The Role of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in Students' Wellbeing: Evidence from South Korea

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1.Introduction

As the modern education systems face challenges of systematic inequality and marginalisation, the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (hereafter: DEI) have gained prominence as both policy priorities and normative goals in education. Despite the wide implementation of DEI initiatives in many educational institutions, however, less has been known about how students actually perceive, respond and internalise DEI in educational settings, where it has been increasingly promoted. Especially significant herein are the questions of how students cultivate DEI attitudes in their school environments and to what extent their DEI attitudes are associated with social-emotional well-being—an outcome that has become especially salient amid growing concerns about adolescent mental health. At the same time, while DEI policies and some relevant studies have been extensively developed in the Western countries, empirical evidence on its application and impacts in Asian context remain largely underexplored. These are the issues this study aims to shed light on. More specifically, using national representative data from the 2018 Korea Educational Longitudinal Study (KELS), this study examines the relationship between students' DEI attitudes and their mental health. The central research question this study addresses is as follows: to what extent does DEI attitude—as constructed based on students' self-reported DEI orientations within the school environment—affects mental well-being among secondary school students?

2.Literature Review

In recent decades, there has been a growing number of studies focusing on DEI framework. Due to its conceptual complexity, however, a concrete definition has yet to be firmly established within the literature. Bush & Lindsey (2024) suggested that the DEI framework can be commonly understood to encompass three core components: (1) diversity as individual differences, beliefs, and lived experiences; (2) equity as fair access to opportunities and resources; and (3) inclusion for creating environments in which all individuals' voices are respected and supported within community and society.

Existing studies show that DEI practices have emerged as significant policy initiatives in many different fields. In various governmental organisations and industrial sectors (e.g., hospitality, technology and construction industry), the DEI principles play a vital role in combatting workplace precarity and inequality (Wingfield & Roach, 2025). Most recently, beyond the DEI impacts at individual level, Li et al. (2025) explored whether DEI practices in

the manufacturing sector can increase macro-level firm performance. Their study confirmed that the DEI commitment was positively associated with both stock returns and sales growth (p.17-19).

Equally important, DEI has now increasingly expanded beyond the workplace and is now being widely implemented across educational institutions. In many cases, DEI practices have been promoted through institutional-level efforts, including multicultural curricular (Kim, 2023; Pettitt, 2024), anti-racist programs (Assaker et al., 2025; Engram & Mayer, 2023; Ordonez et al., 2023) and inclusive pedagogical schemes (Sukhera et al., 2024). While the specific goals may vary by institutions and their policy contexts, there are several common DEI policy objectives: (1) the enhancement of cross-cultural skills; (2) the elimination of class segregation; (3) the creation of supportive environments for students with disabilities; and (4) the promotion of active faculty-student interactions (Pride et al., 2023; Schoenberg et al., 2024). Although it is often argued that the efficacy of DEI policies is limited by the quality of implementation, schools have attempted to address such issues by tracking their progress in promoting equitable and diversified school-level achievements (e.g., admission results) through various annual reports (Dover et al., 2016; Iyer, 2009).

Prior research also reveals that in the US, not only student admissions, but also faculty and staff hiring have been more diversified, equitable and inclusive. For instance, between 2014 and 2017, the percentage of non-white college presidents in the US increased from 14% to 30% (Gagliardi et al., 2017). In addition to such structural changes, some studies show that school DEI environment can play a positive role in students' academic outcomes. Dudu (2023) highlighted the importance of diversity, proposing that higher education institutions with diversity education tend to have lower dropping out rates than those without diversity education. Equally important, a growing body of recent empirical research has explicitly examined the relationship between school-level DEI environments and students' mental well-being. For example, Denson and Chang (2009) reported that higher level of curricular inclusivity tends to increase college students' cognitive and affective development. In a similar vein, Jagers et al. (2021) suggested that schools with high degree of cultural openness were positively associated with emotional regulation and prosocial behaviour. Further, it was found that adolescents in inclusive school environments tend to have low level of mental health problems, including lower frequency of anxiety and stress (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Considering both equity and inclusion aspects, Travia et al. (2022) also confirmed that students in equitable and inclusive school environments tend to experience lower levels of depressive symptoms.

