

Education, identity and health: racial belonging as an element of protection and well-being in the school environment

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Abstract:

Background: The school constitutes an important space for the social, emotional, and educational development of students. In this context, experiences related to racial identity and the feeling of belonging can influence how students establish relationships with the institution, with teachers, with their peers, and with the learning processes. This study aimed to analyze the scientific production regarding the contributions of racial and ethnic belonging to the protection and well-being of students in the school environment.

Materials and Methods: This is an integrative literature review, carried out through the selection and analysis of scientific articles published in national and international journals. The analysis of the studies allowed us to identify that the strengthening of racial and ethnic identity can contribute to the development of a feeling of school belonging, academic engagement, and emotional well-being.

Results. The publications also demonstrate that school environments capable of recognizing diversity, promoting respectful relationships, and confronting discriminatory practices can function as protective spaces for students belonging to racially marginalized groups. On the other hand, experiences of discrimination, invisibility of identities, and lack of representation can compromise the feeling of belonging and produce negative repercussions for health and school participation.

Conclusion: It is concluded that the recognition of racial identities and the construction of inclusive educational environments represent relevant elements for promoting well-being and strengthening students' educational experiences.

Key Word: Racial Identity; School Belonging; Health; Well-being; Education.

Date of Submission: 12-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 22-09-2026

I. Introduction

The school represents a space for formation that goes beyond the transmission of academic knowledge. The experiences lived in this environment influence the construction of social relationships, emotional development, and the students' perception of their participation in the school community. Among the factors related to these experiences, the feeling of belonging stands out, understood as the perception of being recognized, accepted, and valued in the educational space. For students belonging to racially and ethnically marginalized groups, belonging can be directly related to how their identities are recognized and respected by the school institution [5,6].

Racial and ethnic identity is an important dimension of individual and collective development. During childhood and adolescence, students construct perceptions about their origins, their affiliations, and social experiences related to racial and ethnic differences. This process can be influenced by family, community, and school relationships, making school a relevant space for the recognition and strengthening of identities. Recent studies indicate that the positive development of racial and ethnic identity may be related to indicators of academic adjustment and emotional well-being [1,10].

The relationship between identity and belonging at school deserves attention, as the feeling of integration into the educational community can contribute to student participation, engagement, and development. When individuals perceive that their characteristics, experiences, and identities are recognized, they can establish more positive relationships with the school environment. On the other hand, experiences marked by racial

discrimination, exclusion, and invisibility can compromise students' relationship with the school and interfere with their well-being [2,5].

Experiences of racial discrimination represent one of the factors capable of negatively affecting the school experience. Situations related to prejudice and inequality can produce feelings of insecurity, alienation, and reduced academic engagement. In this sense, building school environments committed to recognizing differences and confronting discriminatory practices becomes relevant for promoting more protective and welcoming educational relationships [4,7].

The school's racial climate also influences students' experiences. The relationships established between teachers and students, the institutional organization, pedagogical practices, and the ways in which differences are addressed can contribute to the perception of acceptance or exclusion. Recent research demonstrates that aspects related to adult support, cultural acceptance, safety, and connection to the school are related to important indicators of students' academic development and adjustment [2,3].

The role of teachers is crucial in this process. The relationships established between students and teachers can serve as sources of support and protection, especially when teachers demonstrate the ability to recognize experiences related to racial inequalities and develop pedagogical practices that value diversity. Teachers' critical racial awareness can contribute to building more respectful relationships and strengthening students' sense of belonging within the school environment [8].

Valuing diversity can also be incorporated into curricula and pedagogical practices. Addressing content related to racial and ethnic identities creates opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences, recognize different social groups, and understand inequalities present in society. Studies indicate that educational practices focused on developing ethnic-racial identity can contribute to academic engagement and student participation in school activities [7,13].

