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Emotional Intelligence Through Literature: Conceptual Foundations, Affective Theory, Pedagogy, and Evidence

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) is often discussed in education as a set of abilities related to perceiving, understanding, using, and managing emotions in oneself and others. Literature education offers a meaningful context for developing these abilities because literary texts place students in emotionally difficult situations involving conflict, shame, empathy, moral choice, and interpersonal relationships. This integrative thematic review brings together foundational EI theory, affect theory, literature pedagogy, and empirical research on narrative reading and social-emotional outcomes. It argues that literature can support emotional learning when teachers guide students to identify emotions, interpret characters' feelings, understand different points of view, and reflect on emotional regulation through discussion and writing. The review also emphasizes the importance of clear definitions, teaching that fits students' culture, ethical classroom practices, and assessment methods that match the selected EI model. Evidence suggests that reading fiction can support empathy and understanding other people's thoughts and feelings, but these effects are usually small and may vary across teaching contexts. Therefore, claims about EI in the literature are strongest when they are based on sustained, text-centered instruction rather than on reading exposure alone.

1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) has become an important concept in psychology and education, reflecting the view that learners' success depends not only on cognitive skills but also on emotional abilities that support self-regulation, relationships, and decision-making. A foundational definition describes EI as the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, discriminate among them, and use emotional information to guide thinking and action (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This definition was later refined into the four-branch ability model: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Literature education can help develop EI because stories often show strong human emotions, such as conflict, shame, grief, joy, and difficult moral choices. These stories encourage readers to understand why characters act in certain ways, how they feel, and what happens because of their decisions. Classroom reading, therefore, has the potential to function

as structured practice for emotional skills when teacher guidance is explicit (e.g., guided discussion, reflective writing, perspective-taking tasks). Empirical research supports the possibility of this link: experimental work has reported that reading literary fiction can improve theory-of-mind performance (Kidd & Castano, 2013), and that fiction's effects on empathy can depend on emotional transportation and reader engagement (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). Correlational evidence also links exposure to fiction with empathy-related outcomes (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). At the same time, replication and meta-analytic findings suggest that these short-term effects are small and shaped by the teaching context, reinforcing the importance of careful claims and robust designs in EI research (Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018; Samur, Tops, & Koole, 2018).

At the same time, humanities scholars have paid more attention to emotion and feeling in texts. Ahmed (2014) explains that emotions are not only personal feelings inside individuals; they are also shaped by relationships, culture, and social life. In literature, feelings can become connected to certain characters, places, groups, or objects, which can influence how readers understand a story. This view supports EI theory because it shows that reading is an emotional experience with culturally meaningful texts. It also encourages teaching that helps students notice, interpret, and discuss feelings ethically.

The present review focuses on emotional intelligence (EI) as the main concept, specifically the ability to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is considered a broader educational framework through which EI-related competences can be taught in classroom settings. Emotional competence is used as a general pedagogical term for observable emotional skills such as emotion labeling, perspective-taking, and regulation reasoning. The terms overlap but are not considered identical. With these distinctions in mind, the present review integrates EI theory, affect theory, pedagogical models, and available evidence to answer four questions:

1. How is EI defined and measured in foundational work?
2. What does affect theory add to understanding emotion in literary reading?
3. Which pedagogical strategies can intentionally develop EI through literature study?
4. What evidence supports links between literature learning and EI-relevant outcomes?

This review connects these areas to ask a more practical question: how can literature classes help students practice and evaluate emotional skills? The aim is not to argue that reading alone automatically produces EI, but to clarify the conditions under which literary study can become a structured pedagogical space for emotional reasoning, social awareness, and reflective judgment.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to EI-through-literature is interdisciplinary. It draws from psychological models of emotional intelligence, humanities-based affect theory, research on narrative reading and social cognition, and classroom-oriented pedagogy. This section reviews these strands together because the central argument depends on their interaction: EI theory defines the competencies that may be developed, affect theory explains the cultural and relational nature of emotional experience in texts, and pedagogy identifies classroom practices through which these competencies can be made visible and teachable.

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Emotional Intelligence

2.1.1 Ability EI: definitions and the four-branch model

Ability-based EI frames emotional intelligence as a form of emotion processing. Salovey and Mayer (1990) proposed that EI concerns monitoring and discriminating emotions in oneself and others, and using emotional information to guide thinking and action. Mayer and Salovey (1997) articulated the four-branch model of perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions, providing a clearer structure for educational applications. Later syntheses describe EI as the capacity to reason about emotions and to use emotions to enhance thinking (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004).

For literature education, the four-branch model is especially useful because it can be translated into observable learning behaviors. For example, perceiving emotion aligns with identifying emotional clues in dialogue and narration; understanding emotion aligns with explaining causes, blends, and how feelings change; and managing emotion aligns with evaluating coping strategies and imagining alternative responses in conflict situations.

