

**Evidence on Relational Pedagogy as an Intervention for Emotional Regulation Among
Young Children Experiencing Adversity: A Scoping Review**

By

Ibidunni Abifoluwa Ogunbowale

Department of Early Childhood and Educational Foundations, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

ibidunniabifoluwa@gmail.com

Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and other early life stressors place young children at significant risk for problems with emotional regulation, social functioning, and general developmental outcomes. Emotional regulation, serves as an important protective factor, it helps children stay more resilient, more emotionally steady, and better able to adapt to adverse circumstances. Relational pedagogy has received increasing scholarly attention as a promising approach in early childhood settings, mainly because it emphasizes responsive, supportive, emotionally tuned educator–child relationships. This approach matters for children characterized by adversity, the review, managed, mapped and synthesised data on relational pedagogy and emotional regulation among young and disadvantaged children. The Joanna Briggs Institute method was adopted by the researcher and the PRISMA-ScR was used to guide the work.vThe researcher carried out broad research across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PubMed. Studies published from 2015 through 2026 was included, *provided that they examined* relational pedagogical approaches, childhood adversity, and emotional regulation outcomes for children aged 0–8 years. The review identified four main themes: components of relational pedagogy, trauma-informed and relationship-based interventions, emotional regulation as an outcome, and protective relationships and resilience. The study showed that relational pedagogy aids children in emotional regulation through teacher-child relationships and trauma-sensitive activities. Partnerships between families and schools are essential for emotional regulation and resilience. The evidence thus far suggests that relational pedagogy can insulate learners from the damaging effects of adversity, promoting resilience. There are still important gaps that remain – most notably, longitudinal evidence and a better understanding of implementation fidelity in various contexts. We also do not know whether these approaches are applicable in other cultural settings or in other commercial contexts.

Keywords: relational pedagogy, adverse childhood experiences, emotional regulation, trauma-informed education, teacher-child relationships

INTRODUCTION

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and various other types of childhood hardship such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction significantly threaten children's healthy development. Children who experience these problems often develop emotional difficulty and behaviours at school, and it can have long-term consequences throughout the lifespan. In early childhood, adversity is associated with difficulties in emotional regulation, peer relationship development, and adaptive daily functioning (Lipscomb *et al.*, 2021; Thurston *et al.*, 2018). These difficulties often persist into later developmental stages, the difficulties accumulate. Studies point to a link between early adversity and later maladaptive behaviours (Omopo *et al.*, 2025). There is a need to identify strategies to buffer children from these long-lasting effects, by establishing support systems that can guide them during the challenging period particularly during early childhood. Emotional regulation helps people manage their emotions across different types of situations in turn supports day to day functioning, and overall wellbeing.

Children who learn this early tend to interact, behave, and prepare for learning better. As Goldenthal *et al.* (2023) and Thurston *et al.* (2018) note, children with good emotional control usually develop positive peer relationships, behave better, and are ready to learn in class. Also, it protects children who have experienced trauma from some mental health issues later on. Therefore, emotional regulation may play a critical role in promoting resilience, as Omopo (2025) suggests.

In early childhood education, relational pedagogy is seen as a promising approach for helping children with their emotional development. It focuses on having teachers form caring and responsive connections with the students. According to McNally and Slutsky (2018) and Spilt & Koomen (2022), educators function as significant attachment figures. They offer children security to explore and comfort when distressed. Modern views on this include co-regulation – children learn how to self-regulate after repeated interactions" with sensitive adults (Maisyaroh, 2026; Nilfyr & Ewe, 2025). This aligns with trauma-informed teaching methods. These approaches aim to create environments that are safe, predictable, and supportive for children coming from adverse backgrounds (Sun *et al.*, 2023; Meldrum *et al.*, 2024).

A body of research shows that relationship-focused teaching methods could protect children facing adverse circumstances. For example, programmes like TBRI® and RLR use close

emotional connections, coping strategies, and strong teacher-child relationship to improve outcomes like self-control and social skills in young children with history of adversity (Stephenson & Yost, 2023; Goldenthal *et al.*, 2023; Meldrum *et al.*, 2024). Also, having support at home and good relationships between parents and teachers shield children from negative outcomes associated with adversity (Lewis *et al.*, 2024; Sciaraffa *et al.*, 2018). How parents raise their children shapes how those children develop, even when they face challenging circumstances (Quadri *et al.*, 2025).

