



# Educational Stratification and Psychosocial Development: A Review of Self-Efficacy, Academic Resilience, and Sense of Belonging

**Submission:**  
May 19, 2026

**Acceptance:**  
May 22, 2026

**Published:**  
Jun 30, 2026

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<https://doi.org/10.66412/ed.v35i2.122>

## Abstract

Educational systems globally have long been linked to the perpetuation of socioeconomic hierarchies, but little is understood about the specific psychological processes by which pupils internalize structural inequality. This review examines the association between educational stratification and psychosocial development, with an emphasis on the impact of class-based institutional arrangements on marginalized groups of students' sense of belonging, academic resilience, and self-efficacy beliefs. The study employs a systematic thematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 1977 and 2024. This review is based on searches conducted in ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using Boolean search strings across three conceptual domains. It incorporates foundational sociological and psychological theoretical works from the 1970s to the 1990s, alongside contemporary empirical contributions, as the conceptual framework of the review. Three broad topic groups were identified: intersectional compounding of race, class, and gender; relational and cultural belonging as a protective factor; and structural mechanisms of psychological deterioration. The results lead to the development of a Socio-Psychological Stratification Model (SPSM) by integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Bandura's social cognitive theory, and Bourdieu's field theory. Directions for future research and implications for institutional policy reform and equity-oriented teaching are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Academic resilience, educational stratification, marginalized students, self-efficacy, sense of belonging

## To cite this article:

Maurya, A., Maurya, T.B. (2026). Educational stratification and psychosocial development: A review of self-efficacy, academic resilience, and sense of belonging. *Education and Development*, 35(2). 16–27. <https://doi.org/10.66412/ed.v35i2.122>

## Introduction

While formal education is supposed to be the driver of social mobility, it is often a stratification tool that systematically reproduces social hierarchies on the bases of class, race and geography. Despite decades of global reform, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report indicates that access to education remains profoundly inequitable, signifying a systemic failure to interrupt the perpetuation of generational poverty (UNESCO, 2023). This persistence is not accidental. As Blanden et al. (2023) show, socio-economic gaps in educational achievement have been entrenched in the Global North and the Global South over the last four decades. The data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) consistently reveal that socioeconomic background is a key determinant of academic performance, controlling for

school-level resources, in member and partner countries. Such statistical regularity indicates a disparity in material resources and in the nature of the expectations and valuations that are communicated, in a more nuanced way, to students of different social positions, ultimately limiting their psychosocial development, self-perceptions and sense of belonging.

The field of sociological studies of education and inequality has a considerable body of well-received research. Starting with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) classic theory of cultural reproduction, through to Anyon's (1980) accounts of pedagogical practices that vary by class, to more recent studies on the ideology in curriculum (Apple, 2004), researchers have amassed a strong evidence-based case that schools are not neutral sorting mechanisms. Instead, they actively normalize and sustain the existing hierarchies

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in various ways, such as allocating knowledge unequally, favouring some cultural representations, and assigning students to ability groups or tracks (Oakes, 2005). This collection of research has also provided valuable insights into how institutional inequality is reproduced and has shown less sensitivity to the social and psychosocial implications for individual students as they navigate the levels of hierarchy.

This body of work has been accompanied by a considerable output from educational psychology about the motivational and cognitive factors that impinge upon academic achievement. Of the three, one of the most reliable predictors of academic involvement, persistence and achievement is self-efficacy, which is a person's belief in their competence to perform behaviours that are required to achieve specific attainments (Bandura, 1997). There has also been a long-standing empirical focus on related constructs like academic resilience and an understanding of belonging. Yet an established drawback of this psychological approach is the focus on the variables studied as relatively uncontextualized, personality-based traits, without taking into account the structural contexts in which they are produced and sustained. Bandura identified mastery experiences and vicarious learning within the social environment as key factors in efficacy beliefs, and institutional arrangements that are not egalitarian will affect these social settings.

More recent scholarship has critically examined the tendency to treat educational disparity and psychosocial development as separate topics of investigation and has made the case for frameworks that address both dimensions simultaneously. Educational environments that demonstrate equitable teaching practices and authentic inclusive climates are associated with significant gains in students' psychosocial health, including reduced chronic stress, enhanced future orientation, and more affirming academic experiences (Braun et al., 2024). Other research has documented the strong influence of broader sociopolitical and educational structures surrounding schools on students' perceptions of belonging and academic motivation (e.g., Rosario & Destin, 2024), especially for marginalized and racially minoritized students whose sense of connection to institutional legitimacy is further complicated by structural exclusion. The converging evidence makes it difficult to describe categories such as belonging, resilience and self-efficacy as individual psychological characteristics that pupils either possess or do not possess independently of circumstance. Each of these categories is constructed and sustained within a framework of structural and relational constraints that are unevenly distributed across the socio-economic landscape of formal education. Any real effort to understand educational stratification must adopt a comprehensive analytic approach that accounts for the institutional contexts that promote inequality as well as the psychosocial processes through which those contexts are embodied in the lives and developmental pathways of students.