2.1.2 Trait and mixed models: why definitions matter

Trait EI understands emotional intelligence as how people view their own emotional abilities and personal tendencies, typically measured via self-report (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Because ability and trait models predict different outcomes and rely on different instruments, EI-through-literature work must state which model is used and avoid treating different EI measures as interchangeable.

In educational writing, the term EI is sometimes used interchangeably with related concepts such as emotional literacy, empathy, wellbeing, or "soft skills." These overlaps can be useful for pedagogy, but they also create problems in research reporting if the main concept is not clearly defined. For this reason, studies on EI-through-literature should state exactly which emotional competence is being taught and which outcome is being measured. A more rigorous approach is to use a limited set of measures that correspond to the selected EI model, rather than treating empathy, well-being, and emotional intelligence as interchangeable outcomes.

2.1.3 Measurement and validity considerations

Measurement is central for evaluating claims that literature instruction develops EI. Critics have noted that popular uses of EI often exceed what validated measures support and that construct clarity is essential (Grewal & Salovey, 2005). O'Connor, Hill, Kaya, and Martin (2019) review major EI measures and recommend that researchers align instruments with their conceptual model and intended use.

For ability EI, one widely used performance-based assessment is the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), which measures the four-branch model through emotion-related problem-solving tasks (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006). For trait EI, self-report scales are common and useful for profiling, but they are vulnerable to social desirability bias and to limitations in self-knowledge. For classroom interventions, a practical approach is to use several types of evidence: combine a validated EI/SEL measure with performance tasks in reading/writing and structured observation of discussion behaviors.

2.1.4 EI in education and alignment with SEL frameworks

In educational settings, EI-oriented outcomes overlap substantially with social–emotional learning (SEL). CASEL's widely used framework specifies five competency areas—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—which provide practical targets for curriculum design and evaluation (CASEL, 2020). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that universal school-based SEL programs can improve social–emotional skills, behavior, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011), supporting the premise that emotional competencies can be intentionally developed through instruction.

Mapping literature activities to these competency areas can help teachers and researchers explain why a given activity is included, how it is expected to work, and what outcome would demonstrate progress. For example, close reading and journaling can target self-awareness; perspective-taking discussion can target social awareness; and structured conflict-dialogue rewriting can target relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

2.2 Affective Theory and Literature: A Theoretical Bridge

2.2.1 Affect theory in literary studies

Affect theory offers concepts for analyzing how texts move readers and how emotions function socially and culturally. Ahern (2024) provides an overview of affect theory's use in literary studies and discusses how affect can reorient critical practice toward feeling, attachment, and embodied experience in reading.

For EI-through-literature, affect theory matters because it challenges purely cognitive accounts of reading. It highlights atmosphere, mood, and intensity as part of meaning-making, and it encourages attention to how readers' feelings are shaped by cultural histories, identities, and power relations.

2.2.2 Emotions as relational circulation and attachment

Ahmed (2014) argues that emotions circulate among bodies, signs, and objects; they 'stick' to certain figures and narratives, thereby shaping collective orientations, boundaries, and value judgments. In classroom terms, this perspective supports questions such as: What emotions does the text invite readers to feel toward particular characters? Which groups are coded as threatening or admirable? How do these emotional attachments influence interpretations and ethical judgments?

For example, in a short story about migration, fear may be attached to the foreign setting, shame to the character's accent, and sympathy to the character's silence. Students can analyze how these emotions are produced by narrative details rather than viewing them as simple personal responses.

2.2.3 Affect intensity and the limits of language

Affect theory emphasizes that affect can operate as an intensity that cannot always be fully explained in words or conscious appraisal (Massumi, 1995). This supports pedagogies that begin with noticing felt responses (e.g., tension, discomfort, warmth, shock) before moving to analytical interpretation. It also cautions against treating students' responses as personal psychological problems: a learner may feel strongly without being able to articulate that feeling immediately, especially in a second language.

2.2.4 Ethical implications for EI-through-literature pedagogy

Because literature classrooms can evoke powerful social emotions, EI-through-literature pedagogy should be ethically designed. Work influenced by Silvan Tomkins foregrounds affects such as shame as central to social life (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995). This reinforces the need for psychological safety, 'text-first' discussion norms, and alternatives to personal disclosure when discussing emotionally sensitive material.

Ethical safeguards are also methodological safeguards: they shape participation, disclosure, and the quality of discourse, which in turn shape which data a study can validly interpret as EI growth. For example, if a classroom climate silences learners out of fear of embarrassment, it may artificially suppress statements of empathy and the quality of reflection—thereby creating misleading "no effect" findings.