Aim of the Study

This scoping review examines studies on relational pedagogy and its effect on young children's emotional regulation in adverse situations. It looks at how these methods used in early childhood settings help children's well-being and resilience. The review also assessed how teachers understand and use these strategies, helping children regulate emotions more effectively and demonstrate resilience from adverse experiences or disruptive situations. Specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine how relational pedagogy is conceptualised in studies involving young children experiencing adversity.
2. To identify relational practices and interventions used to support emotional regulation among young children experiencing adversity.
3. To map reported outcomes and evidence relating to emotional regulation, self-regulation, and resilience among young children experiencing adversity.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered:

1. How is relational pedagogy conceptualised in studies involving young children experiencing adversity?
2. What relational practices and interventions have been used to support emotional regulation among young children experiencing adversity?
3. What outcomes and evidence have been reported regarding emotional regulation, self-regulation, and resilience among young children experiencing adversity?

METHODS

Review Design

This study used a scoping review to map and combine literature on relational pedagogy as a way to support emotional regulation among young children experiencing adversity. A scoping review was selected since the topic encompasses diverse concepts, theories, and practices from early childhood ed, developmental psychology, and trauma-informed care. Guided by the Joanna Briggs Institute's scoping review method and PRISMA-ScR guidelines, the review was conducted to ensure transparency, rigour, and reproducibility

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility criteria were structured using the Population–Concept–Context (PCC) framework.

Population

Young children, from birth to eight years old and having faced adversity or ACEs, made up the study group. The researcher focused on children in early childhood settings such as preschools and daycare centres. Any focus on older individuals, such as adolescents and adults, were excluded since this review was aimed at a very specific age range – the early childhood years.

Concept

The review centred on relational pedagogy and its connection to emotional regulation in young children. It covered studies about teacher-child connections, co-regulation, attachment-focused teaching, and methods informed by dealing with trauma. Emotional response teaching and other relationship-based methods were also examined. Additionally, the review looked at how relational processes in schools enhance children' emotional regulation, self-regulation, socio-emotional growth, and resilience.

Context

The review focused mainly on early childhood education settings such as preschools, childcare centres, kindergartens, and early learning centres. Family learning centres were considered important. Young children usually begin forming key bonds with teachers and friends in these

places, enhancing their emotional and social development. Activities happening in clinics or hospitals, which lack an educational focus, were excluded from the review.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they were published between 2015 and 2026, were peer-reviewed, and written in the English language. Eligible studies employed qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, theoretical, or review designs. Studies were included if they focused on children aged 0–8 years, addressed adversity or trauma, and examined relational pedagogy or relationship-based practices in relation to emotional regulation, self-regulation, or resilience outcomes.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on adolescents or adults, or if they investigated medical or pharmacological interventions without educational relevance. Studies that did not address emotional regulation, self-regulation, or socio-emotional outcomes were excluded. In addition, studies lacking a relational or relationship-based pedagogical component, as well as non-peer-reviewed literature such as dissertations, conference abstracts, editorials, and commentaries, were excluded from the review.

Search Strategy

A broad search strategy was done across five electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PubMed. These were selected because they encompass a broad range in education, psychology, developmental science, and, also trauma related work. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords with subject headings, all linked to relational pedagogy, teacher–child relationships, co regulation, attachment-informed practice, trauma-informed care, emotional regulation, self-regulation, adversity, and early childhood education. For narrowing, Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used, with truncation, to improve search precision. The researcher also manually reviewed the reference lists of all eligible studies to identify additional relevant sources that may not have been captured through database searches. An example search string was: ("relational pedagogy" OR "teacher-child relationship*" OR "co-regulation" OR "attachment-informed" OR "trauma-informed care") AND ("emotional regulation" OR "emotion regulation" OR "self-regulation" OR "social-emotional development") AND ("adverse childhood experiences" OR ACEs OR trauma OR adversity) AND ("early

childhood" OR preschool OR kindergarten OR "young children"). The search strategy was adapted for each database, so it matched the local indexing terms and the indexing structure of each database.

Study Selection

The study selection process was in three stages. Firstly, database searches identified records which were then exported into reference management software to eliminate duplicate records. Subsequently, titles and abstracts were assessed against the inclusion criteria; records that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded during title and abstract screening. Finally, potential studies were subjected to full-text review, based on the predetermined eligibility criteria. Reasons for study exclusion were documented in the final full-text assessment for total transparency. Everything followed the PRISMA-ScR flow diagram – showing each step, from records found and duplicates removed, to how many were screened, why some were excluded during full-text eligibility assessment, and the studies retained for inclusion.