The present review is an attempt to fill this theoretical and empirical void and to set up a long-term dialogue between the sociological and the psychological traditions. Students of low socioeconomic backgrounds, students of racial and ethnic minorities, and first-generation students in school systems where there is official stratification. In keeping with Crenshaw's (1989) understanding of intersectionality, these categorizations are not seen as one but rather are recognized as multiple axes of disadvantage that are mutually constitutive and compounded. It first reviews the literature on educational stratification and the effects found on the self-efficacy, academic resilience, and belongingness of marginalized students to create a blended socio-psychological framework that can then inform research of the future.

### Objectives and Research Questions

The main purpose of this review is to integrate the peer-reviewed literature on educational stratification and its documented effects on the psychosocial variables of academic resilience, sense of belonging, and self-efficacy among marginalized student populations to propose an integrated theoretical framework for future research.

The review is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do class-based institutional practices and structural arrangements that mirror educational stratification impact the development of self-efficacy beliefs of underprivileged students?

**RQ2:** In what ways do school-level disparities impede or, at times, foster the academic resilience and sense of belonging of children from marginalized backgrounds?

**RQ3:** What are the main gaps yet to be addressed in the present theoretical frameworks describing the socio-psychological experiences of underprivileged kids in stratified school systems?

### Literature Synthesis

#### Educational Stratification: Models for Classification

The prevailing thesis in contemporary stratification research, as articulated by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), asserts that educational institutions perpetuate existing social and cultural disparities rather than providing equitable chances. This structural replication intensifies as socioeconomic achievement gaps expand at every educational level, aggravated by affluent families pooling resources within elite educational institutions (Kaye, 2024; Chmielewski, 2019). Essential notions encompass "habitus," which denotes the social inclinations that shape individual behaviours, and "cultural capital," referring to the qualities and knowledge esteemed in educational contexts. The congruence of cultural capital with the habitus of privileged households disadvantages working-class and minority students, a phenomenon that educational institutions frequently misconstrue as variations in ability or effort, thereby perpetuating class reproduction through seemingly

meritocratic practices.

It is important to critically examine the assumptions of this paradigm. Bourdieu and Passeron's analysis have been criticized for its determinism, where working-class pupils are so molded by their habitus that resistance or upward mobility is logically difficult to explain. (Nash, 1999) The paradigm also runs the risk of devaluing the agency of marginalized students and families in negotiating, resisting, and selectively appropriating dominant cultural forms. The present review acknowledges these limitations and introduces asset-based perspectives, especially Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, into the analytical framework.

Oakes (2005) demonstrates that academic tracking through ability grouping intensifies disadvantage instead of addressing cognitive variety. Cross-national research, such as those by Van de Werfhorst (2019), demonstrate that tight tracking reinforces the correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Students in lesser tracks get substandard instruction, reduced instructor expectations, and are hindered from obtaining critical academic qualifications. This procedure negatively impacts their psychological well-being; Parker et al. (2018) emphasize that low-track placement might skew social comparisons, resulting in tenuous self-beliefs and constrained educational ambitions. Track placement is significantly correlated with students' social and racial origins, frequently irrespective of their actual academic performance.

Recent contributions have updated this view. Ladson-Billings (2006) redefined the persistent achievement gaps as an accumulated educational debt, shifting the explanatory burden from the characteristics of underprivileged students to the historical and political failures of the institutions that serve them. Lareau (2003) has shown that middle-class families intentionally pass on cultural capital valued by schools through concerted cultivation, while working-class families, not because of any structural deficits, provide their children with fewer linguistic and interactional tools favored in schools. Recent research has shown how school disruptions during the pandemic from 2020 to 2022 exacerbated existing stratification gaps, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds who faced intensified deficits in academic resources and psychosocial support systems (Engzell et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

### **Self-Efficacy in Stratified Settings**

According to Bandura's (1977, 1997) social cognitive theory, four sources of experience influence the development of self-efficacy beliefs: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious learning through observation of similar others, verbal persuasion from authoritative social agents, and the interpretation of the physiological and emotional states as signs of competence. Once formed, these beliefs serve as cognitive regulators of goal setting, effort, persistence, and vulnerability to self-doubt, making self-efficacy one of the most conceptually coherent and empirically robust predictors of academic engagement (Pajares, 1996). The

social cognitive framework embeds theoretical assumptions that we need to scrutinize carefully. Bandura's account was largely built on laboratory and clinical studies of samples lacking socioeconomic diversity and institutional stratification. The four sources of efficacy are proposed to be universal, but the contexts in which they operate are not socially neutral. This limitation has been under-recognized in the prevailing literature on self-efficacy, which has largely regarded efficacy development as a process that occurs in a structural context-independent manner (Pajares, 1996).

