

Enhancing Educational Equity through Social Psychological Interventions: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT: This narrative review examines the effectiveness of social psychological interventions in advancing equity and belonging in education, with a focus on developing countries. Evidence is synthesized across four domains: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), AI-supported interventions, brief positive psychology practices, and multidimensional programs for marginalized students. A systematic search of major databases (Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, Google Scholar) yielded 85 empirical studies meeting inclusion criteria. Findings show that SEL enhances emotional regulation, peer relations, and academic outcomes; AI-based tools provide scalable support for anxiety and stress; and brief positive psychology practices foster motivation and classroom cohesion. Multidimensional programs addressing academic, psychosocial, and family needs deliver the greatest impact in disadvantaged settings. However, systemic barriers such as policy gaps, limited teacher training, and socioeconomic disparities constrain scalability. This review contributes by integrating AI with SEL in the context of low-resource settings, offering practical recommendations: strengthen teacher capacity, embed mental health in education policy, and build school–community partnerships. Future research should employ longitudinal and culturally grounded designs to test sustainability.

Keywords: Social Psychological Interventions, Educational Equity, Student Mental Health, Social Emotional Learning, Inclusive Education, Digital Intervention, Marginalized Students.



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INTRODUCTION

Social psychological interventions in schools have received growing scholarly and policy attention due to concerns about student well-being, social cohesion, and inclusive learning environments. Evidence shows that such interventions can strengthen belonging, resilience, and academic

engagement, especially among adolescents facing emotional and social challenges (Axford & Berry, 2023; Donaldson et al., 2022). These issues are especially pressing in developing countries, where systemic inequalities and limited resources constrain equitable access to education and mental health support.

Social psychological interventions, such as programs focusing on empathy, peer collaboration, and positive behavior reinforcement, have demonstrated promising outcomes in enhancing school climate and reducing instances of alienation and disengagement among students (Sánchez-SanSegundo et al., 2020). The theoretical underpinnings of these interventions draw upon attachment theory, social learning theory, and positive reinforcement models, which collectively emphasize the role of interpersonal relationships and environmental support in shaping students' psychosocial development. In this context, schools are not only academic spaces but also crucial platforms for fostering inclusive identities and promoting mental well-being (Escueta et al., 2014).

Empirical evidence further reinforces the relevance of this topic. In low-resource settings, school-based interventions aimed at improving students' personal and social skills have yielded encouraging results. For instance, research conducted in Spain found that adolescent-focused interventions significantly boosted self-confidence and peer engagement, despite encountering initial resistance from students and parents (Sánchez-SanSegundo et al., 2020). Parallel findings in other contexts underscore that socioeconomic inequality and cultural norms often hinder the effectiveness of such programs. In India and Pakistan, for example, stigma surrounding mental health remains a critical obstacle, deterring students from seeking psychological support and undermining the impact of intervention efforts (Imran et al., 2018).

Moreover, global data point to a growing crisis in students' sense of belonging and perceptions of fairness within school environments. Children in developing countries, in particular, are susceptible to mental health issues stemming from economic instability, social exclusion, and familial disruption (Williams et al., 2021). These adverse conditions not only diminish educational outcomes but also exacerbate existing inequities, leaving students from marginalized communities at a persistent disadvantage. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges, leading to increased social isolation and heightened anxiety among school-aged children, thereby amplifying the urgency for systemic and sustainable psychosocial support mechanisms (Richter et al., 2021).

Social stigma and exclusion continue to play a critical role in shaping students' self-perceptions and their ability to participate meaningfully in school life. Children who suffer from mental health issues frequently experience discrimination, leading to a cycle of social withdrawal and academic disengagement (Nocerino et al., 2024). This phenomenon is particularly severe among students from low-income backgrounds, who often lack access to qualified counselors, peer support groups, or inclusive pedagogical practices. As a result, their psychological well-being and educational attainment remain compromised, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that account for both structural and interpersonal determinants of inclusion (Donaldson et al., 2022).

