

April 2024



Executive Summary: **A Systematic Review of STEM and Social Emotional Development in Out-of-School Time**

Introduction

There is growing interest in understanding the social and emotional dimensions of learning science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to help all young people develop the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a STEM-driven future (Allen & Noam, 2023). Out-of-school time (OST) programs are increasingly integrating methods to support social-emotional development (SED) in STEM learning, such as through collaborative activities that challenge youth to problem-solve and persevere through failure. However, until now, there has not been a comprehensive examination of how skills at the intersection of STEM and SED are conceptualized, put into practice, and studied for effectiveness.

This executive summary highlights key findings from a [National Science Foundation \(NSF\)-funded systematic review](#) that provides evidence to support the field's understanding of STEM and SED in OST programs. We systematically searched, assessed, and synthesized two decades of research, evaluation, and practice literature focused on skills important to STEM and SED among youth ages 5 to 18 in OST settings (e.g., afterschool clubs, summer programs). We chose OST programs as they often place a dual focus on STEM learning and youth development. Our definition of SED includes 21st-century, resiliency, and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, and we used Harvard's [Explore SEL](#) taxonomy to ensure representation of all SED terms. This study maps the landscape of STEM+SED skills and provides an organizing frame to advance essential research on this topic.

Study Highlights

- This study systematically reviewed references from over twenty years of research, evaluation, and practice at the interface of STEM+SED in out-of-school time (OST) programs for youth ages 5 to 18.
- Authors cited hundreds of theories and frameworks, and programs leveraged more than a dozen types of strategies (hands-on experiences, collaboration opportunities, youth expression activities, etc.), in an effort to understand and grow more than 100 different STEM+SED skills in youth.
- 105 quantitative studies reported significant growth in youth SED skill(s) after STEM programming, and 330 qualitative studies identified meaningful SED themes among youth engaged in STEM. However, only 35% to 55% of these study designs were rated as strong or exemplary.
- The extensive list of STEM+SED skills can be mapped to five focal areas/domains; this flexible organizing framework can help unify research, policy, and practice.

Study Background

Context & Purpose

This systematic review was designed to strengthen the evidence base supporting the integration of STEM and SED in the OST field. Integrating STEM and SED has many practical purposes, including increasing youth interest, motivation, identity, and attitudes towards STEM education and careers, particularly for youth who have historically been underrepresented in STEM. This study builds on recent projects and resources that promote the intentional, explicit, and evidence-based integration of STEM and SED in ways that support program improvement and better youth outcomes (Allen & Noam, 2023; NRC, 2015; The Aspen Institute, 2018).

In 2020, the [Institute for the Study of Resilience in Youth \(ISRY\)](#) at McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School convened a two-day virtual conference to explore the connections between STEM and SED (STEM+SED) in OST (NSF Award #1940155). A key recommendation highlighted by attendees, including 49 experts from 37 organizations, was the need to create a unified vision for STEM+SED – one that intentionally integrates diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) – to bolster capacity of the OST field in research, policy, and practice (Allen & Noam, 2023). Attendees underscored the need for a rigorous, evidence-based approach to guide decision-making regarding the integration of STEM+SED. This would empower the field to better equip young people with the essential skills needed for success in STEM fields and 21st-century life. To address this need, ISRY developed a three-pillar approach to understand how STEM+SED is conceptualized (Pillar 1), implemented (Pillar 2), and measured (Pillar 3) in OST programs (**Table 1**).

Study Methods

A health science librarian searched five academic databases to identify all references related to K-12 youth in OST STEM learning environments available between January 1, 2000 - July 8, 2022. These searches, guided by the PICO model (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes), yielded 31,085 references that passed through multiple stages of review to remove references that would not answer our study questions (**Figure 1**).