The literature has lagged in examining the systematic distortion of all four sources of efficacy under stratified educational environments. While mastery experiences contribute significantly to the diversity in self-efficacy growth (Kleppang et al., 2023), educators' deficit beliefs frequently mask the systematic withholding of success-enabling tasks from low-income pupils in stratified schools (Gorski, 2016). Students in lower academic tracks watch peers equally limited by structural placement, receive verbal messages reflecting diminished expectations, and endure prolonged physiological stress. Empirical evidence substantiates this structural distortion; for example, Tan (2023) identified a consistent positive correlation between socioeconomic position and self-efficacy across 69 nations, even after accounting for educational resources. Research done after 2020 has supported this concern, finding that school shutdowns caused large declines in academic self-efficacy for low-income and minority students (Hammerstein et al., 2021)

The expectancy-value theory proposed by Eccles and colleagues (1983) has been redefined as Situated Expectancy-Value Theory, emphasizing that structural arrangements such as tracking and resource allocation affect both students' expected actions and their beliefs about their potential achievements (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). In monitored schools, these elements are systematically distinguished by placement, resulting in a cumulative environment of diminished expectations. The integration of expectancy-value and self-efficacy frameworks highlights a shared focus on the quality of the social feedback environment, an issue that cannot be adequately addressed without examining the structural mechanisms that produce it.

### **Community Feeling and Academic Resilience**

Masten (2001) convincingly stated that resilience is not an exceptional trait of individuals but a prevalent adaptive mechanism dependent on protective circumstances, including positive adult relationships, access to developmental resources, and active community engagement. Recent empirical studies validate that resilience is fundamentally a relationship achievement. Benner et al. (2022) found peer support and protective adult-student ties as reliable cross-cultural resilience factors; institutional mentoring programs thrive mostly due to the quality of relationships rather than structural design (Visser et al., 2023). Institutional environments inside

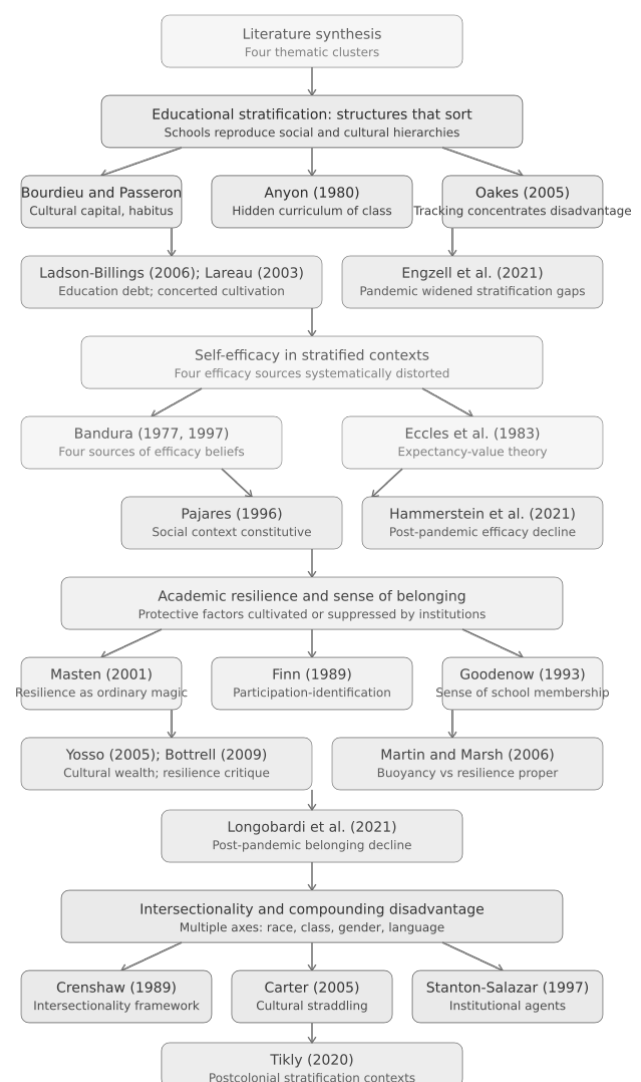
schools either foster resilience or systematically undermine it. Masten's concept has faced criticism for concentrating predominantly on the individual level of risk and protection while neglecting the structural and institutional factors that generate risk initially (Bottrell, 2009). Consequently, numerous individual initiatives aimed at fostering resilience fail to enhance student outcomes unless they are anchored in a comprehensive, relational sense of belonging (Brown et al., 2025). A thorough examination of the resilience literature necessitates distinguishing between resilience as an individual characteristic that may be enhanced and resilience as a systemic result dependent on equitably dispersed institutional conditions.