The relationship between belonging and health also deserves highlighting. The feeling of belonging to a group and occupying a recognized position in the community can contribute to emotional well-being. For racially marginalized adolescents, strengthening ethnic and racial identity can have protective potential in the face of adverse social experiences. Recent studies have identified associations between ethnic identity, belonging, and indicators related to the mental health and well-being of adolescents [4,10,11].

However, the mere institutional recognition of diversity does not guarantee the transformation of students' lived experiences. Policies, discourses, and practices need to be accompanied by changes capable of addressing inequalities present in daily school life. Recent research demonstrates that institutional declarations in favor of diversity may yield limited results when they are not accompanied by concrete measures related to reducing inequalities and confronting discriminatory practices [6].

Given this context, it becomes relevant to gather scientific knowledge about the relationships between education, racial identity, belonging, and health. Analyzing scientific literature allows us to understand how the recognition of identities and the construction of inclusive school environments can contribute to the well-being and strengthening of students' educational experiences. These dimensions are interconnected and should be considered in the development of educational practices and policies aimed at promoting inclusion, belonging, and student well-being [1,5,10].

The overall objective of this study is to analyze the scientific literature on the contributions of racial and ethnic belonging as an element in protecting and promoting the well-being of students in the school environment.

II. Material And Methods

This is an integrative literature review study, developed with the purpose of gathering scientific productions related to racial and ethnic identity, school belonging, and their relationships with the health and well-being of students. This method allows for the analysis of different studies on a given theme, enabling the identification of trends, relationships, and contributions present in the scientific production.

The research process involved defining the theme and guiding question, selecting databases, establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, identifying publications related to the theme, and analyzing the selected studies. Scientific articles published in national and international journals, available in full text, and related to the educational experiences of students belonging to different racial and ethnic groups were considered.

The inclusion criteria considered scientific articles published between 2021 and 2025, related to racial and ethnic identity, school belonging, racial climate, discrimination, well-being, emotional health, academic engagement, and student-teacher relationships. Duplicate documents, studies not directly related to the topic, and publications whose full text was not available were excluded.

After selecting the studies, a detailed reading of the publications was carried out and the information was organized into thematic categories. The analysis focused on identifying the relationships between racial identity, school belonging, and well-being, considering aspects related to the recognition of diversity, experiences of discrimination, school climate, relationships with teachers, and protective factors present in the educational environment.

III. Result

Analysis of scientific literature demonstrates that racial and ethnic identity is important for understanding students' experiences in the school environment. The way young people understand their identity and perceive recognition from their groups can influence their relationships with the institution, with peers, and with learning processes. Recent studies indicate that certain dimensions of racial and ethnic identity are related to indicators of belonging, academic performance, and emotional well-being ^[1,10,12].

The feeling of belonging at school appears as one of the main elements associated with the development of positive educational experiences. Students who perceive greater integration and recognition in the school environment may show greater participation and involvement in educational activities. The literature demonstrates that belonging can also act as an important mechanism in the relationship between racial identity and academic and emotional indicators, reinforcing the need to understand the school as a space for social and psychological development ^[5,10].

Experiences of racial discrimination can compromise this process. Situations of prejudice, exclusion, and inequality can produce feelings of alienation and insecurity, affecting how students relate to school. Studies on race-related stressors demonstrate that these experiences can have negative consequences for academic well-being, making it relevant to have institutional strategies capable of recognizing and addressing the effects of racial inequalities in daily school life ^[4,7,9].

In this scenario, strengthening racial and ethnic identity can act as a protective factor. Developing a positive perception of one's group of belonging can contribute to building individual and collective resources in the face of adverse experiences. Recent studies indicate that a stronger ethnic identity is associated with lower feelings of frustrated belonging among Black and Latino adolescents, demonstrating the importance of considering identity as a dimension related to well-being ^[11].