2.3 Mechanisms: How Literature Can Support EI Development

Across EI theory, affect theory, and reading research, several mechanisms explain why literature study may support EI development when appropriately mediated:

- Emotion perception and differentiation: close reading of dialogue, imagery, and narrative pacing can train students to identify and differentiate emotions—skills central to the ability EI (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).
- Perspective-taking and mental state inference: narrative comprehension requires inferring motives, beliefs, and feelings; experimental work links literary fiction reading to ToM performance (Kidd & Castano, 2013).
- Empathy under conditions of engagement: fiction may influence empathy through transportation and affective involvement (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013), and frequent fiction exposure correlates with empathy-related outcomes (Mar et al., 2009).
- Regulation through reflective distance: discussion and writing can transform immediate affect into reflective appraisal, supporting emotion regulation and strategic emotional use (Mayer et al., 2004).
- Cultural and ethical emotion awareness: affect theory helps learners examine how emotions attach to identities and social narratives, supporting critical emotional reasoning and responsible decision-making (Ahmed, 2014).

These mechanisms do not happen automatically. A story may lead only to a simple reaction if students read it without guidance. With careful questions and discussion, however, the same story can become a space for deeper emotional reasoning. For this reason, pedagogy is central to whether reading becomes EI practice.

These mechanisms are also cumulative. A learner may first notice that a character is angry, then refine that label into resentment, humiliation, fear, or disappointment, and finally evaluate how the character responds to that emotion. In this sense, literature tasks can move students from recognition to interpretation and from interpretation to ethical evaluation. The pedagogical value lies in slowing down this sequence so that emotion becomes an object of inquiry supported by textual evidence.

In a real classroom, this process may begin very simply. Students may first say that a character is "sad" or "angry," but the teacher can guide them toward more precise emotional language, such as ashamed, disappointed, humiliated, anxious, or resentful. This movement from a general feeling to a more accurate emotional label is already part of EI learning. It helps students connect emotion to textual evidence, understand why a character feels that way, and consider how that emotion shapes later choices and relationships in the story.

2.4 Pedagogy: Teaching EI Through Literature

2.4.1 Principles for EI-oriented literature instruction

An EI-through-literature pedagogy is most credible when EI outcomes are explicit and activities map to EI components. Emotional competencies should therefore be intentionally embedded into syllabi rather than assumed to emerge automatically from reading, since EI has been framed as an educational "missing component" in literature education (Alshammari & Ahmed, 2025).

Two design principles follow. First, teachers should articulate learning outcomes in EI terms (e.g., 'students will differentiate mixed emotions in character motives'). Second, activities should include both (a) textual evidence requirements (to keep work academic) and (b) reflection prompts (to practice emotional reasoning). This pairing protects against two risks: reducing literature to therapy and reducing EI to vague "be nice" messaging.

In EFL and university contexts, this principle is particularly important because students may be working simultaneously on language difficulties, literary interpretation, and emotional vocabulary. Teachers can reduce this burden by beginning with short extracts, guiding students to identify emotional cues, and then asking them to justify their interpretations before moving on to personal or ethical reflection. Such sequencing helps maintain academic focus while still giving students repeated practice in emotional awareness.

2.4.2 Practical classroom strategies aligned with EI components

A) Self-awareness (emotion monitoring and labeling)

- Reflective reading journals: "What did I feel at this point? Why?"
- Emotion timeline: track emotional shifts across a character arc.
- Emotion vocabulary expansion: maintain a class 'emotion lexicon' with nuanced terms and contextual examples.

B) Empathy and social awareness (others' emotions and perspectives)

- Role-based discussion: students argue from the viewpoint of a character using textual evidence.
- Hot-seating: one student answers questions "as" the character, while peers probe motives and feelings.
- Counterfactual perspective task: students rewrite a scene from another character's perspective and justify emotional logic.

These practices measure empathy through characters, as emphasized by Ghosn (1999), and support emotion discrimination and inference (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

C) Self-regulation (managing emotion and response options)

- Decision-point analysis: identify character options, emotion triggers, and likely consequences.
- Rewriting scenes: students revise a response with stronger regulation and justify the change (e.g., reappraisal, problem-solving, repair).
- Coping strategy comparison: compare characters' coping methods and discuss adaptive vs. maladaptive patterns.

D) Social skills (communication and conflict resolution)

- Dialogue reconstruction: rewrite conflict dialogue with de-escalation strategies and repair language.
- Structured seminars with norms (listening, turn-taking, respectful disagreement) and rotating roles (summarizer, evidence-checker, empathy monitor).
- Collaborative annotation: pairs label emotion cues and negotiate interpretations.

2.4.3 Cultural responsiveness and ethical safeguards

EI instruction is culturally shaped because norms of emotional expression vary across educational, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Alshammari and Ahmed (2025) show the need to adapt EI-oriented literature pedagogy to local expectations of emotional expression, but this issue should not be limited to a single cultural context. Wider EFL and literature-in-education research also indicates that emotion, empathy, classroom interaction, and teacher–student relationships are influenced by language proficiency, institutional context, and learners' cultural expectations (Ghosn, 1999; Roohani, 2009).

Because social emotions such as shame can be powerful in learning contexts and shape participation and identity, EI-through-literature pedagogy should be designed with ethical safeguards and psychological safety in mind (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995). Practical safeguards include (a) 'text-first' norms (students analyze characters before sharing personal experience), (b) students do not have to share personal experiences, (c) clear discussion rules and turn-taking structures, (d) content warnings when appropriate, and (e) teacher modeling of respectful emotional language.