Data Charting

Data were extracted from all included studies using a standardised data charting form that was made specifically for this review. The charting work was guided by the review goals and also by the Population–Concept–Context (PCC) framework, to keep developments consistent when capturing both the conceptual parts and the empirical evidence across different study designs. Information was taken in a systematic way to include author(s) and year of publication, the country of origin, the study design, participant characteristics, and the type of adversity or adverse childhood experiences that were addressed. It also covered relational pedagogical approaches or interventions, emotional regulation outcomes, and the key findings. The researcher conducted data charting iteratively, so the extraction framework could be refined gradually as new conceptual categories and recurring patterns emerged during the review. This process helped ensure that all relevant dimensions of relational pedagogy and emotional regulation were captured, to ensure that relevant information was not overlooked. To support transparency and, so that someone could replicate the synthesis process, the extracted data were organised using a structured data charting matrix as shown below.

Table 1: Data Charting of Included Studies

Author(s)	Year	Country	Study Design	Participants (Age 0–8)	Type of Adversity/ACEs	Relational Pedagogical Approach/Intervention	Emotional Regulation Outcome	Key Findings
Sun <i>et al.</i>	2023	Australia/International	Scoping review	Early childhood educators & children	Trauma, adversity in ECEC	Trauma-informed ECEC practices	Emotional regulation, behaviour regulation	Trauma-informed training improved relational responsiveness and classroom emotional safety
Meldrum <i>et al.</i>	2024	USA	Programme evaluation / empirical study	Preschool children (3–5 years)	Potentially traumatic events	Ready to Learn through Relationships (RLR)	Self-regulation, emotional competence	Relational coaching improved teacher responsiveness and child regulation
Goldenthal <i>et al.</i>	2023	USA	Mixed-method / intervention study	Children aged 3–5 years	Potentially traumatic events	Trauma-informed relational programme (RLR)	Self-regulation skills	Strong associations between relational environments and improved regulation
Stephenson & Yost	2023	Australia	Qualitative case study	Early childhood settings	Trauma exposure	Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI)	Emotional regulation, behaviour regulation	Relationship-based discipline improved emotional safety and co-regulation
Bano <i>et al.</i>	2026	Asia	Quantitative study	Preschool children	Trauma exposure	Trauma-informed classroom practices	Social-emotional regulation	Trauma-informed pedagogy improved

							on	emotional development outcomes
McNally & Slutsky	2018	Australia/USA	Conceptual paper	Early childhood teachers & children	Developmental adversity	Teacher–child relational pedagogy	Emotional regulation support	High-quality relationships are central to regulation development
Spilt & Koomen	2022	Europe	Review	Early childhood contexts	ACE-related stress	Attachment-based teacher–child relationships	Stress regulation, emotional control	Secure teacher–child relationships function as emotional buffers
Maisy aroh	2026	Indonesia	Qualitative study	Preschool children	Early adversity context	Relational co-regulation model	Self-regulation development	Self-regulation emerges through relational co-regulation
Nilfyr & Ewe	2025	Europe	Systematic review	Preschool children	Adversity & stress	Interactionist relational pedagogy	Emotional self-regulation	Teacher relationships strongly predict regulation outcomes
Thurst on <i>et al.</i>	2018	USA	Quantitative study	Children & adolescents (subsequent early childhood)	Community-level adversity	Caregiver relational support	Emotional regulation capacity	Strong caregiver relationships improve regulation despite ACEs
Lipsc omb <i>et al.</i>	2021	USA	Quantitative study	Early childhood	ACEs	Teacher–child relational	Behavioural & emotio	ACEs negatively affect

				education children		environments	emotional regulation	regulation, buffered by relational quality
Sciara ffa <i>et al.</i>	2018	USA	Conceptual review	Early childhood children	Adverse childhood experiences	Resilience- based relational pedagogy	Emotional resilience & regulation	Supportive relationships build resilience against ACE effects
Lewis <i>et al.</i>	2024	USA	Qualitative study	Early childhood educators & families	Childhood adversity	Family– teacher relational partnerships	Emotional regulation support	Strong family- school relationships improve child emotional outcomes

8. Data Analysis and Synthesis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and more conceptual groupings across the included studies. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate, since the literature lacked uniformity in methods and overall was heterogeneous, reflecting diverse methodological and conceptual perspectives. The researcher charted, reviewed, and coded iteratively. The process enabled the researcher to identify both similarities and differences in how relational pedagogy was described and connected to emotional regulation for children dealing with adverse circumstances.

The findings were organised into four overarching themes. The first theme, Conceptualisations of Relational Pedagogy, examined how relational pedagogy was defined and theorised in the different studies, pointing that stressed attachment theory, co-regulation, and interactionist viewpoints in early childhood education. The second theme, Trauma-Informed and Relationship-Based Practices, synthesised the evidence on relational paired with trauma-informed pedagogical approaches that are used in early childhood settings, to help children who had been exposed to

adversity. The third theme, Emotional Regulation Outcomes, captured evidence regarding children's emotional regulation and self-regulation, also behavioural adjustment and socio-emotional development, as kinds of outcomes that came from relational pedagogical practices. The fourth theme, Protective Relationships and Resilience, explored how lasting, steady relational connections inside the educational environment helped build resilience and served as a protective buffer against the worst impacts of adverse childhood experiences.

