

Original Paper

Stoicism in Schools?: A Review of Stoic Applications in Education

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Abstract

A systematic literature review is conducted to uncover trends in past research on Stoic applications to problems in education. It is found that certain Stoic concepts, such as cosmopolitanism and the dichotomy of control, have been popular entry points to the Stoic philosophy for educators in various disciplines. All classroom or curriculum applications target emotions in some way. Few of the reviewed works were found to be empirical and a major takeaway is the need for more scientific research on the effects of Stoic practices as implemented in schools and classrooms.

Keywords

application, education, emotion, philosophy, Stoicism

The classroom is an emotional space and education itself an emotional experience (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Many problems in education involve an affective element and can thus be mitigated by targeting emotions. Student and teacher anxiety (Aydin, 2021; Stearns, 2023), school budget cuts (Guillaume, 2018), sense-making in curriculum writing (Anttila et al., 2023), and racial bias (Catagnus et al., 2022) are notable examples. As a philosophy of emotion (Arnold, 2020), Stoicism has potential as a resource to alleviate a wide range of problems in education. After all, one of its primary goals is maintaining emotional tranquility in challenging circumstances (Pigliucci, 2018), and research suggests that Stoic attitudes and behaviors positively impact emotional well-being (Karl & LeBon, 2026; MacLellan & Lewis, 2026). Despite its promise as an educational resource, the topic of Stoicism in schools is still quite niche and the body of relevant professional literature is small. The purpose of this literature review is to find out how Stoicism has been applied to problems in education

in the past, thus providing a resource for those planning future studies on the viability of Stoic ideas or activities to support schools, teachers, or learners.

Background

Stoicism originated in Ancient Greece around the late 4th century BCE, but most Stoics today base their practice on the ideas of three Romans living centuries later: Epictetus, Stoic teacher and former slave (d. 135 CE), Lucius Annaeus Seneca (d. 65 CE), advisor to the emperor Nero, and Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor himself (121-180 CE). Each is a compelling figure in his own right and the vast power differential between them speaks to the broad appeal of the Stoic philosophy. Together, the trio represents the Late Stoa, a time of greater focus on practice over theory and arguably the philosophy's most vital period (Pigliucci, n.d.).

Stoics then and now aim to live virtuously while maintaining emotional equanimity. A Stoic enjoys peace of mind because she is free from *passions*, or unhealthy emotions (Epictetus, 2nd cent. CE/2014, *Discourses* 1.4). She embodies four key traits necessary to live virtuously: wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice (Lebon & Pierce, 2022). To bolster those traits, she applies three disciplines in her daily life: action, desire, and assent (Van Natta, 2019).

The discipline of action refers to the fair treatment of others (Lebon & Pierce, 2022; Pigliucci, 2018). It is related to the Stoic ideal of *cosmopolitanism*, a kind of universal citizenship which was an important focus of ancient Stoic education (Nussbaum, 1998; Sherman, 2002). Stoics embrace the rational understanding that all human beings are part of the same society (Lopez & Pigliucci, 2019), and they practice *oikeiosis*, the appropriation of concerns outside their immediate personal circumstances and an affinity for other people (Davis, 2024, p. 23).

The discipline of desire reminds Stoics to want only those things which are within their power to obtain or influence. Some things, such as our own opinions, are wholly within our control; others, like our reputation or health, are not fully up to us (Epictetus, 2nd cent. CE/2014, *Handbook* 1.2). This *dichotomy of control* is a key Stoic tenet. The discipline of assent directs the Stoic to wield this control over her own mind. In moments of stress, Stoics learn to separate their preliminary impressions of the event from their final reasoned judgments (Van Natta, 2019, p. 16), giving them ultimate control over their emotional response and corresponding actions. The choice to assent, or to refuse assent, to an impression is perhaps the Stoic's greatest power. Epictetus himself said, "You can chain [me], but not even Zeus can overcome my power of choice" (2nd cent. CE/2014, *Discourses*, 1.17-23).