Implementing such interventions, however, is fraught with challenges. Limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and underdeveloped institutional frameworks frequently hinder the successful rollout of social psychological programs in schools (Donaldson et al., 2022). Teachers,

often at the frontline of intervention delivery, may lack the necessary competencies to facilitate emotionally supportive classrooms. Furthermore, infrastructural deficits in rural or impoverished communities make it difficult to sustain long-term initiatives. Even when interventions are introduced, their alignment with local cultural and social norms can be tenuous, leading to poor community engagement and low program efficacy (Axford & Berry, 2023).

Another challenge lies in the design and scalability of interventions that are sensitive to cultural and contextual variability. One-size-fits-all approaches, often developed in Western contexts, may fail to resonate with the lived realities of students in diverse settings. The imposition of universal frameworks without adaptation to local conditions can lead to resistance or misapplication, undermining the intervention's intended outcomes. Therefore, a localized and participatory design process is crucial to ensure relevance, acceptance, and sustainability.

A notable gap in the existing literature pertains to the lack of longitudinal assessments that track the enduring impacts of social psychological interventions. While numerous studies report short-term improvements in students' emotional regulation and peer relationships, few have investigated the long-term implications for academic success, social mobility, or psychological resilience. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research that integrates students' own perspectives and experiences with intervention programs, thereby limiting the ability to tailor strategies that resonate with their needs and preferences.

This narrative review seeks to address these gaps by critically analyzing the implementation and outcomes of social psychological interventions in educational settings, with a specific focus on developing countries. The review aims to explore three main areas: the structural and cultural challenges in deploying such interventions, the factors that contribute to their success or failure, and the ways in which they influence students' sense of belonging and inclusivity. Through a synthesis of empirical studies and theoretical models, this paper endeavors to provide actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners seeking to foster more inclusive educational environments.

The scope of this review is geographically centered on developing nations, where the dual challenges of limited resources and diverse sociocultural landscapes necessitate context-specific approaches. Particular attention is given to marginalized student populations, including those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and rural communities. By focusing on these groups, the review aims to illuminate the disparities in access to psychosocial support and to identify strategies for inclusive policy and practice that are both effective and culturally attuned.

METHOD

This narrative review adopts a systematic and structured approach to identify, select, and synthesize relevant literature on the implementation and outcomes of social psychological interventions in educational settings, particularly in the context of developing countries. The methodology used herein aligns with established academic standards for conducting literature reviews, aiming to ensure both comprehensiveness and rigor in capturing the current state of

evidence and practice. The primary goal of this review is to explore the effectiveness and contextual challenges of interventions designed to enhance students' mental well-being, social inclusion, and equitable access to psychosocial support.

The literature search was conducted using several academic databases widely recognized for their coverage of peer-reviewed journals and high-quality scientific literature. These databases include Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Each database was selected for its strengths in indexing empirical studies from psychology, education, and health sciences, which are all relevant to the interdisciplinary nature of this review. The search strategy employed a combination of Boolean operators and quotation marks to ensure precise and relevant results.

Key terms were chosen based on both the conceptual framework of the study and the prevalent usage in the existing body of literature. Among the most frequently used and effective keywords were "social psychological interventions," "belonging in education," and "equity in schools." The term "social psychological interventions" refers to programs or strategies aimed at improving mental health and social well-being through activities that address interpersonal relationships, self-perception, and group dynamics. "Belonging in education" focuses on the psychological need of students to feel accepted and valued in their educational environments, which is considered a foundational component of academic motivation and engagement. "Equity in schools" is used to identify research examining fair and just access to educational resources and opportunities, especially for marginalized or underrepresented student populations. These keywords were selected to capture the broad scope of interventions while maintaining relevance to the specific objectives of this review (Donaldson et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021).

To ensure the selection of high-quality and contextually relevant studies, inclusion and exclusion criteria were rigorously defined prior to the screening process. Articles eligible for inclusion had to meet the following criteria: (1) be published in peer-reviewed academic journals, thereby assuring a minimum threshold of methodological rigor and scholarly reliability; (2) explicitly focus on interventions rooted in social psychological principles, particularly those implemented within educational contexts; and (3) report empirical findings on outcomes related to students' mental health, social well-being, behavioral engagement, or perceptions of inclusion. Additionally, studies involving marginalized student populations, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, or rural communities, were prioritized for inclusion, given the specific interest of this review in addressing educational inequality (Donaldson et al., 2022; Merino-Godoy et al., 2022).