The relationships between teachers and students are also relevant to building a sense of belonging. The quality of these relationships can contribute to students perceiving greater support and recognition within the institution. For racially marginalized students, the ability of teachers to recognize racial inequalities and critically reflect on their practices can foster the creation of more welcoming environments and educational relationships based on respect for different social and cultural experiences ^[8].

The school's racial climate is another important element. Environments characterized by greater cultural acceptance, adult support, and respectful relationships can foster more positive educational experiences. Recent research demonstrates that different dimensions of the school climate are related to academic indicators of racially and ethnically marginalized students, with ethnic identity also identified as an element capable of influencing these relationships ^[2,3,12].

The development of pedagogical practices that acknowledge students' identities can also contribute to strengthening a sense of belonging. Curricula that address racial and ethnic experiences can create opportunities for reflection and recognition of the different trajectories present in the school community. Research on curricular interventions focused on ethnic-racial identity indicates that activities that encourage the exploration of identity can contribute to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of academic engagement ^[7,14].

However, valuing diversity needs to go beyond symbolic actions. The mere presence of institutional discourses favorable to diversity is not enough to eliminate structural inequalities. Recent studies demonstrate that outcomes related to mental health and academic performance can vary according to the practices actually developed by institutions and the existence of inequalities in areas such as discipline and educational opportunities ^[3,6].

Student participation in building more inclusive school environments is also a relevant dimension. The possibility of discussing social and racial experiences can contribute to building relationships based on the recognition of differences. Recent research on critical awareness and school racial climate demonstrates that reflection on inequalities can be related to how students perceive their belonging to the institution, reinforcing the need for educational spaces open to dialogue and participation ^[2].

Racial and school belonging also has connections to health and well-being. Feelings of recognition and integration can contribute to more positive emotional experiences, while exclusion and discrimination can increase vulnerability. Therefore, promoting health in the school environment needs to consider students' social experiences and recognize that factors related to identity and institutional relationships contribute to the construction of well-being ^[4,10,11].

Literature also demonstrates that the school experiences of Black students can be influenced by factors present at the interpersonal, pedagogical, and institutional levels. Relationships with teachers and peers, educational expectations, curriculum, and school policies can act as barriers or facilitators of belonging. This set of factors demonstrates that promoting protective educational environments requires an approach that considers different dimensions of school life ^[5,6,8].

The body of publications demonstrates that racial and ethnic belonging can represent an important element of protection in the school environment. The recognition of identities, the valuing of diversity, the

building of respectful relationships, and the confrontation of inequalities can contribute to strengthening students' connection with the school. However, building educational environments that promote well-being requires continuous actions capable of transforming pedagogical practices, institutional relationships, and forms of organization within the school community [1,5,6].

Racial representation in the school environment is another aspect related to the construction of belonging. The presence of historical, cultural, and social references associated with different racial groups can help students recognize their own trajectories and realize that their experiences are also part of the knowledge taught at school. The absence of these references can produce feelings of invisibility and detachment, while curricular practices that value different identities can foster more positive relationships with the educational institution [7,14].

The construction of belonging can also be influenced by the expectations that teachers develop in relation to students. Differentiated expectations or those based on racial stereotypes can interfere with opportunities for participation, pedagogical interactions, and the perception that students build about their own abilities. For this reason, teaching practices committed to equity need to consider the unique characteristics of students and avoid interpretations based on generalizations related to race or social origin [6,8].

Relationships between students also influence their perception of safety and belonging. Daily interaction can provide opportunities for support, identification, and the building of bonds, but it can also involve situations of exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination. The existence of peer relationships based on respect for differences contributes to the formation of more welcoming environments, while negative experiences among classmates can compromise students' connection with the school and affect their well-being [5,7].

Psychological safety is an important dimension for students to express their opinions, cultural characteristics, and racial experiences without fear of judgment or rejection. Environments in which different identities are respected can foster greater participation in activities and a greater willingness to establish relationships with teachers and peers. In this sense, promoting racial belonging needs to be associated with building spaces in which students perceive that their identities are legitimate and valued [2,5,8].