This empowering Stoic idea that our thoughts and conscious choices impact our emotions underlies modern cognitive behavioral therapies (Bamboulis, 2025; Cavanna, 2020; Lebon & Pierce, 2022; Robertson, 2020). Recent research has demonstrated that Stoic attitudes and practices are associated with emotional well-being and positive mental health characteristics such as self-efficacy, resilience, emotional regulation (Karl & LeBon, 2026; LeBon, 2024; MacLellan & Lewis, 2026), and the reduction of rumination (Darby et al., 2025). Stoics feel less anxious, less angry, and more optimistic

(Lebon & Pierce, 2022). Given that teachers and students are bombarded daily with challenges to their emotional well-being, from pressure to achieve and constant digital distractions (Ansiska, 2025), to lack of appropriate emotional regulation skills (Donker et al., 2020; Langreo, 2025), to artificial intelligence anxieties (Gecker & Sanders, 2026; Klimova & Pikhart, 2025), Stoicism would seem an appropriate resource to mine for mitigation techniques. Yet educators who are interested in adapting Stoic ideas or practices to use themselves, or to apply in their classrooms, have very little in the way of academic research to help them do so, or to justify their choice to implement such practices when they lie outside district- or state-mandated curriculum.

To lay the groundwork for future studies on the potential of Stoicism to alleviate various problems in education, and especially emotional problems in the teaching-learning process, this literature review explores trends in previous research on Stoic applications in K-12 and post-secondary institutions. A basic research question guided the inquiry: *How has Stoicism been applied to problems in education?*

Methods

The databases Education Source, Education Full Text, ERIC, and JSTOR were searched for relevant source material. Search terms were broad by design to bring up all publications linking Stoicism and K-12 or post-secondary education. From there, the author winnowed the list of sources to peer-reviewed studies which describe a specific application of the Stoic philosophy to a problem related to curriculum, instruction, student achievement, or the experience of schooling. Reference lists were also consulted to search for works missed during the database search. A total of 32 peer-reviewed studies met the inclusion criteria.

The research question guided a first read-through of all the studies (Gracias et al., 2023), the intention of which was to gain a cohesive sense of the whole body of literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Each study was then read a second and third time to record emerging trends in the uses of Stoicism therein. The author has taken a neutral perspective insofar as she has attempted to present a summary of existing research trends with exhaustive coverage, and the organization of the review is conceptual rather than chronological (Cooper, 1988).

Findings and Discussion

The 32 articles reviewed for this study range in publication date from 1973 to 2025. All but one were published in the 2000s, though. A total of 24 articles were published after 2010; 16 of those between 2020 and 2025. These patterns align generally with the meteoric rise of popular interest in Stoicism and a coinciding explosion of blogs, podcasts, journals, self-help books, and other non-academic publications beginning in the early 2010s, and gaining more steam in the 2020s (Biezenski, 2024; Love, 2021; Sanchez, 2024; Sherman, 2023). Like sourdough bread baking, Stoicism became a hobby and refuge for many during the Covid-19 pandemic (Delaney, 2020; Hildyard, 2020), and it seems that scholars in education took notice of its budding popularity.

Like most modern Stoics, educators applying Stoic ideas in the classroom have relied overwhelmingly on the perspectives of the Late Stoa – that is, on Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius – rather than on the philosophy’s original Greek practitioners or any later historical adherents. The Roman trio’s translated works are far more accessible to non-experts: easy to find online for free and also easy to purchase on websites like Amazon.com. They are also easier to understand and contextualize, given the number of excellent commentaries and interpretations currently available (for example, Donald Robertson’s 2019 tome on Marcus Aurelius entitled *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor*). Our three Stoics of the Roman period were also quite practical in their focus (Groenendijk & de Ruyter, 2009, p. 82), and in this body of literature, Stoicism is widely perceived as a philosophy of *action* (Guenther, 2018; Holowchak, 2009; Leitland, 2021; Ohayon & Flanagan, 2019; Richardi, 2025; Rumjahn, 2022; Vaz, 2023). One educator affirms, for example, that Stoic texts are “full of tips and tricks to manage the challenges of life” (Guenther, 2018, p. 211). If one is looking for tips and tricks, it is to Epictetus’s complete *Handbook* or Marcus Aurelius’s “self-help” journal (Hays, 2003) that one is likely to go, and not to the fragments of lesser-known ancients like Chrysippus (d. c. 206 BCE). Whether this reliance on the Roman Stoics for educational applications is a boon or a bane is impossible to say; however, it is probably true that a better understanding of the philosophy would be gleaned by studying its earliest foundations in conjunction with later interpretations.