Finn's (1989) participation-identification model elucidates that belonging is established as school identity is formed via robust engagement in the institution's activities. This practice deliberately restricts students in poorer academic tracks, minority students subjected to excessive disciplinary scrutiny, and students excluded from enrichment activities. Goodenow (1993) characterized belonging as the sensation of being accepted and supported inside the educational setting. It serves as a motivator regardless of one's ability level. A sense of belonging to the school community is significantly and favourably correlated with academic resilience, academic buoyancy, and psychological well-being among marginalized kids (Arslan & Coşkun, 2022). The attenuation in stratified contexts represents a considerable loss, alongside the cognitive impairments stemming from insufficient schooling. Martin and Marsh (2006) delineated a crucial difference between academic buoyancy and genuine resilience, asserting that disadvantaged adolescents in stratified contexts frequently confront persistent structural disadvantages rather than only recovering from extraordinary misfortune. Recent empirical research has underscored the significance of belonging as a psychological trait. Post-2020 research indicates that minority and low-income students experienced a greater decline in their sense of school belonging due to pandemic disruptions compared to their more privileged counterparts, and that the restoration of this sense of belonging has lagged behind academic recovery in the following years (Longobardi et al., 2021).

Yosso (2005) challenged deficit perspectives by conceptualizing aspirational, linguistic, family, social, navigational, and resistance capital as legitimate community resources often unrecognized and/or underutilized by educational institutions. This reframing is theoretically important because it changes the analytical question from why marginalized students lack resilience to why institutions fail to recognize and nurture the resilience that already exists within their communities. However, it is important to recognize that the cultural wealth model has been criticized for potentially idealizing community resources and not adequately considering the practical challenges of translating them into institutional settings (Yosso, 2005).

### Cumulative Disadvantage and Intersectionality

The term "intersectionality," coined by Crenshaw (1989), refers to the interconnectedness of various systems of oppression that create complex patterns of discrimination. Standard approaches in education often overlook these compounded inequities by treating aspects of inequality in isolation, rendering interventions insufficient. Studies have shown that Black children navigate cultural straddling, requiring them to adapt to conflicting cultural codes (Carter, 2005). The challenges faced by low-income Latino students are aggravated by the social and racial dynamics within schools (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Early research primarily focuses on North American and British contexts, limiting its applicability in postcolonial and Global South settings. However, emerging studies are addressing issues such as caste and language policies in South Asian and sub-Saharan African education, revealing additional layers of stratification (Tikly, 2020). Gabriel (2021) highlights that race, ethnicity, and gender interplay significantly in postcolonial contexts, affecting access to knowledge and language.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Architecture of the Literature Synthesis

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The literature synthesized thus far shows a continuing convergence of sociological and psychological perspectives on a common set of issues. Still, the frameworks currently approach these issues from largely distinct disciplinary perspectives. In this paper, we present the Socio-Psychological Stratification Model (SPSM), a comprehensive theoretical framework to map out the processes through which macro-level structural inequalities are transformed into the psychosocial development of individual students. SPSM brings together three theoretical traditions, each emphasizing a particular level of analysis, and spells out the mechanisms of their interaction.

Before we discuss the SPSM, it is important to situate it within the context of contemporary integrative models that have likewise attempted to bridge structural and psychological accounts of educational disadvantage. The model of student involvement (Connell, 1990) explains structural factors as precursors to individual motivational states, a significant first step in integration. However, it does not explicitly specify the mechanisms through which particular structural arrangements create different efficacy beliefs, nor does it consider intersectional dimensions of disadvantage. Kaplan and Maehr's (2007) contextualized achievement goal theory places motivational processes within institutional goal structures and pays closer attention to classroom-level conditions than do most psychological models, but it remains largely psychological in foundation and does not systematically address macro-level class stratification. Earlier attempts to synthesize Bourdieu and Bronfenbrenner, most notably Paat's (2013) application of both frameworks to the educational experiences of immigrant youth, illustrate the beneficial complementarity of the two traditions but fail to include a psychological outcomes dimension that could delineate the effects on efficacy, resilience, and belonging resulting from structural conditions. The SPSM builds on these contributions by integrating all three levels and by specifying the proximate institutional mechanisms that translate macro-structural variables into micro-level psychological effects.

### Layer One: Structural Input (Bourdieu's Field Theory and Cultural Capital)

The SPSM's basic layer is based on Bourdieu's theory of the field and the related concepts of cultural capital and habitus. Schools are considered social arenas where different types of capital are valued differently and where pupils' ingrained tendencies either fit or do not fit the cultural norms of the environment. Students whose home environments are incompatible with the school culture, particularly those from working-class, minority, or non-English-speaking families, see the school as a place where the implicit rules, valued behaviors, and accepted modes of expression are basically foreign to them. This imbalance leads to recurring experiences of symbolic exclusion, invisibility and failure that are systematically, not randomly, distributed. This layer of the SPSM provides sociological understandings of the

structural conditions that produce different experiences of inclusion and exclusion and of recognition and invisibility.