2.4.4 Text selection for EI goals

Selecting texts is a core design decision in EI-through-literature curricula. Texts that best support EI outcomes typically include (a) emotional complexity and change over time (e.g., mixed feelings, ambivalence), (b) interpersonal conflict and repair, (c) moral ambiguity that invites multiple interpretations, and (d) culturally meaningful contexts that allow discussion of social norms and identities.

A useful classroom example is Sandra Cisneros's short story "Eleven," which presents emotional intelligence in a simple but powerful way. The story focuses on Rachel, a young girl who feels embarrassed, powerless, and misunderstood when her teacher insists that an old red sweater belongs to her. This situation allows students to examine how shame, fear, and silence shape a child's emotional response in a classroom setting. The story is especially suitable for EI-oriented literature instruction because students can identify Rachel's emotional signs, discuss why she struggles to defend herself, and reflect on how authority and social pressure influence a person's feelings. In this way, the short story 'Eleven' teaches students to recognize, understand, and manage emotions using clues from the story instead of sharing personal secrets.

O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi" is another suitable example because it conveys emotion through themes of love, sacrifice, misunderstanding, and personal choice. Students can discuss how the two main characters act out of affection, how their decisions create irony, and how good emotional intentions may still lead to unexpected results. The story can encourage perspective-taking and regulation reasoning by asking students to consider why people make decisions emotionally and how those decisions affect relationships.

For EFL contexts, text selection should also consider language difficulty. Short stories, excerpts, and graded adaptations can reduce cognitive load, thereby allowing learners to focus on emotional inference and the quality of their discussion. Teachers can also use audio and

visual supports (e.g., film clips, audio recordings) to identify emotional signs. When texts include sensitive themes, instructors can provide alternative tasks (e.g., analytical commentary) and highlight that students are evaluating characters and narratives—not being evaluated as people.

2.4.5 Assessment and evaluation

Assessment should align with the adopted EI model and use several different sources of proof. First, standardized EI measures that match the chosen model can be used pre- and post-intervention, where feasible (Brackett et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 2019). Second, performance evidence can be collected from literature tasks using rubrics that assess: (a) emotion differentiation (specificity and justification), (b) perspective-taking (accuracy and nuance), and (c) regulation reasoning (identifying options, consequences, and repair strategies).

Third, classroom interaction can be assessed through observation checklists (e.g., listening behaviors, respectful disagreement, evidence-based empathy statements). Fourth, reflective artifacts (journals, reading logs) can be coded for emotional vocabulary diversity, causal reasoning about emotions, and ethical reflection. These classroom-embedded measures are especially valuable because they capture EI use in authentic literacy tasks rather than isolated questionnaire responses.

Assessment should therefore avoid treating emotional responses as private confessions or as single correct answers. A stronger approach is to assess the quality of reasoning: whether students can name emotions precisely, connect those emotions to textual evidence, recognize alternative interpretations, and explain possible consequences of different responses. This keeps the assessment within the literature study while still measuring EI-relevant processes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Search Strategy and Eligibility

This article is an integrative thematic review. The final reference list includes several studies published in journals indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science. The search strategy was conducted primarily through Google Scholar, focused searches of relevant journals and publisher websites, and backward and forward reference chaining from key theoretical, pedagogical, and empirical sources. To enhance transparency, the document adheres to key reporting principles recommended by PRISMA 2020, where applicable (Page et al., 2021), while recognizing that integrative reviews may not consistently follow full systematic-review workflows.

Searches were performed throughout the manuscript's development and were updated in June 2026. The review integrates foundational theory with modern empirical research; no specific starting date was imposed on theoretical sources. For empirical and pedagogical investigations, priority was given to sources published between 1990 and 2025, while older or key sources were retained where directly relevant to emotional intelligence theory, affect theory, or literature pedagogy.

Sources were included when they specifically addressed EI theory and measurement, affect theory, literature pedagogy, or empirical evidence linking reading/literature with social-emotional outcomes. Sources were cited for contextual support only when they discussed emotion, reading, or pedagogy in a way that helped clarify the review questions. Sources were excluded when they lacked a clear connection to EI, literature learning, reading, or social-emotional outcomes.