Our research team identified and extracted data from 709 (of the original 31,085) references and then synthesized the data according to the three "pillars" for building coherence in STEM+SED integration: "phenomenon," "implementation," and "assessment" (**Table 1**). Coherence refers to clarity and consistency of conceptual understanding (phenomenon), practice (implementation), and measurement (assessment) of STEM+SED. The pillars intentionally focus on DEIA. For example, we examined how implementation of STEM+SED can inform culturally responsive approaches that lead to progress in STEM inclusion. See p. 8 for additional information and resources, including access to full Methods and a Reference Database.

Research Questions

- How are skills at the overlap of STEM and SED (STEM+SED) conceptualized, implemented, and measured among K-12 youth in OST STEM programs?
- Does the conceptualization, implementation, or measurement of STEM+SED vary over time, by student background, or by formality of the learning environment?

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

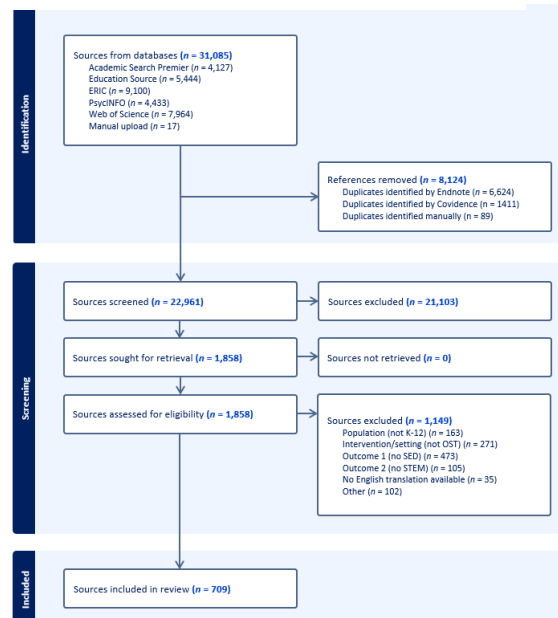


Table 1. Definitions and examples of pillars of coherence to promote STEM+SED integration

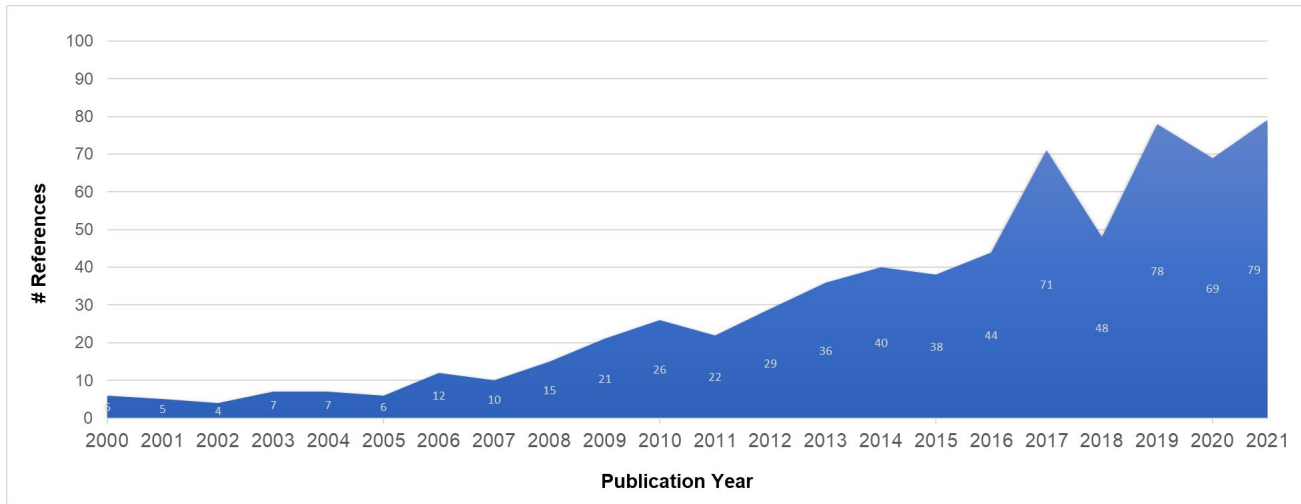
Pillar	Definition
Phenomenon	What the field <i>knows about</i> STEM+SED, including theories, models, or frameworks that inform programming
Implementation	How the field <i>practices</i> STEM+SED, including curricula and strategies that promote teaching and learning
Assessment	How the field <i>measures</i> the quality and outcomes of STEM+SED, including strength of study designs and results