While these studies emphasise the positive effects of DEI on student outcomes, most research has focused on institutional implementation—such as how policies are carried out or how DEI is represented—rather than on how students themselves adapt and cultivate DEI values. This, in turn, offers limited understanding of how DEI environments shape students' own DEI attitudes. In this regard, Jones et al. (2023) argued that whereas DEI practice is globally initiated through school mission guidelines, evaluations have typically centred on institutional indicators rather than students' actual perception and experience. This point is significant as

neglecting students' perspectives—the primary stakeholders in educational settings—may lead to the inadequate conclusion that institutional efforts, such as school policy implementation, automatically brings about meaningful outcomes at individual level (Sabatier, 2014).

Thus far, existing findings propose that DEI framework within educational settings may serve as a protective agent that helps promote psychological resilience for young students. Nevertheless, most prior studies have focused on a single DEI component, and we know little about the combined influence of different DEI factors as an integrated construct. One notable exception among the few studies addressing this issue is that of Yang et al. (2024), who developed a multidimensional DEI score. They showed that students in schools initiating comprehensive DEI programmes experienced significantly lower emotional distress, stronger academic confidence and greater school connectedness. Hassan (2025) used a similar measurement approach and confirmed that aggregated DEI scores moderate the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and racial marginalisation on students' emotional well-being. Although empirical evidence in this regard is still scarce, these findings suggest, first, that DEI can play a role as an effective buffer in stratified educational contexts, and also that the significant impact of all three DEI dimensions may provide cumulative benefits to students.

Against this background, this study aims to contribute to the literature on the relationship between DEI and students' emotional development in several different ways. First, it focuses on the context of East Asian society, rather than Western contexts. While the concept of DEI has been extensively developed and institutionalised in the US and European countries, its application and evolution in Asia remain surprisingly underexplored. Among the Asian cases, this study focuses on South Korea as it presents a compelling case for examining DEI. Since the early 2000s, Korea has experienced significant social changes heavily geared by global migration and rapidly changing family structures (DeWind et al., 2012; Han et al., 2018; Kwon & Holliday, 2007). The growing number of multicultural families, international students and migrant workers has made Korean society increasingly diverse. These demographic shifts, in turn, challenge the traditionally homogenous demographic composition and necessitate relevant policy measures Castles, 2017; Lim 2009). In response, several government agencies, local political bodies and educational institutions have implemented DEI initiatives. Second, this study focuses on secondary education, which has been largely neglected in the existing DEI literature. Most DEI studies in Korea—and in other Asian and Western societies more broadly—have centred on higher education. Yet, secondary schools are critical environmental settings where individuals' identities and attitudes toward difference are shaped. By investigating how students at this educational stage cultivate their DEI attitudes, this study aims to provide deeper insights into whether DEI can facilitate desirable emotional development for young Korean adolescents. Lastly, another key contribution of relevance is lies in its adoption of a novel approach to measuring DEI based on students' perceptions and values. Contrasting to prior research, which has largely relied on the perspectives of school leaders, administrators or teachers to assess DEI at institutional

level, this study foregrounds students' self-reported DEI orientations. Simultaneously, it creates an aggregate measure of DEI attitudes, in order to capture students' overall DEI attitudes, and explores the extent to which these overall attitudes affect to their emotional well-being.