Table 1

Search Strategy and Example Search Strings

Focus area	Example search strings
Emotional intelligence and literature	"emotional intelligence" AND "literature education"
Literature and empathy	literature AND empathy AND students
Fiction and theory of mind	"literary fiction" AND "theory of mind"
Affect theory and literature	"affect theory" AND "literary criticism"
SEL and literature	"social-emotional learning" AND literature
EFL literature pedagogy	EFL AND literature AND "emotional intelligence"

Table 2

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

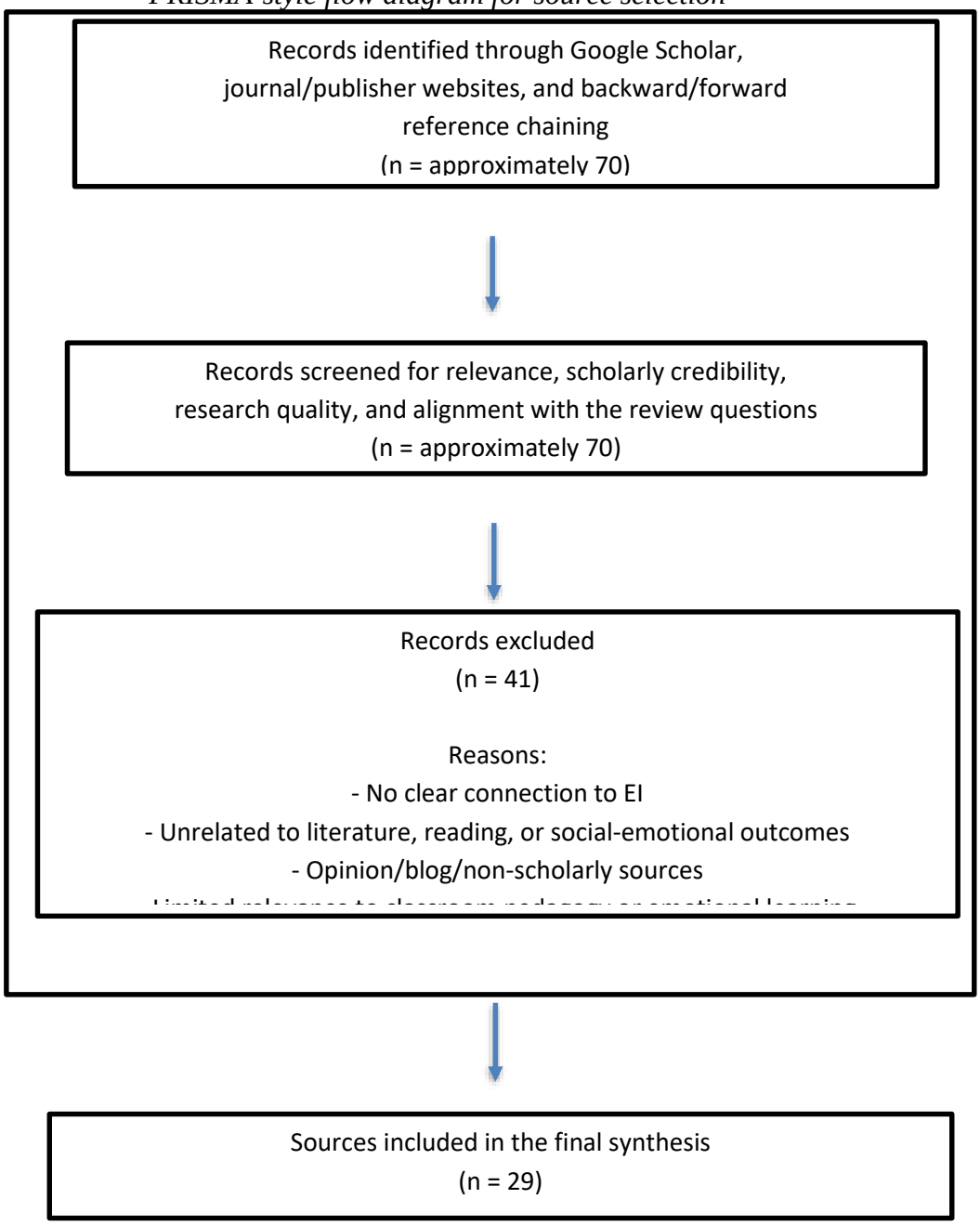
Included sources	Excluded sources
Studies defining or measuring emotional intelligence (EI)	Sources discussing emotion generally without a clear EI connection
Studies on literature, fiction reading, empathy, theory of mind, or SEL	Studies unrelated to literature, reading, or social-emotional outcomes
Pedagogical studies linking literature with emotional development	Opinion pieces without a clear academic or scholarly basis
Meta-analyses or systematic reviews on EI, SEL, empathy, or reading	Non-peer-reviewed blogs or websites
Foundational affect theory relevant to literature and emotion	Sources without relevance to classroom pedagogy or emotional learning

Sources were reviewed for relevance, academic credibility, research quality, and contribution to the review questions. Empirical studies were evaluated for research design, sample clarity, assessment validity, and relevance to emotional intelligence-related outcomes. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews were prioritized when available because they provide stronger evidence than single studies. Theoretical sources were assessed based on their impact on EI theory, affect theory, or literary pedagogy. Pedagogical sources were used when they demonstrated clear classroom relevance and were connected to EI, SEL, empathy, or emotional learning.