Across these themes, relational pedagogy was shown as a protective framework, that helped emotional regulation through secure relationships, via co regulation processes, and teaching that was emotionally responsive, rather than solely instructional approaches. The synthesis was described narratively, and it was backed by tables, so there was a clear mapping of the evidence base.

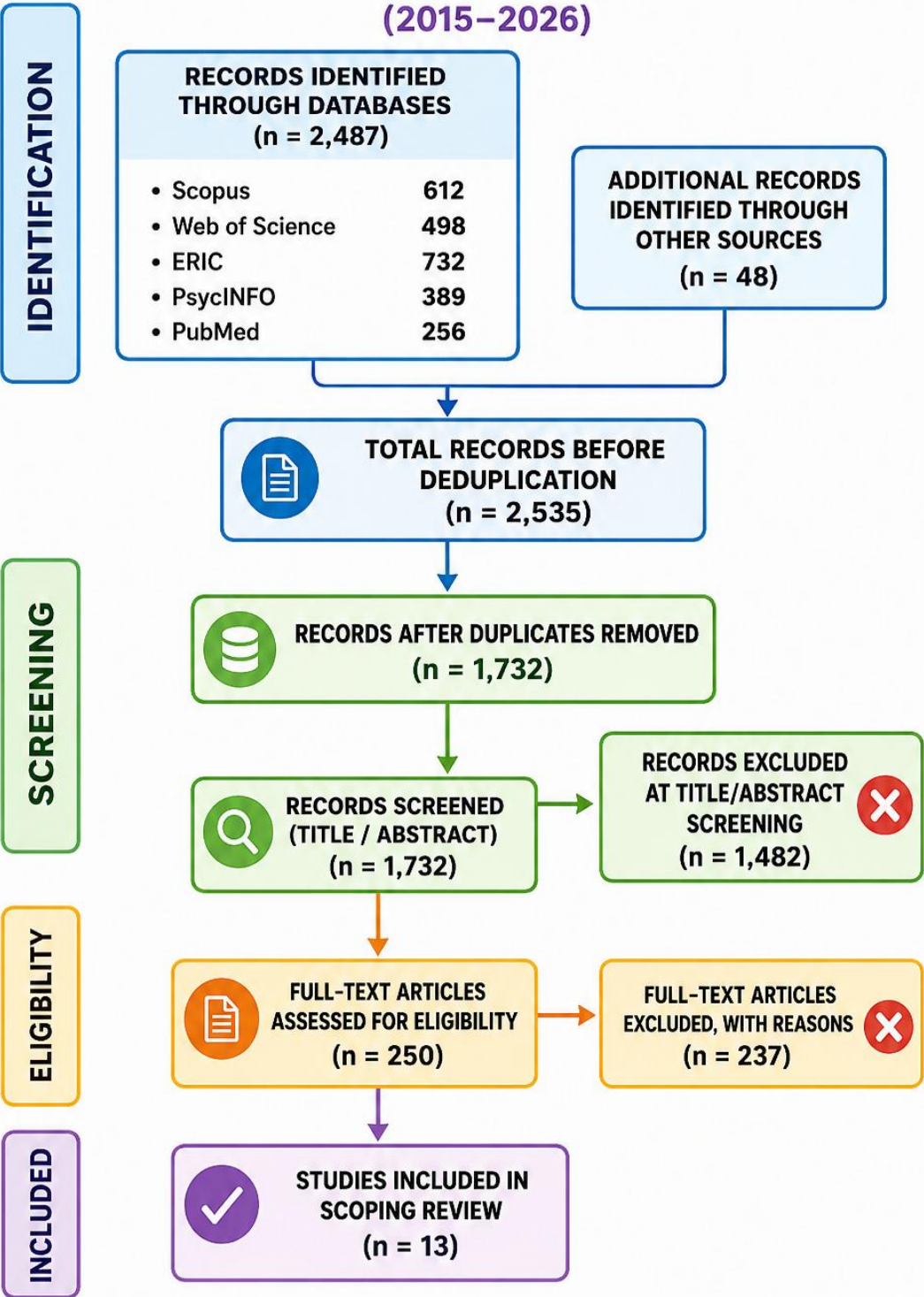
RESULTS

Study Selection and Overview of Included Studies

The scoping review identified various studies about relational pedagogy, trauma-informed teaching, and how young children handle their feelings in adverse circumstances. It covered empirical papers, intervention assessments, conceptual contributions, and some systematic or scoping reviews. The studies were conducted across diverse geographical contexts like North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. The studies employed diverse research designs, showing how fresh and interdisciplinary this field is. Some focused on the links between adverse childhood experiences and emotional management using quantitative methods. Other studies explored educators' perspectives and examined the implementation of interventions within authentic classroom settings through qualitative and mixed-methods research. Additionally, review studies synthesised existing evidence regarding trauma-informed and relationship-centred practices in early education. A PRISMA flow diagram for the study is shown in Figure 1.