Key Findings

Growing Focus on STEM+SED

Initially, we expected to find a relatively small number of eligible references. Instead, we found there is an active and growing body of literature examining the intersection between STEM+SED (see **Figure 2**). Since 2000, the number of references grew by more than 1000%.

Figure 2. Increasing number of references focusing on STEM+SED in OST over time (2000-2021)



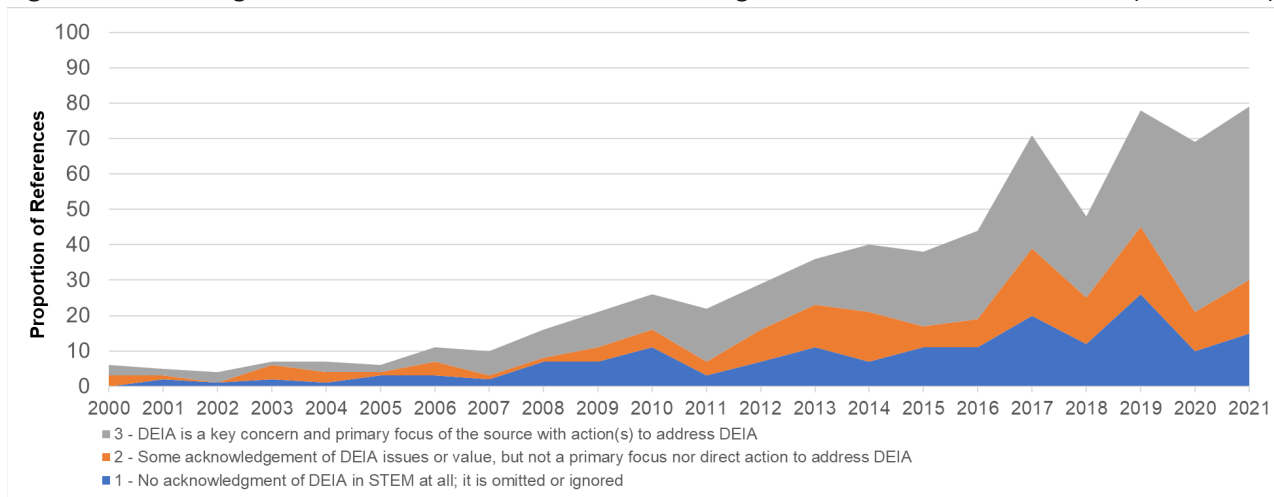
Note. Analysis of trends over time included all years with 12 months of evidence (Jan. 2000 to Dec. 2021).

The programs described by eligible references represented all grade levels of youth from elementary to high school, but they were more representative of adolescents than children, with 66.1% of references exclusively focusing on Grades 6 to 12, and 10% of references exclusively focusing on Grades K to 5. Additionally, programs represented more than 50 countries (the most common being: United States [79.4%], United Kingdom [3.6%], and Canada [2.8%]), and were located in all localities, including urban areas (59.5%), rural areas (13.9%), and suburban areas (6.7%). Programs used different formats (90.6% in-person, 1.7% virtual/remote, and 3.2% hybrid) and were convened in a variety of settings (the most common being at: a college/university [37.1%], school [30.8%], a summer camp [11.7%], outdoors generally [10.9%], a community center [10.4%], a museum [6.5%], or a science center [6.0%]). The programs represented all disciplines within or related to STEM (including each of the four disciplines within 'STEM,' computer science, earth and space science, environmental science, life science, and STEAM, etc.). The disciplines most frequently cited were science, engineering, and mathematics (respectively), each accounting for about 30% to 40% of references, or more than 200 references each.