The initial search and reference-chaining procedure identified around 70 potentially relevant records. After screening for relevance, scholarly credibility, research quality, and alignment with the review questions, 41 records were excluded for failing to directly address emotional intelligence, affect theory, literature pedagogy, reading/literature, or social-emotional outcomes, or for lacking adequate relevance to the review's scope. The final synthesis included 29 sources. Figure 1 summarizes the identification, screening, exclusion, and final inclusion process used in this integrative thematic review.

Figure 1

PRISMA-style flow diagram for source selection



3.2 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Each source was coded into one or more of four analytic clusters aligned with the article title: (1) conceptual foundations of EI; (2) affect theory and literary emotion; (3) pedagogy for EI-through-literature; and (4) empirical evidence. Within each cluster, recurring constructs (e.g., emotion perception, empathy, regulation), pedagogical moves (e.g., reflective journals, dialogic seminars), and empirical outcomes (e.g., ToM, wellbeing, academic performance) were extracted and compared.

Synthesis proceeded in two passes. First, sources were summarized and grouped by conceptual contribution (definitions/models), pedagogical contribution (what teachers should do), or contribution to evidence (what outcomes are observed). Second, themes were integrated

into an explanatory model that links text features and classroom practices to EI/SEL processes and outcomes. Disagreements across studies were retained and discussed, especially where effects are small, varied, or sensitive to context and measurement.

Because this is an integrative review rather than a statistical meta-analysis, the synthesis emphasizes conceptual mapping and pedagogical interpretation. The included sources were not treated as equivalent forms of evidence. Experimental studies were used to discuss possible effects of fiction reading on social cognition, meta-analyses were used to make claims carefully, and pedagogical sources were used to identify classroom strategies that could make EI development intentional and observable.

4. Results and Discussion

Evidence for EI-through-literature comes from several areas of research: (a) EFL studies linking EI to language and literary interpretation, (b) curriculum and pedagogy proposals integrating EI into literature teaching, and (c) psychological studies testing whether fiction reading influences empathy or theory of mind. Table 3 provides an overview of these evidence streams.

Table 3

Evidence map for EI-through-literature

Evidence area	Key sources	Type of evidence	Strength of support	Relevance to EI-through-literature
EI theory and measurement	Salovey & Mayer (1990); Mayer & Salovey (1997); Brackett et al. (2006); O'Connor et al. (2019)	Theoretical / measurement	Strong	Defines EI and supports conceptual clarity
Affect theory foundations	Ahmed (2014); Massumi (1995); Ahern (2024); Sedgwick & Frank (1995)	Theoretical	Moderate	Explains emotion as relational, cultural, and embodied
Literature and social cognition	Kidd & Castano (2013); Bal & Veltkamp (2013); Mar et al. (2009)	Experimental/correlational	Moderate	Supports links between reading, empathy, and theory of mind
Replication and robustness checks	Samur et al. (2018); Dodell-Feder & Tamir (2018)	Replication/meta-analysis	Mixed but important	Shows that effects are small and context-dependent
EI and education outcomes	Sánchez-Álvarez et al. (2020); Puertas-Molero et al. (2020)	Meta-analytic	Strong	Supports the educational relevance of EI
SEL effectiveness background	Durlak et al. (2011); CASEL (2020)	Framework / meta-analysis	Strong	Supports the teachability of social-emotional competencies
Literature pedagogy	Ghosn (1999); Alshammari & Ahmed (2025); Roohani (2009)	Pedagogical / applied / correlational	Developing	Shows classroom strategies and EFL/literature links for EI-oriented teaching

The evidence map shows that the field is promising but still uneven. EI theory and SEL research provide strong conceptual grounds for teaching emotional competencies, while literature and affect theory explain why narratives are especially suitable for this purpose. However, the most direct empirical evidence connecting literature instruction to measurable EI

growth remains limited. This means that the results are best interpreted as support from different sources for EI-relevant mechanisms rather than as proof that any literature course automatically improves EI.

4.1 Correlational Evidence Linking EI and Literary Interpretation

Within EFL and literature-in-education contexts, correlational studies have examined whether learners with higher EI demonstrate stronger comprehension or interpretation of literature. Roohani (2009), for example, explored relationships between EI and the interpretation of literary texts among EFL learners. Such studies align with the broader claim that emotional competencies support interpersonal communication, classroom participation, and persistence in demanding literacy tasks.

However, correlational designs cannot establish causation and are sensitive to measurement choices. If EI is measured via self-report trait scales, observed relationships may partly reflect personality and self-concept. If EI is measured using ability tasks, relationships may reflect both general reasoning skills and emotional reasoning. Future classroom research can strengthen this evidence by (a) selecting EI measures that match the theoretical model (O'Connor et al., 2019), (b) controlling for language proficiency and general ability, and (c) examining whether specific EI components (e.g., emotion understanding) predict specific literature outcomes (e.g., explaining character motive trajectories).