PRISMA-ScR FLOW DIAGRAM

Relational Pedagogy & Emotional Regulation (2015–2026)



Study Characteristics

The studies were published from 2018 to 2026, indicating growing scholarly interest in relational pedagogy and emotional regulation in early childhood. Most research occurred in preschools, childcare centres, and family learning environments. Several studies extended beyond educational settings, bringing in community or family spaces where teacher–family relationships were essentially the foundation of children’s emotional development. For the research design, the evidence set had a mix of scoping reviews (Sun *et al.*, 2023), systematic reviews (Nilfyr & Ewe, 2025), qualitative case studies (Stephenson & Yost, 2023), mixed-method intervention studies (Goldenthal *et al.*, 2023; Meldrum *et al.*, 2024), quantitative correlational studies (Lipscomb *et al.*, 2021; Thurston *et al.*, 2018), plus conceptual and theoretical discussions (McNally & Slutsky, 2018; Spilt & Koomen, 2022). Across these studies, the participants were mostly early childhood educators, and children ranging from birth to eight years. Many of the children had experienced adverse childhood experiences, including trauma, family instability, and adversity at the community level, so the emotional experience was usually connected to real-world stressors rather than only classroom factors.

Thematic Findings

The synthesis identified four major themes, showing how relational pedagogy acts as a protective framework for emotional regulation, especially in young children who are dealing with adversity. These findings suggest that relational pedagogy functions as a broader framework through which ongoing interactions support children's emotional regulation.

Theme 1: Conceptualisations of Relational Pedagogy

Across the included studies, relational pedagogy is conceptualised as an early childhood education approach where relationships are treated as the foundation, for teaching, learning, and also emotional development, rather than a peripheral component. McNally and Slutsky (2018) stressed that high quality teacher–child relationships function as a primary mechanism, through which emotional and behavioural regulation starts to form in early childhood settings. Spilt and Koomen (2022) similarly argued, but they framed the whole idea inside attachment theory. In other words, educators act as secondary attachment figures, so they can provide emotional safety

and co-regulation during periods of emotional distress, or if the child is dealing with pressure. Maisyaroh (2026) then emphasised, positioning self-regulation as a relational process rather than only an individual ability. The idea is that children build regulatory capacities via repeated co-regulatory interactions with responsive adults, over time. Nilfyr and Ewe (2025) added an interactionist angle, where emotional self-regulation is not viewed as purely internal, it rather surfaces through changing reciprocal interactions between children and their social surroundings. In that framing, the supportive educational relationship is especially relevant, because it supports ongoing relational interactions, and it also shapes how the child settles.

These studies show that relational pedagogy is not a set of fixed teaching strategies. Instead, it is more of a framework where relationships are constantly built between teachers and children. This process involves co-constructing emotions through their interactions. It is less about specific tactics and more about how the teacher-child relationship shapes feelings and growth in the moment.

Theme 2: Trauma-Informed and Relationship-Based Practices

The second theme focuses on how relational teaching is manifested, through particular educational practices. Sun *et al.* (2023) noted that early childhood education today often involves supporting teachers in noticing trauma, demonstrating greater emotional responsiveness, and creating safer predictable spaces for children. In line with this, Meldrum *et al.* (2024) reported that coaching efforts, such as “Ready to Learn through Relationships,” can improve teachers’ ability to support children during challenging experiences, in a more capable way. Consequently, classroom environments may become more emotionally supportive and predictable. Goldenthal *et al.* (2023) added, arguing that relationship-centred interventions support children in building self-control, particularly when teachers remain consistent with how they deliver support. Then, Stephenson and Yost (2023) looked at Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) and emphasised the need to move away from punishment, toward strategies grounded in connection-making and in strengthening emotional insight between teachers and students.

Bano *et al.* (2026) reinforced that trauma-informed teaching methods are effective in supporting children, especially when those children had faced early adversity before. In all these studies, relational pedagogy is consistently operationalised, through the implementation of emotional coaching, predictable routines and that responsive caregiving, and relationship centred behavioural support.