Increasing Emphasis on DEIA

Overall, more than half of the references (51.5%) focusing on STEM+SED identified DEIA as a key concern and primary focus for STEM programming (see **Figure 3**). The number of DEIA-driven references in the last five years (2017-2022) of this review was twice as high as the number of DEIA-driven references in the first five years (2000-2005). To make this determination, reviewers assessed and assigned references to one of three levels of focus on DEIA in the context of STEM: Level 3 – DEIA is a key concern and primary focus of the source with action to address DEIA; Level 2 – Some acknowledgement of DEIA issues/value but not a primary focus nor direct action to address DEIA; and Level 1 – No acknowledgment of DEIA in STEM at all - it is omitted or ignored. It will be important to continue to track and assess how this literature develops. This evidence supports adding DEIA as an essential component of the STEM+SED equation. DEIA-driven references centered underrepresented and underserved youth in STEM, and in this review, the four groups with the most focus (accounting for one-half to one-third of DEIA-driven references, over two decades) were: girls/women (47.3%), Black or African American youth (33.9%), Hispanic or Latino/a/x youth (33.9%), and youth of low socioeconomic status (31.9%), respectively. When making connections between STEM+SED, many of the references explored lived experiences, cultural assets, cultural context, and equity within STEM learning paradigms.

Figure 3. Increasing number of DEIA-driven references among STEM+SED literature over time (2000-2021)



Note. Analysis of trends over time included all years with 12 months of evidence (Jan. 2000 to Dec. 2021).

Emerging Organizing Framework for STEM+SED

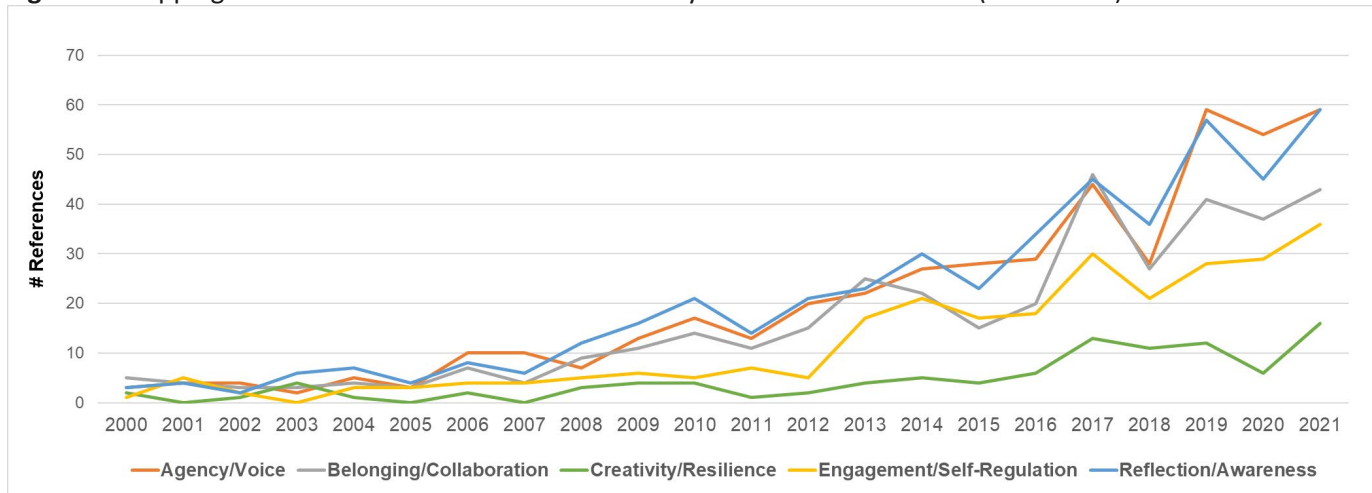
Among the 709 eligible references, we identified a total 3,030 mentions of SED terms. 198 mentions were terms used to label the SED field broadly, such as “social-emotional skills” or “21st-century skills,” and 2,832 were terms used to label specific skills that programs wanted to grow or measure in youth participants, such as “agency” or “collaboration.” These terms represented a total of 106 unique SED skills, after accounting for variations of similar terms (e.g., creativity and creative thinking). Individual skills were mapped to one of five organizing domains, a novel framework for organizing the conceptualization of STEM+SED (see **Table 2**). The first four domains were initially identified by our STEM+SED conference (Award #1940155): Agency/Voice, Belonging/Collaboration, Engagement/Self-regulation, Reflection/Understanding, which align with the domains of a developmental process theory known as the Clover Model (Noam & Shah, 2014). The fifth is a new domain that emerged in the course of this work: Creativity/Resilience.