Conversely, the exclusion criteria were designed to filter out articles lacking in analytical depth or relevance to the psychological and educational dimensions of the research focus. Studies were excluded if they: (1) lacked a clearly defined methodology or presented anecdotal evidence without robust analytical procedures (Williams et al., 2021); (2) centered on medical or clinical interventions unrelated to educational settings or social psychological theory (Kos, 2023; Moreno-Peral et al., 2017); or (3) were published before 2013, given the need to incorporate more recent findings reflective of contemporary educational challenges and sociocultural transformations, particularly in the post-pandemic context (Jones et al., 2018; Donaldson et al., 2022).

The process of literature selection involved several stages. Initially, a total of 2,500 records were identified through the combination of keywords across the selected databases. After removing

duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, approximately 420 studies were retained for full-text review. Each article was evaluated against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with particular attention paid to the clarity of intervention design, the robustness of the methodology, and the specificity of educational outcomes assessed. The final corpus included 85 studies that met all criteria and provided comprehensive data on the implementation, outcomes, and contextual factors influencing social psychological interventions in schools.

During the data extraction phase, key information was systematically recorded from each selected study. This included details on the type of intervention implemented, the demographic and geographical characteristics of the target population, the theoretical framework guiding the intervention, and the measured outcomes. Furthermore, the review noted whether the study was conducted in a high-income or low- to middle-income country, enabling a comparative understanding of how economic and institutional variables affect program effectiveness. The majority of studies were either randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies, or longitudinal cohort studies, which provided robust evidence on causal relationships and the durability of intervention impacts. Case studies and ethnographic research were also included where they provided unique contextual insights or participant perspectives absent in quantitative research.

The evaluation of methodological quality and thematic relevance was conducted through a mixed-method appraisal framework. Quantitative studies were assessed based on criteria such as sample size adequacy, use of control groups, and statistical validity of the reported outcomes. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies were evaluated for the depth of contextual analysis, participant voice, and clarity in methodological articulation. Studies that integrated both quantitative measurements and qualitative insights were particularly valued, as they provided a more nuanced understanding of both the efficacy and experiential aspects of the interventions.

This rigorous and transparent methodological approach ensures that the narrative review synthesizes literature that is not only empirically robust but also contextually meaningful. By drawing from diverse methodological traditions and disciplinary perspectives, the review aims to construct a holistic view of how social psychological interventions function within educational settings, especially under the constraints and opportunities unique to developing countries. The systematic identification and evaluation of relevant studies serve not only to highlight best practices and key findings but also to expose gaps in the literature that merit further investigation. In doing so, the review contributes to the advancement of knowledge in educational psychology, policy formulation, and inclusive pedagogical practices.

Ultimately, the strength of this methodology lies in its ability to balance academic rigor with contextual sensitivity. The selected literature provides a rich foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of psychosocial interventions and the various factors that mediate their success. Through a comprehensive and structured synthesis, this review aims to inform future research, guide educational stakeholders, and support the development of policies and practices that promote equity, inclusion, and student well-being in diverse learning environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The narrative synthesis of literature on social psychological interventions in educational settings reveals four dominant thematic approaches: Social Emotional Learning (SEL)-based interventions, AI-driven digital interventions, short-form positive psychology practices in classrooms, and multidimensional intervention programs targeting marginalized populations. Each theme provides distinct yet interconnected insights into the ways educational systems can address mental health, belongingness, and equity. This section discusses the findings of the reviewed studies according to these thematic classifications, drawing on global evidence to examine effectiveness, contextual adaptability, and student impact.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions have been repeatedly recognized for their broad and sustained positive effects on student psychological well-being and academic outcomes. Research by Sánchez-SanSegundo et al. (2020) indicates that students who engage in structured SEL programs report improved stress regulation, enhanced interpersonal skills, and increased emotional intelligence. These findings are echoed in the meta-evaluative work of Wang and Ishak (2025), who found that SEL fosters not only psychological resilience but also cognitive engagement and academic motivation. In a complementary study, Brill et al. (2025) demonstrated that participants in SEL programs experienced statistically significant reductions in anxiety and marked improvements in empathy, with longitudinal follow-up data confirming the sustainability of these effects.