3.Methods

3.1. Data source

This study aims to examine secondary students' DEI attitudes within their schools and the association between DEI and students' positive emotion. The data used for the analyses in this study were drawn from the Korea Educational Longitudinal Study (KELS), conducted by the Korea Educational Development Institute (KEDI). Initially, it began in 2013 with students who were in the 5th grade of elementary school and continued tracking their educational experiences throughout primary, secondary and higher education. The dataset includes a wide range of key variables needed for this study, such as cognitive and emotional development, family background, school life and peer relationships, and students' perceptions of DEI-related programs implemented in schools. For the descriptive nature of this study, it uses the cross-sectional data from the 2018 survey year, which includes sufficient information to operationalise both aggregated DEI score and emotional development.

3.2. Sample

For the purpose of this study, which focuses on the lived experience of high school students in Korea, it was important to ensure that the sample consists only of high school students who responded to all key measures—particularly DEI items, emotional development measures, and control variables such as SES. Thus, among the original sample of 7,324 students in 2013, a final analytical sample of 5,615 11th grade students was used after excluding the missing data.

3.3. Measures

This study employed a range of individual- and school-level variables to examine the relationship between secondary students' overall DEI attitudes and emotional well-being. The primary outcome variable was *emotional well-being*, which was measured based on the three items related to positive emotional state: (1) "I feel at ease"; (2) "I feel cheerful"; and (3) "I feel happy." Each item was rated on 5-point Likert scale, and the average score across these three items was computed to construct a composite index of emotional well-being.

Considering the main objective of this study, the key independent variable was student' DEI attitudes. Herein, this study designed a composite index to describe students' overall attitudes in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion within their school environment. In detail, a total of six items were selected and categorised based on their conceptual alignment with the three components of DEI. For diversity, two items were included that reflect an attitude of cultural and racial openness: (1) "I can accept students from different cultural backgrounds as classmates" and (2) "I would like our school to become more diverse with students of different races and cultures." As regard equity, one item was chosen that emphasises fairness and equal treatment across race or nationality, such as supporting leadership opportunities

regardless of racial background. More specifically, the question asks: "Anyone can be a class president regardless of race." Lastly, for inclusion, three items were selected, which reflect willingness to engage in meaningful relationships with individuals from different backgrounds: (1) "I can become best friends with a student from a different cultural background"; (2) "If a foreign student joins our class, I will try to become friends with them first"; and (3) "I can easily become friends with students who have a different appearance or skin color." It is important to note that each item was rated on 5-Point Likert scale, and a composite DEI attitude score was calculated by taking the average of all six items.

A set of individual-level control variables was included to account for potential confounding factors. First, gender was coded as a binary variable (0 = male, 1 = female). Students' class comprehension was assessed using self-reported understanding levels across three core subjects: Korean language, mathematics, and English. For each subject, students selected one of five percentage ranges reflecting how much of the class content they felt they understood: (1) = "20% or less"; (2) = "21–40%"; (3) = "41–60%"; (4) = "61–80%"; and (5) = "More than 81%." An overall class comprehension variable was computed by averaging the numeric values of the three subject-specific items (Korean, math and English). Further, household monthly income was included as an indicator of family socioeconomic status and was log-transformed due to its skewed distribution. In addition, existing studies suggest that there is a strong correlation between social activities and individuals' mental health (Kim 2015; Phosaly 2019). Thus, this study incorporates a social activity variable, which was measured by one item: "I actively participate in volunteer activities." Lastly, both parental and teacher support were measured using a single item assessing the home environment (i.e., "My parents create a supportive atmosphere for studying at home) and the emotional and interpersonal dimension of teacher support (i.e., "My teacher listens to me well).

Further, beyond the individual-level confounders, this study takes into account two school-level contextual variables: school type (private vs public) and school location (metropolitan vs non-metropolitan). In the Korean context, private and public high schools do not operate under a uniform educational system, and there are notable structural differences in curriculum implementation, school governance and student management. Prior research suggests that students attending private high schools tend to report higher levels of stress and anxiety about their future compared to their peers in public schools (Xu & Lee, 2023; Phosaly et al., 2019; Houri et al., 2012). Moreover, school location also serves as a significant contextual factor influencing students' emotional development. According to Kim (2015), high school students in metropolitan areas are generally exposed to more intense academic competition than their non-metropolitan counterparts, which can, in turn, contribute to heightened academic stress and increased experiences of negative affect.