4.2 Curriculum Integration and Applied Pedagogical Evidence

Applied education work argues that the development of El through literature is most likely to occur when EI outcomes are intentionally embedded. Alshammari and Ahmed (2025) provide an example of linking EI competencies to literature-learning objectives within a culturally specific curriculum. This argument is reinforced by EFL and literature-in-education research showing how short literary readings, empathy-oriented instruction, classroom environment, learner engagement, and teacher–student relationships can shape emotional learning outcomes. For example, Rouhani (2008) used short literary readings in a cognitive-affective EFL course with 70 Iranian undergraduate students, while Li and Zhang (2024) examined teacher–student dynamics, learning enjoyment, burnout, and EI among 806 Chinese EFL students.

From a review perspective, these curriculum proposals are important because they clarify the mechanism: EI is not expected to emerge from reading alone; it is expected to emerge from cycles of guided noticing, interpretation, discussion, and reflection. Such work also highlights practical constraints: teacher readiness, time, assessment pressures, and the risk of turning emotional discussion into moralizing rather than analysis. Teacher professional development is therefore a key enabling condition for EI-through-literature, especially training in facilitating emotionally sensitive discussion and in keeping claims evidence-based.

4.3 Narrative Reading, Empathy, and Theory of Mind

A broader body of psychological literature examines whether narrative reading influences social cognition. Kidd and Castano (2013) reported that reading literary fiction can improve performance on ToM tasks, suggesting that certain texts may engage social-cognitive processing. Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that empathy-related effects depend on emotional transportation, with engagement as a moderating variable. Correlational research links exposure to fiction to empathy-related outcomes (Mar et al., 2009).

For EI-through-literature, these findings are best interpreted as evidence for EI-relevant mechanisms (perspective-taking, emotion inference) rather than EI itself. EI includes regulation and strategic use of emotion, which are not directly measured by most fiction-reading studies. Therefore, classroom studies should incorporate tasks that explicitly target and assess regulation reasoning (e.g., identifying coping options, evaluating consequences) in addition to empathy and ToM.

4.4 Replication and Meta-Analytic Evidence on Effect Size and Robustness

Evidence for short-term causal effects of brief reading exposures is mixed. Samur et al. (2018) conducted four replications of Kidd and Castano (2013) and reported that the original theory of mind effect did not replicate reliably across studies. Meta-analytic work suggests that reading fiction produces a small positive improvement in social cognition compared with reading nonfiction or no reading (Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018).

These results have two implications for EI-through-literature. First, research claims should be calibrated: reading may contribute modestly to social cognition, but effects are not guaranteed and may require sustained exposure and teacher guidance. Second, intervention design should prioritize mechanisms that are teachable and assessable—emotion differentiation, justification with textual evidence, and regulation reasoning—rather than assuming that short reading sessions will produce broad changes.

4.5 EI and Education Outcomes: Contextual Meta-Analytic Evidence

Even when literature-specific evidence is limited, broader meta-analytic work supports the educational relevance of EI. Sánchez-Álvarez, Berrios Martos, and Extremera (2020) report a meta-analysis linking EI and academic performance, with heterogeneity across EI models and measures. Puertas-Molero et al. (2020) synthesize evidence on EI within education, emphasizing associations with well-being and school functioning.

Taken together with the SEL meta-analysis (Durlak et al., 2011), this work suggests that emotional competencies can be developed and associated with educational outcomes. For a literature-specific argument, these findings provide contextual justification: if EI matters for learning and well-being, then subject areas that naturally engage emotion—such as literature—are possible places for EI development, provided that instruction is intentional and measures are evaluated to match the selected EI model.

4.6 Summary of Limitations and Defensible Claims

Across evidence streams, three limitations recur. First, conceptual confusion occurs when EI is treated interchangeably with empathy, well-being, or personality. Second, many studies rely on self-report measures and correlational designs, limiting cause-and-effect conclusions. Third, the effects of narrative reading on social cognition appear to be small and may vary across teaching contexts, underscoring the importance of pedagogy and sustained intervention.

The evidence supports a more careful claim: literature can support emotional learning when teachers make emotional interpretation part of the lesson. In this sense, literature can help students practice EI-related processes such as emotion differentiation, perspective-taking, and regulation reasoning, especially when reading is supported by discussion, reflection, and clear classroom tasks. However, whether these classroom processes lead to measurable EI growth or transfer beyond the literature classroom, further empirical research is needed.

4.7 Synthesis Framework: Literature as an Affective Laboratory

A key contribution of EI-through-literature scholarship is its attempt to integrate two traditions with different assumptions. EI research in psychology often aims for construct measurement and prediction; affect theory in the humanities often emphasizes intensity, relationality, and the cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2014; Massumi, 1995). Rather than treating these traditions as incompatible, EI-through-literature can use them as complementary lenses.

Drawing on EI theory, the review adopts the view that emotional skills can be articulated as abilities or competencies and therefore can be taught and assessed (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). From affect theory, the review adopts the caution that emotional experience is not always fully reportable or reducible to discrete labels, and that emotions have social consequences beyond individual self-management (Ahmed, 2014).