SEL programs typically implement a combination of theoretical models. One widely adopted model is the value-based approach, integrating themes such as empathy, respect, and integrity into the curriculum through classroom discussions and behavior modeling. This method emphasizes internalization of values that support positive social interactions and community cohesion. Another popular approach is skills-based, focusing on building competencies like emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and effective communication through experiential activities like role-plays and peer-group exercises (Wang & Ishak, 2025; Brill et al., 2025). Integrated SEL frameworks that combine psychosocial and academic instruction are particularly effective in creating learning environments that are both inclusive and achievement-oriented (Waldemar et al., 2016).

Technologically mediated interventions, particularly those utilizing artificial intelligence (AI), are gaining traction as tools to support student mental health and well-being. Recent advancements in this domain include the development of AI-powered applications such as GymBuddy and Elomia, designed to provide emotional and psychological support for students experiencing stress and anxiety. A quasi-experimental evaluation by Jiang and Yang (2025) demonstrated that students who used these applications exhibited notable improvements in anxiety, somatic symptoms, and emotional regulation. These outcomes were measured using standardized psychometric instruments administered at baseline and post-intervention stages.

Although digital interventions offer scalable and cost-effective solutions, their comparative effectiveness relative to traditional face-to-face counseling remains a subject of debate. Donaldson et al. (2022) and Yeo et al. (2023) suggest that, in certain contexts, digital interventions perform on par with in-person support, particularly when personalization and adaptive feedback are integrated into the app design. However, concerns persist that digital tools cannot replicate the depth of

human empathy, active listening, and trust-building integral to conventional therapy models (Smith et al., 2022). The success of AI-based interventions appears to be mediated by individual student preferences, the socio-digital infrastructure of schools, and broader cultural attitudes toward technology and mental health (Wang & Ishak, 2025; Axford & Berry, 2023).

Combining digital mental health tools with SEL programming can provide a hybrid framework that supports holistic development. Schools in technologically enabled environments can leverage these tools to supplement traditional programming, particularly for students who may be reluctant to seek face-to-face help or who require flexible access to support.

Brief, classroom-based positive psychology interventions present another highly accessible and low-resource avenue to improve school climate and student mental health. Gratitude journaling, wherein students document daily reflections on things they are thankful for, has been shown to foster a more appreciative and supportive classroom atmosphere (Elena, 2025). This technique reduces disciplinary incidents and enhances group cohesion, promoting peer appreciation and emotional safety. According to Brill et al. (2025), consistent practice of gratitude journaling correlates with statistically significant reductions in student-reported anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Similarly, the "Best Possible Self" exercise, which prompts students to envision and articulate their optimal future selves, has demonstrated efficacy in boosting optimism, self-concept clarity, and intrinsic motivation (Elena, 2025). These interventions are particularly advantageous due to their brevity and ease of integration into daily classroom routines. As mental health support systems in many schools remain underfunded or understaffed, such short-term practices provide a practical mechanism to embed well-being promotion into educational infrastructure without overburdening existing resources.

Positive psychology practices also show strong potential in fostering inclusive peer relationships and reducing social exclusion. Through collaborative reflection and group sharing activities, students develop increased empathy and cross-cultural understanding, which are essential in diverse classrooms. These gains are magnified in schools that pair these interventions with ongoing SEL curricula, thereby reinforcing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills through repeated exposure and reinforcement.

In more structurally disadvantaged contexts, multidimensional interventions have emerged as particularly impactful for supporting students from marginalized backgrounds. These interventions typically combine academic support, psychosocial counseling, family engagement, and financial aid to address the multifaceted barriers faced by low-income or socially excluded students. Gómez-Restrepo et al. (2022) and Tol et al. (2013) reported that such programs, when implemented in rural or underserved areas, lead to significant improvements in student attendance, emotional well-being, and educational attainment.