3.4. Research design and statistical approach

The overarching goal of this study is to investigate the association between students' DEI attitudes and their emotional well-being. To this end, it employed a quantitative cross-sectional design, which is appropriate for exploring patterns and relationships between

variables of interest at a specific point in time. Although cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inference, it can be useful for this study as it aims to provide a descriptive analysis for the empirical associations of interest.

As regards the statistical approach, descriptive statistics were first computed for ordinal variables. Means, standard deviations and standard errors were calculated to offer a brief summary of the data's central tendency and variability. Then, to test the relationship between DEI attitudes and emotional well-being, a series of linear regression analyses were conducted. To isolate the effect of DEI attitudes, this study ran several different regression models, beginning from individual-level to school-level contextual analyses.

4.Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	mean	sd	se
DEI score	4.258	0.603	0.008
Positive Emotion	3.585	0.976	0.013
Class comprehension	3.511	1.087	0.014
Social Activity	3.780	1.000	0.013
Family Income	573.274	594.038	7.916
Parental Support	3.257	1.107	0.015
Teacher Support	3.925	0.779	0.010

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the core variables included in the analysis. Students' attitudes toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were generally favourable, with a mean score of 4.258 (SD = 0.603). This suggests that a majority of students in the sample cultivated inclusive values and demonstrated openness toward difference—an encouraging sign that DEI norms are being internalised by youth in the contemporary educational context. The primary outcome of interest—emotional well-being—yielded a mean of 3.585 (SD = 0.976), which indicates that students reported a moderately high level of emotional well-being in their school life. Meanwhile, self-reported understanding of classroom lecture had a mean of 3.511 (SD = 1.087), and participation in social or volunteer activities averaged 3.780 (SD = 1.000). In terms of background characteristics, the average monthly family income was 573,274 KRW (SD = 594,038). Perceived parental and teacher support averaged 3.257 (SD = 1.107) and 3.925 (SD = 0.779), respectively—pointing to generally strong interpersonal support, particularly within the school setting.

4.2.DEI attitude as predictor of emotional well-being

Now turning to the main issue of the role of DEI: how students' DEI attitudes are associated with positive emotion? In examining this question, a linear regression analysis was conducted to estimate the effects of DEI attitudes on the outcome variable of interest. Given that, DEI attitude was included as an independent variable across all regression models. In Model 2, the

following demographic and behavioural factors were added: gender, class comprehension and social activity. Then in Model 3, family income, parental support and teacher support were included as socio-economic resource variables. After controlling for the aforementioned individual-level variables, school-level characteristics (i.e., school location and school type) were also included in Model 4, in order to further isolate the independent effect of DEI attitudes.

Table 2 displays the results of four linear regression models exploring the relationship between students' DEI attitudes and their emotional well-being. Across all models, DEI attitudes emerged as a consistent and statistically significant predictor, with coefficients ranging from 0.244 to 0.395 ($p < .001$). These results suggest that students who cultivate high DEI attitudes tend to have more positive emotion in their daily school lives.