This integration also has practical value for teaching. In the literature classroom, emotions can be treated as subjects for analysis rather than as personal confessions. Students can examine how a text produces feeling, how characters manage or fail to manage emotions, and how social attachments such as fear, admiration, or disgust are built through narrative details. In this way,

EI-related skills can be practiced without turning literary study into therapy or moving away from textual analysis.

Drawing on the reviewed sources, EI-through-literature can be represented as a staged model linking texts, pedagogy, processes, and outcomes:

1. Features of texts: narratives with emotional complexity, interpersonal conflict, and moral ambiguity invite emotion inference and ethical evaluation.

2. Teacher guidance: structured activities (journals, seminars, role-play, rewriting) make emotional processes explicit and practiceable.

3. Affective–cognitive processes: students notice affect (Massumi, 1995), interpret circulating emotions and attachments (Ahmed, 2014), and reason about emotional information (Mayer et al., 2004).

4. EI/SEL outcomes: growth in emotion perception, understanding, regulation, empathy, and relationship skills (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; CASEL, 2020).

5. Transfer: applying emotional reasoning and regulation strategies beyond texts to interpersonal contexts and academic collaboration.

4.8 Practical Implications for Curriculum Design

For curriculum design, three implications follow. First, outcomes should be written in measurable terms tied to an EI/SEL framework (CASEL, 2020), such as 'students will justify emotion inferences with textual evidence' or 'students will propose and evaluate regulation strategies for characters in conflict.' Second, lessons should be sequenced so that emotion perception and vocabulary precede more complex regulation and ethical reasoning. Third, assessment should be planned from the outset, using rubrics and observation tools that capture the use of EI in authentic literature tasks.

Teacher support is also essential. Facilitating emotionally charged discussions requires skill in setting boundaries, redirecting, and fostering inclusive participation. Professional development can focus on (a) designing prompts that remain text-centered, (b) using evidence-based discussion protocols, and (c) recognizing cultural differences in emotional expression.

A practical curriculum can therefore begin with emotion identification, progress to perspective-taking, and then move toward regulation, reasoning, and ethical judgment. For example, a short-story unit might first ask students to identify emotional cues in narration, then compare two characters' interpretations of the same event, and finally rewrite a conflict scene with alternative responses. Such activities demonstrate how EI can be integrated without removing the literary, textual, and interpretive nature of the lesson.

4.9 Future Research Agenda

Future work can strengthen the field by addressing design, measurement, and contextual factors. First, studies should specify the EI model (ability vs. trait) and select measures accordingly (O'Connor et al., 2019; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Second, intervention research should test sustained, literature-based curricula with pre- and post-outcomes and comparison groups, rather than relying on single-session reading effects.

Third, research should test mediators and moderators: Does transportation mediate the growth of empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013)? Do genre, cultural familiarity, and language proficiency moderate outcomes? Fourth, mixed-methods designs can combine standardized measures with students' classroom work (journals, essays) and classroom discussions to better understand how EI development happens. Fifth, studies should report how closely teaching follows the plan and describe teacher guidance strategies, as pedagogy likely accounts for a substantial portion of the variability in outcomes.

Latin American scholarship also points to the need for broader regional evidence. Suyo-Vega, Meneses-La-Riva, and Fernández-Bedoya (2023) analyzed scientific evidence on emotional intelligence among university students in Latin America from 2015 to 2021 and identified fifteen relevant articles. Their review concludes that research on emotional intelligence should be deepened and that scientific production should be increased at the Latin

American level. For this reason, Latin American classrooms should be included more directly in future studies of EI and literature.

Finally, culturally responsive and ethically safe pedagogy should be regarded as a core research variable rather than a background assumption. Future research can examine how students' emotional expression norms, gender expectations, language proficiency, and power relationships in the classroom affect measured participation and outcomes.

5. Conclusion

EI theory, affect theory, and reading research together provide a strong basis for viewing literature education as a space for emotional learning. Foundational EI work emphasizes the ability to reason about emotions and use emotional information to guide thought and action, while affect theory reminds us that emotions in literature are shaped by relationships, culture, and social factors. Empirical research suggests that narrative reading can engage empathy and the ability to understand other people's thoughts and feelings, although these effects are usually small and may vary across teaching contexts.

For this reason, claims about EI through literature should be framed carefully. Literature does not automatically make students more emotionally intelligent, but it can provide repeated opportunities to notice feelings, discuss them ethically, and reflect on human responses in complex situations. When teachers guide students to identify emotions, interpret characters' motives, consider alternative responses, and connect emotional judgments to textual evidence, the literature classroom can become a place for emotional reasoning.

Overall, this review takes a careful position: literature education can contribute to EI development when it is structured, text-centered, culturally responsive, guided by ethical classroom practices, and assessed with appropriate tools. Future research should move beyond broad theoretical claims and examine which texts, classroom tasks, and teaching conditions are most likely to produce meaningful and transferable emotional learning.

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