One must be aware of the considerable limitations of this theoretical framework. Bourdieu's paradigm has been criticized for its predisposition to structural determinism, whereby the impact of the habitus limits theoretical reflection on individual agency, resistance, or upward mobility (Nash, 1999). SPSM does not subscribe to an uncritical determinism but rather sees structural conditions as setting the parameters within which individual agency operates, while still allowing for the possibility of resistance or reform. This qualification is central to the framework's alignment with asset-based approaches, such as Yosso's (2005) model of cultural wealth, which details the complex forms of capital that marginalized communities develop in direct response to structural conditions.

### Layer Two: Institutional Mediation (Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory)

The second layer draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to describe the processes through which macro-structural factors impact the everyday experience of the individual student. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that development occurs within a hierarchy of interacting environmental systems: the microsystem (immediate contexts such as the classroom and family); the mesosystem (interactions between these contexts); the exosystem (institutional frameworks such as district-level policies that indirectly affect the student); and the macrosystem (the dominant cultural ideologies and structural conditions of the broader society). This architecture provides the SPSM with a multi-layered explanatory framework through which class-based stratification at the macrosystem level, as expressed in policy decisions about resource distribution and monitoring at the exosystem level, is mapped onto differentiated classroom experiences at the microsystem level.

We need to note a key limitation of Bronfenbrenner's original ecological model. The framework is quite precise in capturing the nested architecture of developmental systems, but is less clear about the power dynamics that structure those systems and the ways in which disparities are reproduced across levels. The SPSM addresses this head-on by incorporating Bourdieu's view of power and capital at Layer One, treating ecological systems not as neutral nested contexts but as institutional arrangements with differential access to resources and power dynamics. The SPSM suggests that macro-level inequality influences individual students through proximate mechanisms, including teacher expectations, peer composition, curriculum quality, and the existence of institutional agents, which serve as the institutional link between structural conditions and psychological outcomes.

### Layer Three: Psychosocial effects (Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura)

The third layer draws on Bandura's (1997) social cognitive

theory to determine the psychological consequences that arise when hierarchical institutional structures continually thwart the conditions for healthy psychosocial development. Our literature synthesis suggests that environments defined by tracking, low teacher expectations, and insufficient resources systematically undermine all four sources of Bandura's efficacy information: mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. The SPSM does not see reduced self-efficacy as a personal failure but as a predictable psychological response to structural constraints that have blocked the experiential bases for the development of efficacy.

A major limitation of Bandura's social cognitive theory as an independent framework is that it is formulated in socially and institutionally decontextualized research environments, which leads to a model of efficacy development where the four sources are treated as universally applicable, ignoring the influence of structural conditions on access to those sources. The SPSM overcomes this limitation by not treating Bandura's framework as a stand-alone explanation of psychological development but rather as the outcome specification layer of a multi-tiered model, where the structural and institutional conditions prevailing at Layers One and Two determine the quality and availability of efficacy-enhancing experiences at Layer Three. In this sense, academic resilience and sense of belonging are seen as additional psychosocial outcomes that are created and sustained by the quality of the institutional mediation layer, which in turn shapes the relationship between structural input and academic performance. This specification has been validated with empirical evidence since 2020. Recent studies have shown that pandemic-induced disruptions to institutional mediation, especially the decline of teacher-student relational quality and peer belonging during remote education, led to quantifiable declines in self-efficacy and belonging, with more pronounced effects for students from marginalized backgrounds (Hammerstein et al., 2021; Longobardi et al., 2021).

### **Integrative Value and Operationalisation of the SPSM**

What is explanatory about the SPSM is that it says you have to look at all three layers together. In a strictly sociological analysis, the psychological effects of stratification can be considered secondary phenomena, while a strictly psychological analysis might pathologize individual responses to structural conditions. The SPSM posits that self-efficacy, resilience, and belonging are socially constructed within specific institutional contexts and that interventions focusing on only one level, while ignoring other levels, are likely to result in incomplete and unstable outcomes.

To address concerns about operationalizability, the SPSM includes measurable indicators for each of its three analytical tiers. Structural input Layer One: Institutional factors (track placement, resource allocation metrics, curriculum differentiation indicators and suspension and exclusion rates by socioeconomic position and race). Layer Two is the institutional mediation of these relational

factors, such as teacher expectancy metrics, belonging climate assessments, culturally sensitive pedagogy indices, and access to institutional representatives. The psychosocial outcomes are assessed at Layer Three, using validated measures such as Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy assessments, Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership scale, and Martin and Marsh's (2006) Academic Resilience Scale. This operationalization allows the SPSM to be empirically tested in multilevel modelling designs in which structural variables at Layers One and Two are predictors of psychosocial outcomes at Layer Three and institutional mediation variables are intervening mechanisms.