Table 2. Organizing framework for STEM+SED with the most common skills represented in the literature, by domain

Domain Name	Skills Youth Are Developing	Most Common Skills
Agency / Voice (795 mentions)	<i>Expressing & Empowering</i> themselves, especially through self-directed (or agentic) actions and self-confidence in learning and achieving learning goals.	Among 29 terms/skills identified: 1. Confidence (<i>n</i> = 206 references, 25.9%) 2. Self-efficacy (<i>n</i> = 156 references, 19.6%) 3. Agency (<i>n</i> = 79 references, 9.9 %)
Belonging / Collaboration (724 mentions)	<i>Connecting & Collaborating</i> with others, especially through social interactions (communication, teamwork) that create emotional bonds and attachments to place/learning spaces and others.	Among 28 terms/skills identified: 1. Relationships (<i>n</i> = 134 references, 18.5%) 2. Communication (<i>n</i> = 114 references, 15.7%) 3. Teamwork (<i>n</i> = 111 references, 15.3%) 4. Collaboration (<i>n</i> = 100 references, 13.8%)
Creativity / Resilience (128 mentions)	<i>Creating & Adapting</i> , especially through the creation of original ideas, evolution of ideas to fit new scenarios/situations, and the ability to be resourceful.	Among 5 terms/skills identified: 1. Creativity (<i>n</i> = 96 references, 75.0%) 2. Innovation (<i>n</i> = 11 references, 8.6%) 3. Resilience/Resiliency (<i>n</i> = 11 references, 8.6%)
Engagement / Self-regulation (383 mentions)	<i>Acting & Discovering</i> , especially through active participation in learning and managing the drive to participate in learning.	Among 9 terms/skills identified: 1. Motivation (<i>n</i> = 142 references, 37.1%) 2. Active Engagement (<i>n</i> = 47 references, 12.3%) 3. Self-regulation/management (<i>n</i> = 35 references, 9.1%)
Reflection / Understanding (801 mentions)	<i>Understanding & Becoming</i> , especially through thoughtful analysis of ideas (personal or academic) and an awareness of oneself, the immediate environment, and the world beyond (e.g., values, thoughts, emotions).	Among 35 terms/skills identified: 1. Problem-solving (<i>n</i> = 217 references, 27.1%) 2. Identity (<i>n</i> = 174 references, 21.7%) 3. Critical thinking (<i>n</i> = 104 references, 12.9%)

When mapping the number of OST STEM references by SED domains over time (see **Figure 4**), we found the majority of publications focused on the Reflection/Understanding domain ($n = 500$, 70.5%); the most common terms included problem-solving, identity, and critical thinking. This underscores how SED includes cognitive processes, in addition to the affective and social components inherent in the term "SED." STEM provides a bridge connecting these skills.

Figure 4. Mapping the number of OST STEM references by SED domain over time (2000-2021)



Note. Analysis of trends over time included all years with 12 months of evidence (Jan. 2000 to Dec. 2021).