Policies to combat racism in the school environment are also important for promoting health and well-being. The existence of institutional mechanisms to identify, prevent, and respond to situations of discrimination can contribute to building a safer environment. These actions need to involve not only disciplinary measures, but also educational strategies capable of promoting reflection on prejudices, inequalities, and racial relations among the different members of the school community [6,7].

Another relevant element is the participation of families and communities in strengthening the racial identity of students. Family and community experiences can offer cultural, historical, and emotional references that contribute to building a positive perception of identity. Closer ties between school, family, and community can expand these possibilities, fostering a more integrated understanding of students' experiences and strengthening support networks that are important for their development [1,10].

Education on ethnic-racial relations can also contribute to preventing situations of discrimination and strengthening the recognition of differences. The pedagogical approach to racial relations allows for the historical discussion of inequality processes and the valuing of different cultural contributions. When these discussions are incorporated into daily school life, they can broaden opportunities for critical reflection and help students understand racial differences as part of social diversity, and not as a justification for inequalities [7,14].

The feeling of belonging can also be related to academic engagement. When students realize that they are part of the school community and that their identities are recognized, they may develop a greater willingness to participate in activities and establish relationships with educational processes. Recent studies indicate that school belonging can act as a mechanism associated with the relationship between racial identity and academic outcomes, demonstrating that social and educational aspects are interconnected in students' experiences [5,10,14].

Promoting racially sensitive well-being requires that educational institutions recognize that students experience different social conditions and experiences related to their identity. Uniform strategies may not adequately address the needs of groups facing different forms of discrimination or exclusion. Therefore, well-being initiatives need to consider students' racial and cultural experiences and incorporate perspectives that acknowledge the diversity within the school community itself [3,4,11].

Finally, building a school that fosters a sense of belonging requires a continuous institutional perspective. The recognition of racial identities should not occur only at specific times in the school calendar, but should be integrated into daily relationships, pedagogical practices, the curriculum, and institutional policies. The literature reviewed indicates that school environments characterized by support, recognition, safety, and appreciation of diversity offer better conditions to promote the academic and emotional development of students, reinforcing the need for educational policies committed to equity and belonging [2,5,8].

IV. Conclusion

Racial and ethnic identity is an important dimension for understanding the experiences students have in the school environment. Recognizing identities and strengthening the feeling of belonging can contribute to more positive relationships with the school, promoting participation, engagement, and emotional well-being.

The scientific production analyzed demonstrates that belonging can function as an important protective element, especially for students belonging to racially and ethnically marginalized groups. The quality of relationships with teachers, the racial climate of the institution, the valuing of diversity, and the confrontation of discriminatory practices represent relevant factors in building more welcoming educational environments.

It is concluded that promoting health and well-being in the school environment needs to consider dimensions related to racial identity and experiences of belonging. Building institutions committed to recognizing diversity and reducing inequalities can help students develop more positive relationships with school and find opportunities for protection, participation, and development within that space.

In this context, schools have an important role in creating conditions that enable students to recognize themselves positively and establish meaningful connections with their peers and teachers. Actions focused on inclusion, respect for racial and ethnic differences, and the prevention of discrimination can strengthen the sense of belonging and contribute to a school climate characterized by greater acceptance and social support.

The findings also indicate the importance of incorporating racial and ethnic dimensions into educational and health promotion strategies developed within schools. Educational practices that encourage dialogue about diversity, identity, and social inequalities may contribute to reducing prejudice and strengthening students' confidence to participate in school activities and interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, strengthening belonging should be understood as a continuous process that involves the entire school community. Teachers, administrators, families, and students can collectively contribute to the construction of environments in which differences are respected, identities are valued, and discriminatory experiences are addressed. Such initiatives may support more equitable educational experiences and promote conditions that favor students' academic, social, and emotional development.

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