## **Methods**

This study employs a systematic thematic review process that is suitable for synthesizing empirical and theoretical literature across fields and for developing conceptual frameworks from existing knowledge, instead of using primary data. The systematic part of the methodology includes the transparent and reproducible description of search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria and analytical procedures. The thematic dimension is the interpretive synthesis of literature that identifies patterns of meaning that recur across studies. This approach is consistent with the broader tradition of qualitative systematic review (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is well suited to the aim of this paper, which is to describe what the entire body of literature suggests about the relationship between educational stratification and student psychosocial outcomes. This methodology is characterized by its interpretive orientation, comparable to that of narrative conceptual review, but distinguished from pure narrative approaches by its explicit and reproducible search procedures, systematic application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and structured thematic coding protocol.

### **Database Search Strategy and Selection**

A literature search was conducted via the search of four electronic databases: ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus and Google Scholar. These databases were chosen for the breadth and complementarity of their coverage of the educational, psychological, and sociological literature relevant to the review's topic. ERIC was prioritized for educational research; PsycINFO for psychological constructs such as self-efficacy, resilience, and belonging; Scopus for multidisciplinary peer-reviewed literature; and Google Scholar for extensive retrieval of foundational theoretical texts and book chapters not indexed in the other three databases.

Searches were conducted using Boolean search strings with terms from three conceptual domains. The actual strings found in the databases were:

Domain 1: Inequity in Education

("educational stratification" OR "school inequality" OR "social class" OR "ability tracking" OR "academic tracking" OR "achievement gap")

Domain 2: Psychosocial outcome measures:

("self-efficacy" OR "academic resilience" OR "sense of belonging" OR "school membership" OR "academic buoyancy")

Domain 3: Target Population:

("marginalized students" OR "low-income students" OR "minority students" OR "first-generation learners" OR "socioeconomically disadvantaged.")

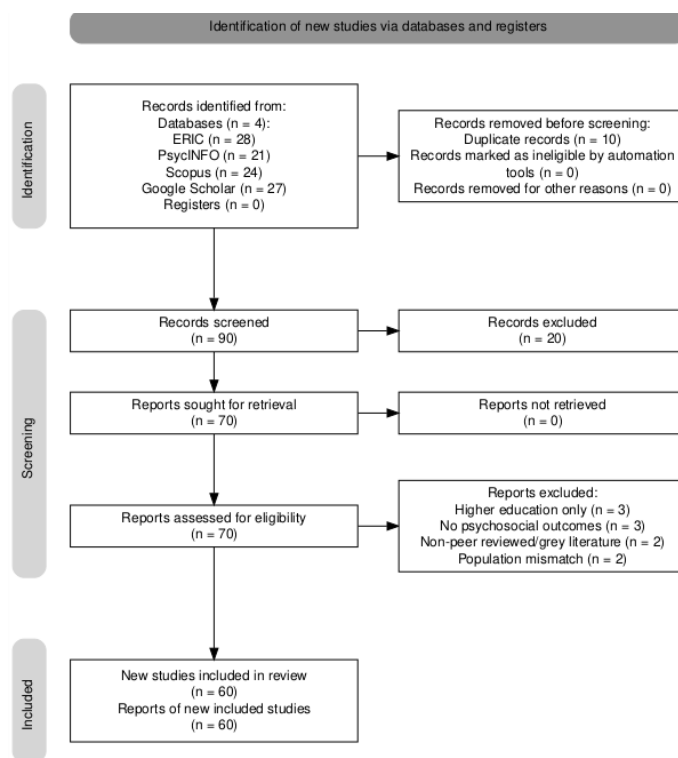
master string in all database queries:

("educational stratification" OR "social class" OR "ability tracking") AND ("self-efficacy" OR "academic resilience" OR "sense of belonging") AND ("marginalized students" OR "low-income students" OR "minority students")