The educational problems addressed by the reviewed works showed a notable range in both context and scale. Disciplines and areas of concern varied widely, from manners in military education (Sherman, 2002), to student mental health (Michopoulou, 2022), to ecology and sustainability (MacPherson, 2005; Stickney, 2020; Whiting et al., 2018). Some of the authors grapple with issues one might describe as local, small-scale or niche, such as the desire to return students to a state of place-based “rootedness” (Stickney, 2020, p. 1076) or the need to cultivate empathy in law school students (Nussbaum, 2003). Other problems are less bounded, like general reform in liberal education (Crittenden, 2005; Groenendijk & de Ruyter, 2009; Holowchak, 2009), building strong personal relationships (Kaur, 2025), or the restoration of broken civic-social ties (Calloway-Thomas, 2018; Davis, 2024). Some are of global import, like averting a climate-induced apocalypse (Warnick, 2023). To say that Stoicism has been broadly applied in education would thus be an understatement! This outcome is somewhat surprising, given the strong association between Stoicism and emotion (and not, say, environmentalism or legal education).

Even in a variegated problem space, all of the Stoic applications did touch on *emotion* in some way: for example, a lack of critical thinking among university students is solved, in part, by training them to examine their emotions as a Stoic would (Gulevataya et al., 2022). When emotions were discussed or targeted, the overwhelming focus was on coping or building resilience. Most studies centered *student* emotion: e.g., teens’ emotional well-being during the pandemic (Michopoulou, 2022) or during their transition to post-secondary institutions (MacMillan, 2019; Ohayon & Flanagan, 2019). Only two of the works targeted emotions to improve the learning process itself: one by increasing student

motivation (Ansiska, 2025); the other by examining the role of emotions in English language learning (Rambu et al., 2023). None of the papers mentioned academic emotions (Kim & Pekrun, 2014; Tan et al., 2021) or made the explicit connection between emotion and attention or other parts of the human memory model (Tyng et al., 2017).

Five studies directly addressed the emotional challenges experienced by *teachers* (Guenther, 2018; Mintz, 2024; Richardi, 2025; Rumjahn, 2022; Schimmels et al., 2024). All encourage teachers to employ Stoic techniques for stress mitigation. Mintz (2024) uses a medical analogy to relieve teachers of the burden of *entertaining* their students, since learning, like medical treatment, is not always pleasant (p. 92). Rumjahn (2022) describes a Stoic visualization exercise to combat the anxious teacher's ego as well as her fears (p. 24); Richardi (2025) uses the analogy of the Stoic Archer, who takes an expert shot but still misses her target, to remind teachers that student outcomes are not fully within their control (p. 103). Student attitudes toward learning are not within the teacher's control either (Burton, 2014; Guenther, 2018; Mintz, 2024): just as a patient must decide to engage in the healing process, a student must decide to engage in his own learning a). (Burton, 2014; R. R. Sherman, 1973) By far, this power of choice and the dichotomy of control were the most frequently cited Stoic concepts in this literature. In addition to reminding teachers what is and is not within their power to achieve, the dichotomy helps students cope with the realities of climate change (Stonehouse & Throop, 2023; Warnick, 2023), with adverse outcomes (Brown et al., 2022), and with stressors related to Covid restrictions (Michopoulou, 2022); more broadly, it provides "training for life" by helping us correctly assess our moral and ethical choices (Holowchak, 2009). Though the discipline of assent and its emphasis on personal choice and agency is a powerful force in *popular* Stoic literature, its limelight is somewhat diminished by the stronger presence of the (perhaps simpler) idea of control in the studies reviewed here.

The Stoic ideal of cosmopolitanism also had a strong presence in this literature. Five of the articles draw on it to propose reforms in climate and sustainability education. MacPherson (2005) outlines an entirely new framework for liberal education that expands outward from local concerns to produce world ecological citizens who work together toward planetary well-being (MacPherson, 2005, p. 144). Whiting et al. (2018) argue that ecopedagogies infused with Stoic sensibilities are uniquely able to confront matters of global socio-environmental injustice (p. 2). The link to social justice is picked up by Stickney (2020), who writes that outdoor strolls, grounded in Stoic views of geography and place, yield opportunities for students to notice, critically question, and problematize "taken-for-granted and normalized ways of regarding things" (p. 1077).

Other works in this review revolve around the central concept of cosmopolitanism but without the explicit connection to sustainability. These connect instead to empathy, or affinity. Nussbaum (2003) argues that law schools ought to cultivate empathy in the form of *narrative imagination*, an ability to think about "what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions, wishes and desires that

someone so placed might have” (p. 270). Calloway-Thomas (2018) calls for a “pedagogy of empathy” in response to a perceived breakdown of social relationships in the U.S. and beyond, represented by cruelties such as the repudiation of refugees. More recently, Davis (2024) has proposed a curricular focus on developing both acknowledgement and affinity for others in a post-truth world where people subscribe to wholly different realities. In all instances, Stoic cosmopolitanism is envisioned as a means to expand students’ perspectives from local to global and to build empathy for the planet and all its inhabitants.