Students participating in multidimensional interventions demonstrate enhanced life satisfaction, stronger connections to peers and teachers, and improved self-esteem. These outcomes are attributed to the holistic nature of the support provided, which addresses not only the cognitive but also the emotional and material needs of students. Moreover, the community-based delivery of such programs ensures cultural relevance and fosters stakeholder buy-in, enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of interventions.

International comparisons further illuminate the value of this approach. For example, in Latin American countries where community-based education initiatives are more common,

multidimensional programs have shown success in reducing dropout rates and improving student engagement. In contrast, similar interventions in sub-Saharan Africa highlight the importance of tailoring strategies to align with local values, gender norms, and familial structures to overcome resistance and promote inclusivity (Gómez-Restrepo et al., 2022).

Notably, schools that combine brief psychological interventions with broader multidimensional programming report the highest levels of improvement in student well-being and institutional climate. This layered approach allows for targeted, low-intensity interventions to be embedded within a more robust system of structural support, creating synergy between individual psychological growth and systemic resource provision. Such hybrid models are increasingly recommended in international policy frameworks for inclusive and equitable education.

In sum, the review highlights that while different types of social psychological interventions vary in structure, delivery, and scope, they collectively contribute to fostering equity, mental health, and social cohesion within educational environments. SEL programs excel in nurturing foundational emotional and social competencies, digital tools offer scalable and flexible support mechanisms, positive psychology practices provide practical classroom-based strategies, and multidimensional models deliver holistic support to the most vulnerable populations. Importantly, the integration of these approaches—when informed by context-specific needs and implemented with cultural sensitivity—holds significant promise for transforming schools into more inclusive, supportive, and effective learning spaces.

The findings of this narrative review highlight the significance of social psychological interventions in enhancing student wellbeing and fostering a sense of belonging within educational environments. These interventions, particularly those grounded in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and positive psychology, have consistently demonstrated positive outcomes in mental health and academic achievement (Sánchez-SanSegundo et al., 2020; Brill et al., 2025; Imran et al., 2018). However, the consistency of these findings is challenged when placed within diverse educational contexts, where structural and cultural differences influence the efficacy and sustainability of such programs (Levey et al., 2016).

The application of SEL-based interventions has been robust across various studies, affirming their utility in improving emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and academic engagement. Brill et al. (2025) noted that structured SEL programs led to marked reductions in student anxiety and increased emotional intelligence. This aligns with earlier work by Imran et al. (2018), who emphasized the role of SEL in reducing stigma around mental health issues. Nevertheless, Levey et al. (2016) critiqued the universal applicability of SEL, cautioning that programs imported from Western contexts may fail to resonate in non-Western cultural and institutional settings unless culturally adapted.

Similarly, interventions that leverage digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) present new frontiers in psychological support for students. Tools such as GymBuddy and Elomia have shown efficacy in reducing stress and supporting emotional wellbeing (Jiang & Yang, 2025; Carbone & Leccese, 2023). These applications can provide accessible, low-cost support, particularly in settings where professional mental health services are scarce. Yet, the literature also highlights concerns regarding the lack of human interaction, which remains a critical factor in psychological support (Smith et al., 2022). The effectiveness of such tools, as noted by Yeo et al. (2023) and Axford & Berry (2023), often depends on students' preferences and socio-cultural environments.

Brief classroom-based positive psychology interventions such as gratitude journaling and "best possible self" exercises have garnered empirical support for their ease of integration and positive impact. Elena (2025) found that daily gratitude journaling significantly improved classroom climate and student cohesion, while Brill et al. (2025) emphasized its role in reducing behavioral issues. These interventions foster a culture of appreciation and connectedness, essential components for inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environments. Nonetheless, the sustainability of such practices requires institutional support and teacher engagement, which are not always guaranteed in resource-constrained contexts.