Searching for Coherence in STEM+SED

Pillar #1: Phenomenon

When examining how STEM+SED is conceptualized (Pillar #1: Phenomenon), we found that more than three-quarters of the 709 references ($n = 557$, 78.5%) provided a theoretical foundation to support their STEM+SED work, with over 300 frameworks/theories cited. Specifically, 361 publications (50.9%) cited one or more theoretical models or frameworks that connected SED in the context of STEM. Within these 361 references, there were 363 unique theoretical models or frameworks. Many publications referenced multiple theories; there were 833 total mentions of at least one of the 363 specific (“named”) theoretical models or frameworks. The most frequently cited theories were constructivism ($n = 44$ mentions), self-efficacy/self-efficacy theory ($n = 40$ mentions), and situated learning theory ($n = 28$ mentions). Only about one-third of references ($n = 225$, 31.7%) explicitly defined one or more SED concepts/constructs of interest. Although we are pleased that there is a diversity of terminology and theoretical support for STEM+SED work, this finding emphasizes the importance of using broad categories to organize terms, as we have done in this review. It also indicates a lack of consistency and consensus around SED terms and theory in the context of OST STEM.

Pillar #2: Implementation

When examining the different ways OST programs integrate STEM+SED in practice (Pillar #2: Implementation), we identified 13 categories of implementation strategies across 690 references (see **Table 2**). The most common implementation categories (>50% of references) were “Hands-on experiences” (e.g., tinkering, role-playing, $n = 631$) (90.0%), “Collaboration opportunities” (e.g., group work, pair shares) ($n = 581$, 81.9%), and “Youth expression opportunities” (e.g., presentations, journaling, artwork/mixed-media) ($n = 376$, 53.0%). Between 75.5% to 85.8% of references describing STEM+SED implementation strategies were dated between 2011 to 2022, indicating a significant increase in adoption of SED in STEM learning contexts in the past decade. These commonly used strategies can be characterized as inter-personal (not focusing on the individual). For example, many programs provided opportunities for youth to deepen STEM learning through social interactions, including by working with one or more peers to discuss ideas and troubleshoot problems, or to design and create solutions together.

Pillar #3: Assessment

When examining how STEM+SED is measured in OST programs (Pillar #3: Assessment), we found that the majority of eligible references had a research or evaluation focus (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies, $n = 527$,

74.3%) compared with practice-focused references (e.g., program descriptions, activity guides, policy briefs; $n = 181$, 25.5%). Studies were most commonly found in journal articles ($n = 449$, 63.3%), conference papers ($n = 90$, 12.6%), and dissertations/theses ($n = 81$, 11.4%). The most common qualitative designs were case study ($n = 174$, 32.9%) and ethnographic study ($n = 49$, 9.2%), and the most common quantitative designs were post-test only without comparison group ($n = 49$, 9.2%). Smaller percentages of studies involved participatory designs (those that involve youth, educators, and/or families in study design, implementation, and interpretation, $n = 30$, 5.7%) and longitudinal designs ($n = 15$ studies, 2.8%). The most common forms of data collection were student/youth self-report surveys ($n = 313$, 59.28%), individual interviews ($n = 225$, 42.61%), non-standardized observations ($n = 174$, 32.95%), and artifacts ($n = 157$, 29.73%), although not every study assessed a SED or STEM+SED outcome. A range of measures were used to examine the intersection between STEM+SED; there is not yet a consistent or standardized group of measures being used across the field (for example, see the [Assessment Tools for Informal Science \[ATIS\]](#) for a database of available measures).