Searches were conducted in ERIC, PsycINFO and Scopus with the title, abstract and keyword fields used as the primary search parameters. For Google Scholar searches, the entire combined string was used. Results were sorted by relevancy and reviewed across the first ten pages of results. The systematic search focused on peer-reviewed literature published between 2000 and 2024, a period during which the integration of sociological and psychological perspectives on school-based inequality has been most vigorously pursued. Researchers deliberately kept a great deal of important theoretical and empirical work prior to this period. The review is not based on background materials but on the works of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Bandura (1977), Anyon (1980), Eccles et al. (1983), Oakes (2005), Finn (1989), Crenshaw (1989), and Goodenow (1993). The period of the reviewed literature is from 1977 to 2024. Figure 2 illustrates the detailed source selection procedure.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they satisfied all of the following criteria: published in a peer-reviewed journal or as a chapter in a scholarly volume; written in English; focused on psychosocial variables (e.g., self-efficacy, resilience, or sense of belonging) in educational settings; and used samples described as students from socioeconomically disadvantaged, racial or ethnic minority, first-generation, or otherwise marginalized backgrounds. In the review, book-length theoretical contributions from seminal figures were included regardless of their publication date, because of their essential importance in the conceptual framework of the review. Studies were excluded if they were restricted to higher education populations, economic or policy analyses that did not take into account of student-level psychosocial outcomes, or grey literature, including institutional reports, policy briefs, and conference proceedings that were not peer reviewed. These criteria led to an initial retrieval of more than 90 sources, of which about 60 works were selected for in-depth thematic analysis, based on their direct involvement in the intersection between structural and psychological factors.



**Figure 2:** PRISMA-Informed Source Selection and Screening Process for the Systematic Thematic Review of Educational Stratification and Psychosocial Outcomes (1977–2024)

### Thematic Coding and Analysis

Data were analysed thematically using the six-phase reflective framework as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). During the familiarization phase, all selected texts were carefully read with attention to their main arguments, theoretical bases, empirical findings and admitted limitations. In the first phase of coding, open codes were assigned to segments that related to any aspect of the relationship between institutional conditions and student psychological outcomes. Representative codes included foreclosure mastery, teacher expectation effects, cultural capital mismatch, protective relational belonging, intersectional load, and asset-based resilience. During the theme creation phase, codes that had conceptual similarities were grouped into candidate themes. These were then reviewed in the theme review phase to ensure they were coherent within themselves and distinct from other themes. Themes were combined, split or redefined as necessary to the analytic procedure. In the theme-defining phase, each theme was given a descriptive label and a short narrative statement reflecting its main point. The entire coding process was documented in a manual codebook that was kept throughout the study.

Due to the interpretative nature of thematic analysis in the context of a qualitative systematic review, inter-rater reliability coefficients (e.g., Cohen's kappa) were not calculated. To establish trustworthiness, a systematic and transparent codebook, full documentation of all coding

decisions, and iterative reflexive examination of thematic categories were employed, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for establishing rigor in qualitative synthesis.

## Results

Thematic analysis of the reviewed literature revealed three main themes that together describe the processes through which structural stratification impacts the psychosocial experiences of marginalized students and the relational and cultural conditions that provide partial resistance to such impacts.

### Theme One: Structural Mechanisms of Psychosocial Breakdown

The predominant theme was the systematic psychosocial disadvantage faced by underprivileged students. Three predominant themes emerged: limited mastery experiences, inequitable curriculum quality impacting academic identity, and resource inequities inducing chronic stress. According to Albert Bandura's mastery theory, kids in low-track classrooms have fewer demanding learning experiences, hence constraining their efficacy growth. Decreased confidence diminishes engagement with forthcoming tasks and perpetuates retention in lesser tracks. This loop is exacerbated by social comparisons and diminished expectations, which may diminish educational goals (Parker et al., 2021).

Curriculum inequality exacerbates academic identity erosion by omitting the intellectual and cultural contributions of marginalized groups, indicating that their knowledge is deemed inferior. Educational settings significantly affect a sense of belonging; competitive conditions frequently exacerbate disadvantage, whereas supportive atmospheres foster social and emotional growth (Wang et al., 2022). Resource disparities, frequently associated with educational funding mechanisms, generate ongoing stress due to inadequate conditions, high teacher attrition, and restricted opportunities. Poverty-induced stress impedes neurodevelopment and the executive functioning essential for mastery experiences (Santiago et al., 2023). In high-stakes tests, elevated cortisol responses may impair academic performance and skew accomplishment results (Heissel et al., 2021).

### Theme 2: Relational and Cultural Belonging as a Protective Factor

The second subject addresses how underprivileged students cultivate resilience and a feeling of belonging in the face of institutional disadvantages. The results do not endorse a wholly deterministic viewpoint; rather, they highlight relational and cultural elements that may influence the impact of inequality on psychosocial outcomes. Teacher-student connections have emerged as a significant protective factor. Students' views of acceptance and motivating support from educators have consistently correlated with enhanced engagement and school adjustment (Goodenow,

1993). Stable relationships with supportive adults are acknowledged as essential factors in fostering resilience (Masten, 2001). Teachers frequently serve as institutional actors for marginalized learners, facilitating access to opportunities and resources. When educators merge elevated standards with authentic support, they can deliver affirmative efficacy signals that mitigate adverse structural experiences. Research indicates that racial congruence between teachers and students can enhance the sense of belonging in school for kids from minority backgrounds (Cherng & Halpin, 2016).