Theme 3: Emotional Regulation Outcomes

The third theme synthesised the evidence on how relational pedagogy affects emotional regulation outcomes. Lipscomb *et al.* (2021) found that being exposed to adverse childhood experiences was linked to weaker emotional, and also behavioural regulation; but when teacher–child relationships were high-quality these negative effects were substantially mitigated. In a similar way Thurston *et al.* (2018) showed that solid caregiver relationships went along with better emotional regulation capacity, even if the setting was marked by community level adversity, adverse environments. Goldenthal *et al.* (2023) also delivered empirical evidence that children taking part in early childhood programmes with a relational focus showed meaningful gains in self-regulation, emotional competence, and adaptive functioning. These results were consistent with broader evidence implying that emotionally responsive educational environments help children cope with stress, control their affect, and join learning tasks in a more constructive manner. Across the studies, emotional regulation was consistently portrayed as something that happens through relationships rather than as an isolated developmental skill, this points to how key adult–child interactions are for building children’s regulatory capacities.

Theme 4: Protective Relationships and Resilience

The fourth theme focused on how relational pedagogy helps children build resilience when they have experienced adversity. Sciaraffa *et al.* (2018) stressed that resilience in early childhood is, almost fundamentally relational, it forms when children get consistent contact with supportive adults who are nurturing and emotionally available. Then Lewis *et al.* (2024) showed that teacher–family partnerships that are strong were associated with improved emotional stability and they provide an additional protective relational mechanism for children who are dealing with adversity. Put together, these studies suggested that relational pedagogy functions as a protective mechanism, it softens the impact of ACEs by embedding children within networks of emotionally responsive relationships. And those relational networks do more than help children

manage feelings in the moment, they also support longer-term resilience and adaptive functioning over time.

Evidence Map of Relational Pedagogy and Emotional Regulation

The evidence map showed a convergence in relational practices across very different settings, with trauma-informed training, attachment leaning pedagogy, co regulation strategies and teacher family partnerships emerging as the predominant approaches. Most of the studies centred on preschool-aged children and consistently identified educators as the primary drivers for emotional co-regulation. The mapping also suggested that emotional regulation, and self-regulation were the outcomes that were the most frequently reported outcomes across studies. But at the same time, fewer studies looked at long term development, or employed longitudinal follow-up designs. That leaves a gap around whether the benefits of relational pedagogy are sustained over time. Also, even though the intervention studies often reported positive short-term results, there was still a recurring issue: implementation fidelity varied, and contextual adaptation didn't always happen in a consistent way across studies. So overall, the evidence maps points to a growing but still fragmented literature. There seems to be a solid shared agreement on how important relational pedagogy is, but the methods used and the way outcomes were measured varied substantially.

DISCUSSION

In the reviewed literature, relational pedagogy consistently emerges as more than a teaching approach; it functions as the relational framework through which emotional development is shaped during early childhood. Instead of viewing emotional regulation as something only inside the child, studies like McNally and Slutsky (2018), Spilt and Koomen (2022), Maisyaroh (2026), and Nilfyr and Ewe (2025) converge on a common proposition. Regulation is not simply “happening” internally, it is co-constructed through repeated relational reciprocal interactions, over time. A notable finding is the alignment between attachment theory and interactionist perspectives with interactionist perspectives. Both of them position educators as regulatory companions, not as outside instructors who deliver skills and then move on. Still, the literature does not read as perfectly unified, some conceptual fragmentation remains evident in what gets stressed. Some studies emphasise attachment security, while others highlight dynamic co-

regulation, or they focus more on systemic interaction. And that conceptual variety is not automatically a flaw

The second theme seems to point toward a shift from thinking in a more abstract way about relational teaching, into something more concrete, like how these principles are enacted in classroom practice. Relational teaching then gets implemented through trauma-informed approaches. Research by Sun *et al.* (2023), Meldrum *et al.* (2024), Goldenthal *et al.* (2023), Stephenson and Yost (2023), and Bano *et al.* (2026) suggests that these approaches appear most effective when it is translated into specific strategies such as coaching, fixed routines, and carefully calibrated responses. What these studies underline is that good relationships by themselves are insufficient. They have to be supported in a systematic manner, so teachers can remain emotionally responsive, especially when learners have lived through trauma. Ways of working like RLR and TBRI also indicate that when relational practice becomes a norm rather than something dependent upon individual practitioner judgement, children tend to show better emotional safety and steadiness. Still there is an important limitation. Even if the strategies make responsiveness easier, there is a risk of getting oversimplified. They could be turned into packaged methods that may lack sufficient flexibility for different contexts unless people adapt them appropriately within specific contextual circumstances.