The quality of all research and evaluation studies that examined youth outcomes was assessed by appraising the Weight of Evidence (WoE). WoE is essential for ensuring the reliability, validity, and transparency of the review process. The WoE appraisal was based on a 4-point rating scale ranging from 1 (Weak research design) to 4 (Exemplary research design) using rubrics developed for informal science education studies (Habig, 2020). Features of exemplary studies defined by this method include being grounded in a theoretical framework, including a control or comparison group, employing an appropriate study design, and having an adequate sample size. Our WoE appraisal of studies included in this review ($n = 528$) revealed that, on average, the evidence base is weak to adequate (quantitative: $M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.996$; qualitative, $M = 1.94$, $SD = .916$; mixed-methods: $M = 1.92$, $SD = .882$), although percentage-wise, about 35% to 55% of studies received a WoE rating of at least 3 (“strong”) in design (quantitative: 55.1%, $n = 76$ studies; qualitative: 39.0%, $n = 80$ studies; mixed-methods: 35.4%, $n = 62$). None of the qualitative or mixed-methods studies received a WoE rating of 4 (“exemplary”). See **Table 3** for WoE appraisal and skills most supported by the evidence-base.

Table 3. STEM+SED domains and skills with statistically significant (quantitative) or meaningful (qualitative) outcomes

Domain	Quantitative Studies		Qualitative Studies	
	% of References with Statistically Significant Results (WoE)	Skills Most Supported by Quantitative Evidence	% of References with Meaningful Themes (WoE)	Skills Most Supported by Qualitative Evidence
Agency / Voice	50.0% ($n = 66$ studies total, WoE: 41 strong/exemplary studies – 62.1%)	Self-efficacy [32 results], Confidence [21 results]	47.6% ($n = 157$ studies, WoE: 58 strong studies – 36.9%)	Confidence [51 themes], Self-efficacy [27 themes], Agency [25 themes]
Belonging / Collaboration	22.0% ($n = 29$ studies, WoE: 21 strong/exemplary studies – 72.4%)	Relationships (with peers, adults, others) [15 results], Responsibility (social, Environmental, stewardship) [7 results]	60.0% ($n = 198$ studies, WoE: 79 strong studies – 39.9%)	Relationships (with peers, adults, others) [104 themes], Teamwork [42 themes]
Creativity / Resilience	5% ($n = 6$ studies, WoE: 3 strong/exemplary studies – 50.0%)	Creativity [6 results]	5.8% ($n = 19$ studies, WoE: 7 strong studies – 36.8%)	Creativity [18 themes], Adaptability/flexibility [4 themes]
Engagement / Self-Regulation	15.2% ($n = 20$ studies, WoE: 14 strong/exemplary studies – 70.0%)	Motivation (self, intrinsic) [12 results], Active engagement (in learning, action orientation) [9 results]	21.8% ($n = 72$ studies, WoE: 30 strong studies – 41.7%)	Engagement (active, hands-on, sensory, immersion) [63 themes], Motivation (academic, intrinsic, self-) [19 themes]
Reflection / Understanding	44.7% ($n = 59$ studies, WoE: 34 strong/exemplary studies – 57.6%)	Awareness (self, cultural) [17 results], Identity (STEM, cultural) [14 results]	56.7% ($n = 187$ studies, WoE: 64 strong studies – 34.2%)	Identity [76 themes], Problem-solving [32 themes], Awareness (self, personal, cultural, of world) [29 themes]

Among the 314 quantitative studies assessed for WoE ($n = 138$ quantitative studies, $n = 176$ mixed-methods studies):

- 132 (42.0%) reported a statistically significant result for at least one STEM+SED outcome.

Among these quantitative studies reporting statistically significant STEM+SED results:

- 105 studies (33.4%) found significant change over time (pre-test/post-test or retrospective designs, WoE: 53 strong/exemplary studies – 50.5%)
- 18 studies (5.7%) found significant differences between groups (OST intervention vs. control/comparison, WoE: 13 strong/exemplary studies – 72.2%)
- 9 studies (2.9%) found both time and group effects (WoE: 3 strong/exemplary studies – 33.3%)
- 80 studies (25.5%) reported results that were not statistically significant (WoE: 30 strong/exemplary studies – 37.5%)
- 102 studies (32.5%) did not perform statistical analyses although quantitative data were collected.

Among the 388 qualitative studies assessed for WoE ($n = 211$ qualitative studies; $n = 177$ mixed-methods studies):

- 330 (85.1%) identified at least one STEM+SED outcome as a meaningful theme (WoE: 123 strong studies among 75 qualitative studies and 48 mixed-methods studies).