Table 2. Results of Linear Regression

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	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
DEI	0.396***	0.356***	0.245***	0.244***
	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Gender		0.315***	0.236***	0.235***
		(0.025)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Class comprehension		0.086***	0.031***	0.029**
		(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Social activity		0.079***	0.029**	0.027**
		(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Family Income			-0.039*	-0.037*
			(0.021)	(0.021)
Parental support			0.128***	0.130***
			(0.011)	(0.011)
Teacher support			0.290***	0.293***
			(0.017)	(0.017)
School type				-0.029
				(0.025)
School region				0.014
				(0.025)
Constant	1.899***	1.316***	0.891***	0.885***
	(0.090)	(0.096)	(0.153)	(0.155)
Observations	5,631	5,631	5,631	5,614
R^2	0.060	0.101	0.173	0.175
Adjusted R^2	0.060	0.101	0.172	0.174
Residual Std. Error	0.947 (df = 5629)	0.926 (df = 5626)	0.888 (df = 5623)	0.887 (df = 5604)
F Statistic	358.674*** (df = 1; 5629)	158.322*** (df = 4; 5626)	167.948*** (df = 7; 5623)	131.971*** (df = 9; 5604)

Note: *p **p ***p<0.01

More specifically, Model 1, which includes only DEI attitudes as a predictor, accounts for 6.0% of the variance in positive emotion. This bivariate result indicates that DEI orientations are meaningfully related to emotional experience, even in the absence of other controls. It supports the idea that internal values related to fairness, empathy and openness may themselves foster a more positive emotional development—perhaps through enhanced peer relationships or reduced interpersonal conflict.

Model 2 adds key demographic and behavioural controls, including gender, academic comprehension and social engagement. With these included, the model's explanatory power increases substantially (Adjusted R^2 = 0.101). Among these variables, gender shows a robust effect: female students report significantly higher levels of positive emotional state (B = 0.315, p < .001), consistent with patterns observed in prior psychological research on gender and emotional expression. Importantly, while both class comprehension and participation in social/volunteer activities exhibit statistically significant, though smaller, positive effects, the DEI coefficient remains large and statistically significant (B = 0.308, p < .001). This may suggest that students' DEI attitudes are the most important factors influencing emotional development.

Then, Model 3 introduces students' socio-economic resource variables—that are, family income, parental support and teacher support. As for the results, both teacher support (B = 0.290, p < .001) and parental support (B = 0.128, p < .001) show strong, positive associations with emotional outcomes, confirming the foundational role of supportive adult relationships in shaping students' psychological health. Surprisingly, however, family income demonstrates a small but statistically significant negative association with emotional well-being (B = –0.039, p < .05). While counterintuitive, this may reflect the distinct pressures or social expectations faced by students from higher-income households. The DEI coefficient, meanwhile, remains stable and significant (B = 0.245, p < .001), reinforcing its independent contribution to emotional well-being.

Lastly, Model 4 takes account into all factors by incorporating school-level structural variables—school type and region—but neither proves significant in predicting emotional outcomes. This proposes that students' internalised DEI attitudes are more closely tied to emotional well-being than external institutional characteristics. The coefficient for DEI remains virtually unchanged (B = 0.244, p < .001), underscoring the robustness of this association across models. Moreover, the full model explains 17.4% of the variance in positive emotion (Adjusted R^2 = 0.174), which is notable given the explanatory power of the regressors substantially increased when comparing to the previous models. Taken together, the results support that students who hold highly diverse, equitable and inclusive attitudes are not only more likely to experience greater mental well-being, compared to those with low DEI values. Hence, these findings extend prior research on DEI at school level by suggesting that students' own value systems—rather than simply institutional features—play a pivotal role in shaping affective outcomes.

Conclusion

Using nationally representative data from the 2018 Korea Educational Longitudinal Study (KELS), this study aimed to investigate whether and how secondary school students' DEI attitudes are associated with their emotional well-being. First and foremost, the findings reveal that students who hold stronger attitudes in favour of diversity, equity and inclusion report significantly higher levels of emotional well-being. In particular, one of the key

findings is the robustness of DEI attitudes as a predictor of emotional well-being, which remained significant across all different regression models with various confounding factors. This is noteworthy in that, while the inclusion of controls such as gender, academic comprehension, social activity, parental and teacher support, and family income substantially increased model explanatory power, DEI attitudes retained a positive and independent association with emotional well-being. This further suggests that students' internalised values of fairness, openness and inclusion may foster a psychological climate of acceptance and belonging that can enhance positive emotional development and well-being in school life. Moreover, these key findings and theoretical interpretation align with prior research that highlights the role of inclusive learning environments in promoting empathy, prosocial behaviour and reduced emotional distress (Denson & Chang, 2009; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Biegel et al., 2020).