The evidence on emotional regulation outcomes converges around one central idea, that emotional regulation in early childhood is highly sensitive to relational quality, especially when adversity is present. Studies like Lipscomb *et al.* (2021), Thurston *et al.* (2018), and Goldenthal *et al.* (2023) consistently demonstrate that adversity does not act on its own; its effects are clearly shaped by the relational environment around the child. Relational pedagogy may function as a protective buffering mechanism, it interrupts the pathway from adversity to dysregulation. A particularly significant finding is that regulation is not only “improved”, it is repatterned through prolonged relational exposure. Children may develop to organise emotional responses differently, when adults consistently co-regulate with them, in a steady and responsive way. Still, a lot of the evidence remains short-term and correlational, so even though relational pedagogy looks protective, how durable these regulatory changes are across developmental time, is still underexplored.

The final theme shifts attention from regulation toward resilience, shifting relational pedagogy into a protective role, not a pedagogical strategy in the classroom. In line with Sciaraffa *et al.* (2018) and Lewis *et al.* (2024), resilience not merely as an individual characteristic, more like an outcome that comes from steady and supportive networks, teachers included, plus parents. That means the attention moves away from supporting only the child, and toward crafting secure connections around them. An important implication is that resilience is more than “recovering from adversity” because it also includes repeated moments where an individual can experience psychological safety within relationships. Those lived moments tune how children interpret stress and how they respond to it. Even so, there’s a gap in understanding how these protective systems play out across different cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic situations, and institutional arrangements. This raises an important question, does relational pedagogy operate similarly across contexts, or does it depend a bit heavily on context to be trusted universally.

Implications for Practice

The synthesis suggests that relational pedagogy is not an optional arrangement for early childhood education. For teacher education, this implies a substantial shift away from behaviour management models toward training that puts emotional attunement first, and more reflective practice, and also co regulation skills. In trauma-informed early childhood education the findings back the idea of bringing in structured relational frameworks, that help teachers maintain responsiveness, especially in cases where children show complex trauma histories. Relationship-based approaches should go beyond what an individual teacher can do, and get embedded as a collective institutional practice so that support for emotional regulation stays consistent rather than being dependent on a specific teaching style or personality.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, the findings challenge the narrow definitions of early childhood quality that usually emphasise on curriculum delivery, or cognitive outcomes. More specifically, relational pedagogy frames emotional safety and regulation as foundation for educational outcomes. Policy needs to recognise those developments, in a practical way. This also means investing in

professional development systems that prioritise trauma-informed relational competencies, and not only the what to teach. And there are structural conditions, like reduced teacher–child ratios, because without that, sustained relational engagement is difficult to sustain. On top of that, policies should back integrated family–school relational models, since emotional regulation is shaped across home and education spaces, rather than inside only one setting.

Research Gaps

Even though there is more conceptual overlap now, the field remains, methodologically and geographically uneven. A major gap, is that there is limited longitudinal research that follows how relational pedagogy shapes emotional regulation pathways over time, not only the short term, right after an intervention. Also, there's not much empirical evidence that cleanly distinguishes which particular relational mechanisms matter most, like attunement, co-regulation, or attachment security, in terms of actually driving regulatory change. On top of that the work is largely concentrated in high income settings. That raises question about whether these ideas are transferable across cultural contexts, and whether they can be realistically implemented in different early childhood systems where institutional structures differ. Going forward, research should connect child outcomes with educator wellbeing and the broader institutional conditions because relational pedagogy seems less like one single intervention, and a multidimensional educational framework, shaped by multiple levels that interact.

Limitations of the Review

This scoping review had several limitations that should be taken into account when trying to interpret its findings. Even though a fairly comprehensive search strategy was used across multiple databases and there was a defined window (2015–2026) the evidence base around relational pedagogy and emotional regulation in early childhood is still emerging, and also methodologically diverse. The included studies were not all that alike in terms of design, the way they framed the topic conceptually, and the outcome measures they used, so that made direct comparisons hard, and it also reduced how far a quantitative or consistent synthesis could go. Also, because we included conceptual papers, intervention descriptions and review studies together with empirical research, the overall evidence base contains different levels of

methodological rigor. That, in turn, makes it more difficult to reach strong causal claims about how effective relational pedagogy is. On top of that, most studies take place in high-income countries, so the generalisability of the findings to low- and middle-income settings may be limited, especially since early childhood adversity and the educational structures around it can look quite different. Finally, the choice to only include English-language publications might have left out relevant studies, and that could introduce some language- related and publication-related bias.

