accessible learning does not eliminate educational exclusion. An integrated environment arises when organisational rules, pedagogical practices, interpersonal relationships and the student's subjective experience function consistently. It is this interlevel consistency that is the central psychological and pedagogical condition for combining inclusion and safety in a single model of the educational environment.

5. DISCUSSION

The review findings support considering inclusion and safety not as parallel characteristics of the educational environment, but as its functionally interconnected properties. The proposed four-level structure suggests that accessibility of learning in itself does not ensure full inclusion if the student does not feel acceptance, belonging and psychological safety. At the same time, supportive relationships or a positive emotional climate do not compensate for pedagogical barriers that actually limit the participation of individual students. This interpretation develops the position of Margas [1], who considers inclusive classroom climate an important intermediate link between inclusive teaching and inclusion outcomes. Our synthesis shows that this connection should be considered more broadly: classroom climate is a point of intersection of the pedagogical, interpersonal and individual psychological levels, through which formal principles of inclusion are either translated into practice or remain unfulfilled.

The established connection between the pedagogical level and the student's actual experience is particularly significant. Within the review, teacher self-efficacy appeared as a particular mechanism of transition from a positive attitude towards inclusion to real inclusive practice. This interpretation is consistent with Woodcock et al. [29]: teachers with high and low self-efficacy may share a similar conceptual understanding of inclusion, but differ substantially in the way they organise learning. Highly efficacious teachers were more oriented towards students' success, accessibility and confidence, while low self-efficacy was more often combined with an emphasis on behavioural control. This pattern is considered alongside Long et al. [30], who in a meta-analysis consider teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy as important components of implementing inclusive education. At the same time, the results of Russell et al. [31] caution against excessive generalisation of teachers' attitudes: although attitudes towards the inclusion of students with autism were mainly positive, they depended on a number of factors, and the effect of training and previous experience appeared ambiguous.

One practical implication of the model is that teacher training should cover not only the formation of positive beliefs concerning inclusion, but also the ability to turn these beliefs into specific pedagogical decisions. A similar conclusion follows from the review by Maldonado-García et al. [32], where the positive attitudes of prospective teachers towards inclusion coexist with stereotypes and resistance, while specialised training, contact with people with disabilities and practical experience in a diverse environment are defined as important factors in forming inclusive attitudes. This supports our conclusion that professional development should be connected with practice and supported at the organisational level.

The synthesis also suggests that accessibility should be treated as a property of pedagogical design, rather than as a system of adaptations introduced only after barriers have affected individual students. At the same time, this conclusion requires caution. Zhang et al. [28] showed that the empirical base of UDL is characterised by unequal coverage of individual principles, an insufficiently clear connection between the declared UDL components and the interventions actually implemented, as well as a lack of theoretical justification for the implementation process. Thus, the inclusion of UDL in our integrated model should be understood as a promising mechanism for proactively ensuring accessibility, but not as a universal technology with guaranteed effectiveness regardless of the method of implementation.

The role assigned to school belonging in the review also supports the need for a multilevel treatment of the educational environment. In the proposed model, belonging is not simply one of the psychological components, but an interpretive indicator of the extent to which organisational, pedagogical and interpersonal conditions are perceived by the student as inclusive. Štremfel et al. [33], in their review of 86 studies, found that school belonging is determined by factors at different levels, while research literature lacks studies of their interaction. It is here that the results of our synthesis have additional conceptual significance: they connect belonging with pedagogical accessibility, the quality of relationships and structural safety within one model.

A similar interlevel dependence appeared particularly important for trauma-informed approaches. Our results showed that psychological safety cannot be ensured only by separate supportive actions of a teacher. Wilson-Ching and Berger [5] confirm the central role of relationship building in trauma-informed frameworks, but at the same time record significant

variability in the methods of their implementation between institutions. Newton et al. [34] also identified promising results of trauma-informed programmes in Australian schools, but differences in staff training and implementation complicated comparison of the programmes. The organisational dimension is traced even more clearly in Onipede et al. [35]: a trauma-informed school provides for a combination of organisational and policy changes, professional development and educational or clinical practices, while applying only one component does not characterise a school as systemically trauma-informed. The authors also identified insufficient attention to racial equity in the models described.

Taken together, the review findings support a systemic understanding of an inclusive and safe educational environment. Its quality is determined not by the number of individual programmes, but by the consistency of the organisational, pedagogical, interpersonal and individual psychological levels. A promising direction for further studies is the empirical verification of the proposed model, particularly the establishment of the strength of connections between its components, comparison of different types of educational institutions and study of which interlevel configurations best support students with different educational needs. Specific attention is required to verify whether universal mechanisms of safety and inclusion work equally for groups at increased risk of exclusion. This creates a basis for the transition from conceptual synthesis to conclusions concerning the key psychological and pedagogical conditions for forming an integrated educational environment.

A further limitation concerns overlap among the studies included in the selected reviews and meta-analyses. The 35 publications are units of documentary analysis rather than 35 independent experiments, and some may discuss the same underlying primary studies. Repeated agreement across reviews therefore should not be interpreted as an equivalent number of independent replications. Differences in educational stage, disability representation, national context, and outcome measurement also restrict direct transfer between settings. The proposed connections between the four levels remain analytical propositions requiring prospective assessment; the present review does not demonstrate their temporal order, relative strength, or causal direction.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This integrative literature review indicates that inclusion and safety of the educational environment should be considered as interconnected characteristics whose effectiveness is determined not by separate measures, but by the consistency of psychological, pedagogical, interpersonal and organisational conditions. The conceptual and thematic analysis of 35 English-language peer-reviewed publications from 2021–2026 identified nine key content components: accessibility of learning, psychological and social safety, school and classroom climate, school belonging, pedagogical support, social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, trauma-informed practices, as well as teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy and professional development.

The analysis organised the conditions supporting an inclusive and safe educational environment into four interdependent levels. At the individual psychological level, the sense of safety, belonging and readiness to participate are defining; at the interpersonal level, trust, acceptance, support and freedom from stigmatisation; at the pedagogical level, accessible learning design, differentiation, SEL and trauma-informed interaction; at the organisational level, consistent policies, whole-school practices, professional support for teachers and mechanisms for preventing violence. It was identified that the most critical risks arise at the transitions between these levels, when formally proclaimed principles of inclusion are not supported by pedagogical practice or when supportive relationships are not accompanied by effective accessibility of learning.

The findings support evaluating and implementing an integrated model that combines Universal Design for Learning, teachers' professional development, psychological support systems, anti-bullying mechanisms, student participation in decision-making and regular assessment of school climate. Particular attention should be given to groups at increased risk of social exclusion.

The limitations of the study include purposive rather than random selection of publications, inclusion of only English-language publications, heterogeneity of the methodological designs of primary studies and absence of a new quantitative pooling of their results. Further research should test the proposed four-level model empirically, compare its applicability across different educational institutions, and examine which mechanisms most consistently support inclusion, psychological safety, and social belonging at the same time.

Author Contributions

Yuliia Bondarenko: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing. Olena Akimova: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft. Iryna Samoilova: Investigation, Data Curation, Validation, Writing – Original Draft. Iryna Batareina: Resources, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing. Maiia Suprun: Literature Review, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing. All authors contributed to the development of the study, critically reviewed the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to

be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability

The materials supporting this literature review are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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