The most common STEM+SED domains (and skills) accounting for positive quantitative and qualitative results are shown in **Table 3**. Quantitative studies more often identified statistically significant results for skills related to Agency/Voice (50.0% of references) while qualitative studies more often identified meaningful themes for skills related to Belonging/Collaboration (60.0%). Evidence for skills related to Reflection/Understanding were the second most common across both quantitative (44.7%) and qualitative (56.7%) study designs.

Summary and Conclusions

This study systematically reviewed references from over twenty years of research, evaluation, and practice at the interface of STEM+SED in informal/OST programming. The substantial increase in references dedicated to STEM+SED over time confirms rising interest in the integration of these fields to support youth development and success. While the diversity of terminology and theoretical support for STEM+SED work is encouraging, it emphasizes the need for a broader framework that organizes the long list of STEM+SED terms to support consistency and consensus.

The STEM+SED framework introduced in this executive summary, based on the most common and evidence-based STEM+SED domains/skills identified by our systematic review, provides a starting point for building consensus around terminology and priorities for research, evaluation, and policymaking. This is a rate-limiting step for more precise study. The finding that one-half to two-thirds of studies were in the weak/adequate range underscores the need for more investment in quality research/evaluation designs and measurement development. Developing and applying a common framework for STEM+SED will enable the field to design more cohesive studies and compare results more easily.

This review has contributed to the growing evidence base for the integration of STEM+SED in OST. The results and products of this project, including a detailed manuscript (forthcoming), are intended to expedite several essential steps forward: 1) assessing strengths and gaps in this growing field of connected STEM+SED, 2) defining overlapping or integrated STEM+SED practices, and 3) defining skills that are important to both fields and proposing robust assessments based on precise definitions. The five-domain organizing framework emerging from this study can help simplify the many overlapping skills of interest in the STEM and SED fields, without excluding any. This may encourage the creation of clear and cohesive logic models and theories of change, leading to higher-quality STEM+SED learning experiences (via quality program plans) and evidence of impact (via quality study designs).

Information & Resources

Suggested Citation

Allen, P.J., & Noam, G.G. (2024). *A Systematic review of STEM and social-emotional development in out-of-school time programs: Executive Summary*. Institute for the Study of Resilience in Youth.

https://www.isry.org/s/STEM_SED_systematic_review_exec_summary.pdf

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Supplemental Resources

To support the field's access to STEM+SED knowledge, the following resources are available upon request:

- [Extraction Database](#): A dataset with sortable variables for the 709 references included in this review.
- [Methods](#): A detailed description of systematic review methods. [A brief PowerPoint is available here](#).
- [Reference Database](#): A complete list of 709 references (including citation and pdf files) in Zotero.

About the Authors

Patty Allen, Ph.D. (pallen@mclean.harvard.edu) is Director of Research at the [Institute for the Study of Resilience in Youth \(ISRY\) at McLean Hospital](#) and a faculty member at Harvard Medical School. Her research focuses on measuring and enhancing the quality and outcomes of educational experiences, both within and beyond school settings, with a particular focus on fostering the social, emotional, and academic development of young people. Dr. Allen is dedicated to increasing synergy between educational research and practice to innovate ways of supporting children and families.



Gil Noam, Ed.D., Dr. Habil (Gil_Noam@hms.harvard.edu) is Founder and Director of the [Institute for the Study of Resilience in Youth \(ISRY\) at McLean Hospital](#) and an associate professor at Harvard Medical School. As a trained clinical and developmental psychologist, Dr. Noam has a strong interest in translating research to support social, emotional, and academic resilience in youth within educational settings. He has authored over 200 publications covering child and adolescent development across clinical, school, and out-of-school learning environments. Dr. Noam spearheaded the development of a comprehensive approach to evaluate the quality of students' STEM learning experiences, establishing a common language for STEM outcomes.