Conclusion

This scoping review mapped, and then the existing literature on relational pedagogy as a protective scaffold for helping emotional regulation in young children who are dealing with adversity. The findings showed that relational pedagogy is consistently described as an attachment-informed, and also a co-regulatory approach, where emotionally attuned relationships sit at the heart of early childhood development. Across the included studies, relational practices like trauma-informed teaching, co-regulation methods, teacher–child attachment connections, and family–school collaborations emerged as key mechanisms for supporting emotional regulation, self-management, and resilience in young children facing adversity. In general, the evidence implies relational pedagogy demonstrates considerable potential as a protective educational framework, but the area still remains fragmented, and needs more rigorous longitudinal work, plus research that is more varied across contexts. That would help clarify causal pathways and, in turn, support sustainable early childhood practice.

References

- Bano, T., Younas, E., & Hassan, S. (2026). Impact of trauma-informed practices on social and emotional development in early childhood classrooms. *Journal of Asian Development Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2026.15.2.26>
- Goldenthal, H. J., Gouze, K. R., Raviv, T., Tragoudas, G., Holley, C., & Cicchetti, C. (2023). The Ready to Learn Through Relationships (RLR) programme: Development, feasibility, and acceptability. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01472-0>

- Goldenthal, H. J., Gouze, K. R., Russo, J. M., Raviv, T., Holley, C., & Cicchetti, C. (2023). Potentially traumatic events, socioemotional and adaptive functioning: Associations with self-regulatory skills in a community sample of primarily Black and Latinx 3–5-year-olds. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 56, 669–682. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-023-01595-w>
- Lewis, H. R., Lipscomb, S. T., Hatfield, B. E., Jäderholm, C. M., & Tominey, S. L. (2024). Early childhood teachers' relationships with families when children experience adversity. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 38(4), 665–690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2024.2314611>
- Lipscomb, S. T., Hatfield, B. E., Lewis, H., Goka-Dubose, E., & Abshire, C. (2021). Adverse childhood experiences and children's development in early care and education programmes. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 74, 101218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101218>
- Maisyaroh, N. (2026). Self-regulation in early childhood as a relational process in early childhood education. *Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Education*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.66291/qr-ece.v1i1.3>
- McNally, S., & Slutsky, R. (2018). Teacher–child relationships make all the difference: Constructing quality interactions in early childhood settings. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(5), 508–523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1417854>
- Meldrum, M., Gouze, K. R., Russo, J. M., Kerns, C., Holley, C., Centola, H., Sroka, A., Cutshaw, O., & Cicchetti, C. (2024). Meeting the relational and developmental needs of young children exposed to potentially traumatic events through trauma-informed care. *Early Education and Development*, 36(5), 767–792. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2024.2424732>
- Nilfyr, K., & Ewe, L. P. (2025). Thriving children's emotional self-regulation in preschool: A systematic review discussed from an interactionist perspective. *Education Sciences*, 15(2), 137. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15020137>

- Omopo, O. E. (2025). Can Emotion Regulation, Peer Pressure, And Social Support Shape the Impact of Childhood Trauma on Adolescent Mental Health? A Structural Equation Modelling Approach in Oyo State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Innovative Psychology & Social Development* 13 (3):56-65. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16222335>
- Omopo, O. E., Quadri, G., Ukpere, W. I., & Balogun, O. J. (2025). From Trauma to Trouble: How childhood adversity ffuels maladaptive behaviour and juvenile delinquency among in-school adolescents. *Journal of Namibian Studies* (Vol. 45, pp. 174–206). Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18273113>
- Quadri, G. O., Omopo, O. E., & Ukpere, W. I. (2025). Childhood trauma, peer pressure, parenting styles, and gender on adolescent substance abuse in Ibadan: a structural equation modeling approach. *EUREKA: Social and Humanities*, 3, 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.21303/2504-5571.2025.003768>
- Sciaraffa, M. A., Zeanah, P., & Zeanah, C. H. (2018). Understanding and promoting resilience in the context of adverse childhood experiences. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(3), 343–353. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0869-3>
- Spilt, J. L., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2022). Three decades of research on individual teacher–child relationships: A chronological review of prominent attachment-based themes. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, 920985. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.920985>
- Stephenson, E., & Yost, H. (2023). Exploring the effectiveness and sustainability of Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®) as a trauma-informed approach in two Tasmanian child and family learning centres. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 17, 467–480. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-023-00574-6>
- Sun, Y., Blewitt, C., Minson, V., Bajayo, R., Cameron, L., & Skouteris, H. (2023). Trauma-informed interventions in early childhood education and care settings: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(1), 648–662. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231162967>

Thurston, H., Bell, J., & Induni, M. (2018). Community-level adverse experiences and emotional regulation in children and adolescents. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 42, 25–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedn.2018.06.008>