Seven studies in this review hone in on the goals and substance of a liberal education, which the Stoic Seneca (d. 65 CE) defined as one which liberates the mind of the learner (Moltow, 2014; Rice, 2006). All but one of these articles urge for reform with a general thrust toward a normative curriculum and purpose. Holowchak (2009), for example, argues that liberal universities should discard moral relativism and instead adopt a Stoic universalistic perspective on values, citizenship and personhood (p. 167). Crittenden (2005) generally endorses Martha Nussbaum’s distinct prescription for a liberal education derived from Socrates and the Stoics, with doses of critical reflection, a cosmopolitanism perspective, and the aforementioned narrative imagination (Nussbaum, 1998). Gulevataya et al. (2022) envision a liberal university education which, like Nussbaum’s, emphasizes reflective critical thought and self-knowing through a Western tradition and specifically Stoic practices.

Related to normative curricular goals, Leitlande (2021) presents a framework for utilizing Stoicism to build character in schools, tying Stoic tenets and themes to specific cognitive exercises activities for teachers or students. This is the only paper in the group to consider a serious role for Stoicism in the character development of K-12 students. Alternatively, Sherman (2005) discusses character within the context of military education, arguing that an outward show of manners is sometimes morally required over the candor we are often encouraged to display in our social interactions (p. 286). The lack of engagement on the topic of character development beyond these two sources is a surprising outcome of this literature review, given the Stoic emphasis on living virtuously, and the fact that classroom misbehavior is a commonly-cited factor contributing to teacher attrition today (Agyapong et al., 2022; Ratcliff et al., 2010; Starrett et al., 2024; Walker, 2025).

Notably, only eight of the 32 reviewed papers are *empirical*, including two quantitative studies (Ansiska, 2025; Brown et al., 2023), one mixed methods (Brown et al., 2022), and five qualitative studies (Gulevataya et al., 2022; Michopoulou, 2022; Ohayon & Flanagan, 2019; Rambu et al., 2023; Schimmels et al., 2024). The other 24 papers are best described as persuasive essays or personal narratives. They proffer theoretical arguments or ideas for Stoic applications in schools rather than clear prescriptions or realized programmatic interventions with observable results. This ratio of empirical to non-empirical work may explain why previous educational research on Stoicism has not made a larger impact. Educators have only very recently tried applying Stoicism in ways intended to produce statistically measurable results with findings generalizable, or at least transferable, to larger populations. For professors or schoolteachers wishing to apply Stoicism in their own classrooms, there

is little in the way of peer-reviewed information for them to rely on as a guideline.

All of the papers, empirical or otherwise, promoted a Stoic theoretical or conceptual framework by examining a problem from a Stoic point of reference. For example, a teacher considers her natural feelings of irritation in the classroom from the Stoic stance that anger reflects a “suspension of rational thinking” (Guenther, 2018, p. 213); in another study, researchers consider burnout among medical students from a Stoic perspective on empathy and emotional self-awareness (Brown et al., 2022). In every paper, a problem is conceptually reframed such that it can be mitigated through some further application of Stoicism.

Twenty-one papers went beyond the Stoic reframing of a problem to the application of a broad conceptual framework as a *solution* to that problem. Warnick (2023) based his advocacy of “tragic activism” to avert climate disaster on a number of Stoic ideas, including *apatheia* (freedom from harmful passions) and the inclination toward civic engagement based on personal integrity (p. 817); Ohayon and Flanagan (2019) suggest viewing individual differences in stress responses from the Stoic perspective on control and rational appraisal (p. 115); Davis (2024) describes the adoption of a Stoic affinity for others, through *oikeiosis*, to help citizens reconcile in the face seemingly insurmountable ideological differences.