Another notable finding is the strong role of interpersonal support—particularly from teachers—as a predictor of mental well-being for secondary students. The coefficient for teacher support was nearly twice that of parental support, highlighting how caring, responsive relationships in school settings can buffer stress and foster positive emotional development. This is consistent with research on the importance of teacher-student relationships in adolescent socio-emotional outcomes (Koch & Zahedi, 2018; Jagers et al., 2019). The finding that school-level characteristics (e.g., school type and region) were not significantly associated with emotional well-being further reinforces the argument that subjective interpersonal experiences and attitudes—rather than structural or geographical factors—may function as the primary drivers of students' emotional development.

The negative association between family income and positive emotional state, although modest, adds a layer of complexity. Higher socioeconomic status is often assumed to correlate with better mental health outcomes, but in the Korean context, students from wealthier households may face heightened academic pressures and performance anxieties (Kim, 2023). This finding echoes broader concerns about the psychosocial costs of meritocratic competition in East Asian education systems (Lee & Kim, 2024). It suggests that DEI-supportive attitudes—emphasising fairness and acceptance—could serve as a counterbalance to these competitive pressures by promoting a more cooperative, relational ethos among students. From a theoretical standpoint, this study substantiates the notion that DEI is not merely an institutional framework but also a set of internalised values that shape students' social-emotional outcomes. This echoes the previous studies from Travia et al. (2022), and Yang et al. (2024) and Hassan (2023), which argued that aggregated DEI measures were strongly linked to individuals' various mental health outcomes.

Moreover, the current study contributes additional evidence from an Asian context, addressing a gap in the literature that has been heavily dominated by Western case studies. As Korea becomes increasingly diverse due to migration and multicultural family structures (Kwon & Holliday, 2007; Han et al., 2018), understanding how students develop inclusive attitudes—and how these attitudes relate to their emotional health—has both academic and policy relevance.

As regard policy implications, the findings indicate that cultivating positive DEI attitudes among students can have tangible benefits for their emotional well-being. This calls for a shift in policy focus: rather than treating DEI as a set of compliance measures or abstract values, schools should embed DEI principles into everyday classroom practices and interpersonal interactions. Teacher training on inclusive pedagogy, anti-bias education and culturally responsive communication may amplify the protective effects of DEI. Furthermore, since teacher support emerged as a key factor, investing in teacher-student relational quality—through mentoring programs, teacher reflection sessions and professional development—may indirectly boost students' emotional outcomes.

While this study provides meaningful empirical evidence on the role of DEI, its design did not allow for better causal inference, thus remaining unclear whether DEI attitudes directly enhance emotional well-being, or whether emotionally healthy students are more likely to hold strong DEI values. In this respect, future studies may employ longitudinal design, which could better capture the directionality and causality of these relationships. Moreover, its reliance on self-reported measures introduces potential biases, including social desirability effects, especially around culturally sensitive items such as attitudes toward diversity. Future research could conduct student self-reports with teacher evaluations, peer assessments or other behavioural indicators. Finally, while the composite DEI measure used here provides a broader view, additional statistical analyses on this index would strengthen its validity as an aggregated DEI measure.

In sum, this study demonstrates that students' DEI attitudes are not only markers of overall social openness but also significant predictors of emotional well-being in secondary schools. By foregrounding students' own voices and values, this research advances the understanding of how DEI operates at the micro-level of adolescent experience. As educational systems in Korea and beyond confront increasing diversity, integrating DEI principles into the daily fabric of school life—and ensuring that students internalise these values—may be central to creating emotionally supportive and inclusive learning environments.

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