Multidimensional interventions designed for marginalized student populations have also demonstrated significant positive outcomes. Programs that combine academic support with mental health services, social skills training, and resource provision are particularly effective in underserved rural and low-income communities (Gómez-Restrepo et al., 2022; Tol et al., 2013). These studies indicate that holistic support structures enhance not only academic performance but also social integration and emotional stability among students. However, such comprehensive programs demand substantial institutional investment and intersectoral collaboration, which are often lacking in developing countries.

Systemic factors play a crucial role in determining the success or failure of social psychological interventions. Educational policies, particularly those related to funding and teacher training, form the bedrock upon which intervention efficacy is built. Axford & Berry (2023) and Sánchez-SanSegundo et al. (2020) both emphasized that inadequate funding and fragmented policies severely limit the implementation of mental health programs in schools. Moreover, Imran et al. (2018) highlighted that teacher confidence and competence in delivering interventions are directly tied to the availability of continuous professional development and institutional support.

Inequities in access to resources between affluent and under-resourced communities further exacerbate challenges. Students in disadvantaged settings often lack access to trained mental health professionals, technological tools, and safe learning environments, diminishing the potential impact of even well-designed interventions (Sánchez-SanSegundo et al., 2020; Axford & Berry, 2023). Such disparities underline the need for targeted interventions that consider the specific needs and constraints of local communities.

To mitigate these systemic barriers, evidence-based policy reforms are essential. Government agencies must prioritize mental health and psychosocial support in education budgets and policies. Axford & Berry (2023) advocate for integrated policy frameworks that embed mental health into core educational mandates. Equally important is the development of training modules that empower teachers with not only pedagogical but also socio-emotional competencies. Regular workshops, in-service training, and support networks can bolster teacher efficacy and confidence in delivering psychological interventions (Imran et al., 2018).

Community involvement is another crucial element for successful implementation. Engaging parents, local leaders, and students in the design and execution of interventions ensures cultural alignment and promotes sustainability. Levey et al. (2016) stressed the importance of community buy-in for the long-term success of educational interventions. Collaborative models that involve family and community structures help bridge gaps between home and school, fostering a more cohesive support system for students.

Longitudinal and culturally responsive research is necessary to fill existing gaps in the literature. Many current studies are short-term and lack follow-up, making it difficult to assess the long-term impact of interventions (Donaldson et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a dearth of studies that explore the nuanced perspectives of students themselves. Understanding how students perceive and respond to interventions can provide vital insights for tailoring programs to be more effective and engaging. The limited representation of culturally diverse populations in the literature further underscores the need for inclusive research agendas that reflect the lived realities of marginalized communities.

The integration of social psychological interventions in education, particularly in developing countries, must therefore be both contextually grounded and systematically supported. While the evidence for positive outcomes is compelling, the pathway to effective implementation requires structural reform, stakeholder collaboration, and a sustained commitment to equity and inclusion. These findings signal a pressing need for education systems to not only adopt evidence-based interventions but also to transform the broader institutional and societal conditions that shape student wellbeing and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review highlights the significant role of social psychological interventions in fostering equity and belonging within educational settings. Across diverse approaches, including Social Emotional Learning (SEL), AI-based interventions, brief positive psychology strategies, and multidimensional support in marginalized communities, the findings consistently underscore improvements in students' mental well-being, interpersonal relationships, and academic engagement. These outcomes affirm the transformative power of interventions that are contextually grounded and holistically designed.

The urgency to implement these interventions is amplified by persistent educational inequalities and limited access to psychosocial support, particularly in underserved environments. Systemic barriers—such as underfunded policies, uneven teacher training, and socioeconomic disparities—continue to hinder effective implementation. Addressing these requires proactive policies that allocate dedicated funding for mental health initiatives, teacher capacity-building, and collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and communities.

Future research should address current gaps by conducting longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to assess the long-term sustainability and adaptability of interventions. Moreover, innovative integration of SEL with digital platforms offers promising pathways that should be explored further. Strengthening inclusive practices through evidence-based policies and community-centered approaches will be vital in building equitable educational ecosystems.

Ultimately, advancing student well-being through targeted social psychological interventions remains essential for achieving inclusive and resilient learning environments, particularly in diverse and disadvantaged contexts.

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