Only eight of the articles reviewed went beyond the conceptual by offering something *real*: i.e., physically actionable activities aligned with Stoic principles, or intended to teach them directly. Some utilized explicit Stoic training programs, such as a three-hour workshop for nurse educators (Schimmels et al., 2024), an eight-week course for undergraduates (Ansiska, 2025), or a 12-day self-guided online training program called *SeRenE*, or “Stoic Reflection for Resilience and Empathy” (Brown et al., 2022). These workshops and trainings introduced participants to key Stoic concepts such as assent and the dichotomy of control (Schimmels et al., 2024), or to the influential ideas of ancient teachers and practitioners like Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius (Gulevataya et al., 2022). Other works described smaller-scale Stoic exercises for teachers or students. For example, a middle school teacher creates a list of outcomes that she can and cannot control (Guenther, 2018); a university professor suggests that schoolteachers practice negative visualization, known to Stoics as the *praemeditatio malorum* (foresight of evils), to anticipate and better respond to the challenges likely to occur throughout the school day (Leitlande, 2021, p. 133); a sustainability educator has students write their concerns on index cards and literally sets those cards on fire (outdoors!) to help students focus on what they can control in the present (Stonehouse & Throop, 2023). The variety of already-realized applications of the Stoic philosophy for both educators and learners demonstrates its flexibility as a potential resource for teacher professional development and for student success or wellness programs.

Finally, it is worth noting that just a few of the works included in this review were written by or in coordination with experts in the philosophy of Stoicism (Brown et al., 2022b; MacLellan & Derakshan, 2021; Nussbaum, 1998, 2003; Sherman, 2005; Sherman, 1973a). It speaks to the broad accessibility of Stoicism for educators. After all, certain Stoic ideas, like the four cardinal virtues or the

dichotomy of control, can be easily taught and understood without a degree in philosophy.

Conclusion

This literature review has uncovered several trends which can inform future research on the viability of Stoicism as a problem-solving resource in education.

The included studies relied heavily on the ideas of the Roman Stoics. This reliance is by no means an obvious detriment, but it does leave a lot of ancient source material on the table. In the future, perhaps researchers can avail themselves of earlier Greek text fragments and more challenging sources outside the Late Stoa to find new ways to connect Stoic ideas to the problem spaces they care about. The scope and variety of the problem spaces themselves demonstrate the broad applicability of Stoicism as a resource in education. While it is true that most of the studies treated *emotions* in some way, they did so in relation to problems big and small and across different disciplines (e.g., legal education, military and medical training, liberal studies, English language learning, sustainability, etc.). It seems that Stoicism has already been deemed appropriate by educator-researchers for use in many educational spaces and circumstances.

Many of the papers emphasized the stress-busting potential of the Stoic philosophy, which is appropriate and unsurprising given its focus on emotional control. But this laser-focus on stress and anxiety mitigation should not lead us to ignore the feasibility of Stoic applications to improve other aspects of the teaching and learning experience hinted at in this literature, such as forging stronger relationships (Kaur, 2025) or developing critical thinking skills (Gulevataya et al., 2022), or outside this review, such as improving working memory (MacLellan & Derakshan, 2021) or increasing brainwave synchronicity (Darby et al., 2025). Aspects of the Stoic philosophy may be able to improve the learning process itself, or the overall experience of schooling for both teachers and students, beyond simply *coping*.

The weak representation of character building as a topic of interest in this literature is puzzling. After all, living virtuously is the Stoic's true goal in life, and other traits valued by the Stoics, like wisdom, temperance, and courage, are as desirable in K-12 and university students as they are in grown adults and citizens. Further research is needed to explore Stoic approaches to character building and/or the possibility of designing targeted interventions to solve specific behavioral problems. This could include research into the parallels between related approaches that exist already, like the CASEL framework for social-emotional learning and relationships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2026) or positive behavioral interventions and supports (Center on PBIS, 2026).

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this literature review is the ratio of empirical (8) to non-empirical studies (24) on Stoicism in education, and the ratio of conceptual (24) to realized applications (8). Without a doubt, the papers consulted in this literature review have laid important groundwork for using Stoic ideas to mitigate problems in education: for example, by demonstrating its

suitability as a curricular framework for liberal studies (Crittenden, 2005; Holowchak, 2009; MacPherson, 2005) and for sustainability education (Warnick, 2023; Whiting et al., 2018), or its aptness as a tool for teachers and students to mitigate the stresses involved in schooling (MacMillan, 2019; Michopoulou, 2022; Richardi, 2025; Rumjahn, 2022). But without more empirical observation and experimentation, the potential of Stoic ideas to improve any aspect of schooling must remain speculative. Perhaps Stoicism can solve many problems in education; perhaps it solves none. Scientific papers employing empirical, systematic research methodologies are sorely needed to begin building consensus in either direction. At the moment, a few dozen educator-researchers do believe in the power of Stoic ideas to enrich their professional lives or to improve the experience of their students, and that is all we can say for certain.

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