Culturally responsive pedagogy and supportive peer networks serve as protective measures. Acknowledging students' cultural knowledge and experiences as valuable assets enhances academic identity and participation (Yosso, 2005). Likewise, co-ethnic peer interactions can offer emotional support, bolster self-efficacy, and augment a sense of belonging in educational environments (Dost-Gözkan, 2022).

### Theme Three: Intersectional Overlap of Race, Class, and Gender

The third subject addresses the interplay between educational stratification and gender, ethnicity, and language, resulting in compounded psychosocial disadvantages. These discrepancies cannot be comprehensively understood by singular-category methodologies. Yu et al. (2021) discovered that males who rigidly adhered to traditional masculine norms exhibited diminished academic desire, as academic involvement was at odds with prevailing gender expectations. Likewise, Schwab and Dupuis (2022) indicated that masculine norms inhibited help-seeking behaviours, leading pupils to internalize their academic difficulties. Yan and Gai (2022) indicated that resilient low-socioeconomic status kids had enhanced academic identity, future goals, and accomplishment motivation, underscoring the significance of supporting educational environments. Borrero and Yeh (2020) demonstrated that racial and linguistic minority students frequently encounter cultural invisibility, underscoring the necessity for culturally sustaining educational methods that acknowledge students' intersecting identities as assets rather than shortcomings.

## Discussion

It is important to explicitly recognize the theoretical linkages among these themes before discussing how they fit together and with the proposed Socio-Psychological Stratification Model (SPSM). The conceptual boundaries among these three themes are porous, illustrating the complex and reciprocal nature of students' lived experiences. The structural mechanisms of psychosocial breakdown (Theme One) do not operate in isolation. Their impact is dynamically mediated by the existence of relational and cultural protective factors (Theme Two). Theme Three, the intersectional convergence of race, class, and gender, provides a compounded framework to view the structural adversities and relational protections variably. It is therefore

better to think of these themes as overlapping components of the multi-layered educational experience, rather than as separate entities.

The three thematic clusters are aligned with the three layers of the SPSM. Bourdieu's first layer is reflected in the structural mechanisms of Theme One. The cultural capital framework stratifies the fields, and the institutional manifestations of this stratification are tracking, curriculum disparity, and resource deficiency. These are the pupils who are on the margin of the field, who are disadvantaged pupils whose habitus is not congruent with the field culture. Theme Two's protective factors, teacher relationships, culturally relevant pedagogy, and peer belonging align with the ecological mediation layer, which were identified by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as conditions that buffer the negative influences of the macro systems. This synthesis presents a description of their psychological mechanisms: mastery experiences, vicarious learning and verbal persuasion, which Bandura (1997) describes as sources of self-efficacy. The SPSM is enhanced in Theme Three by introducing the concept of intersectionality, which not only strengthens the processes at the three levels but also reconstitutes them.

The literature reports three strains that need to be mentioned. A clear understanding of the relationship between structural conditions and psychological outcomes does not indicate a one-to-one link and the existence of protective factors means that there is scope to reduce the impact of structural disadvantage to some degree, identifying targets for intervention. Second, the dynamic of stratification, if it becomes self-reinforcing, could build a momentum that may not be easily broken down by structural changes alone and requires a psychosocially conscious pedagogy in addition to structural change. Third, asset-based frameworks such as Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model highlight a persistent limitation in this literature: the tendency to view marginalized students primarily through a deficit lens, failing to recognize them as dynamic agents who possess valuable knowledge in the form of navigation, resistance, and community resilience.

## Conclusions and Implications

In this review, we synthesized the sociological and educational psychology literature to give a coherent understanding of the effect of educational stratification upon the psychological development of the marginalized students. The SPSM, along with Bourdieu, Bronfenbrenner, and Bandura, outlines links from macro-structural conditions to micro-level outcomes of self-efficacy, resilience, and belonging. The findings support school detracting, equity-based resource allocation, and the requirement of standards for culturally responsive teaching in teacher education. Professional development at the classroom level should include the effects of teacher expectations and verbal feedback practices, school climate initiatives should incorporate the structural conditions that have differential effects on belonging, and asset-based approaches should replace deficit-oriented intervention models.

Future research needs to prioritize longitudinal designs that track efficacy trajectories in both tracked and detracted environments, cross-national comparative studies that move beyond Anglophone contexts and intervention studies that assess the SPSM by simultaneously implementing and measuring changes across all three of its layers.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the use of AI-assisted tools for proofreading, structural editing, literature retrieval, and formatting support during the revision process, in compliance with the journal's guidelines. The authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and final content of this work.

## Funding

We received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of Interest

We declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Authorship

Atul Maurya: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, writing original draft preparation, Writing review & editing. Dr. Tej Bahadur Maurya: Conceptualization, Validation, Supervision, Writing review & editing.

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