

Linking Emotional Intelligence and Achievement Motivation in School Students: A Review of Correlates and Implications for Social and Emotional Learning

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Abstract

Achievement motivation and emotional intelligence (EI) are increasingly regarded as central to student success beyond cognitive ability. This review synthesises theoretical and empirical literature on the correlates of achievement motivation and EI among school students, with attention to their interrelationship, demographic and contextual correlates, and implications for practice in the Indian school system. Drawing on classical motivation theories, ability and trait models of EI, meta-analyses and selected school-based studies, the review finds that EI shows a small-to-moderate positive association with academic performance and a consistent positive association with adaptive motivational orientations such as self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation and persistence. Gender, age, parental involvement, school climate and socioeconomic background emerge as important correlates, although findings are often inconsistent. Methodological limitations, including overreliance on self-report, cross-sectional designs and heterogeneous measurement, restrict causal inference. The review concludes that integrating social and emotional learning into curricula and teacher preparation is a promising, evidence-informed strategy, and it identifies priorities for future longitudinal and culturally grounded research.

Keywords: Achievement motivation, emotional intelligence, school students, academic achievement, self-efficacy, social and emotional learning

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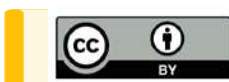
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1. INTRODUCTION

For much of the twentieth century, academic success was explained chiefly through intelligence and prior attainment. Decades of educational research, however, have shown that cognitive ability accounts for only part of the variation in school performance. Students of similar ability often achieve very different results, and the difference is frequently traced to motivational and emotional characteristics such as the drive to excel, the capacity to persist after failure, and the ability to manage anxiety and frustration (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Richardson et al., 2012). Two constructs have attracted particular attention in this regard: achievement motivation and emotional intelligence.

Achievement motivation refers to the striving to attain standards of excellence and to experience pride in accomplishment (McClelland, 1961). Emotional intelligence, popularised in the mid-1990s, refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate and use emotions in oneself and others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995). The two are conceptually adjacent; since motivation is



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itself an emotionally charged process and emotion regulation is necessary for sustained goal pursuit. Both also matter especially during the school years, when children and adolescents form academic self-concepts, encounter competitive examinations and negotiate demanding social environments. In India these questions carry particular weight. High-stakes board examinations, entrance tests and intense parental expectations create conditions in which motivational and emotional resources are constantly tested. The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly calls for holistic development, including socio-emotional learning, reflecting official recognition that schooling must attend to more than rote cognitive outcomes (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). A clear understanding of how achievement motivation and emotional intelligence relate to each other, and to the personal and contextual variables that surround them, is therefore timely.

This article reviews the conceptual foundations of both constructs, examines the theoretical rationale for their association, synthesises empirical findings on their correlates among school students, discusses measurement and methodological issues, and outlines implications for educational practice and future research.

2. Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Achievement motivation

The modern study of achievement motivation began with McClelland's (1961) work on the need for achievement (n-Ach), a relatively stable disposition to compete against a standard of excellence. Atkinson (1957) formalised this idea by proposing that achievement behaviour results from the tension between the motive to approach success and the motive to avoid failure, with individuals high in the former preferring tasks of moderate difficulty. Subsequent cognitive approaches shifted attention from stable needs to beliefs and goals. Weiner (1985) showed that the causes students assign to success and failure, whether ability, effort, luck or task difficulty, shape their expectancies and emotional reactions. Bandura (1997) emphasised self-efficacy, the belief in one's capability to organise and execute the actions required to produce given attainments, as a powerful predictor of effort and persistence. Expectancy-value theory further holds that achievement choices depend on whether students expect to succeed and on how much they value the task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Self-determination theory adds a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It argues that motivation flourishes when the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). For school students, this implies that motivation is not merely a trait carried into the classroom but a state that is shaped by teachers, peers, parents and the learning environment.

2.2 Emotional intelligence

The term emotional intelligence was introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990), who defined it as a set of abilities involved in appraising and expressing emotions, regulating emotions, and using emotional information to guide thinking and action. Mayer and Salovey (1997) later specified a four-branch ability model comprising perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions. Its intellectual roots lie in Thorndike's (1920) notion of social intelligence and Gardner's (1983) account of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences.

Two other traditions coexist with the ability model. Goleman (1995) popularised a broader conception that folded in traits such as zeal, persistence and self-motivation, and Bar-On (1997) framed emotional-social intelligence as a cluster of non-cognitive competencies that influence coping with environmental demands. Petrides and Furnham (2001) distinguished trait EI, defined as emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies, from ability EI, which is assessed through maximum-performance tests. This distinction matters for the present review because studies of school students overwhelmingly use self-report instruments and therefore capture trait rather than ability EI.

3. Theoretical Linkages Between Emotional Intelligence and Achievement Motivation

Several theoretical lines explain why emotional intelligence and achievement motivation should be related. First, the control-value theory of achievement emotions holds that emotions such as enjoyment, hope, pride, anxiety, shame and boredom arise from students' appraisals of control over and value of learning activities, and that these emotions in turn influence attention, motivation, learning strategies and performance (Pekrun et al., 2002; Pekrun, 2006). A student who can recognise and regulate anxiety before an examination is better placed to maintain engagement than one who is overwhelmed by it. Emotion regulation therefore functions as a gateway to sustained motivation.

Second, self-efficacy beliefs are themselves partly emotional. Bandura (1997) noted that physiological and affective states are one source of efficacy information, so students who interpret arousal as manageable rather than threatening are likely to report stronger efficacy. Emotionally intelligent students may also seek and use social support more effectively, which strengthens the relatedness that self-determination theory identifies as a condition for motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Third, attributional processes are shaped by emotional understanding. Weiner (1985) showed that attributing failure to controllable and unstable causes such as effort produces hope and renewed striving, whereas attributing it to uncontrollable and stable causes produces shame and withdrawal. The ability to reflect on one's feelings after setbacks, a core component of the understanding and managing branches of EI, is likely to support more adaptive attributions.

Finally, Brackett et al. (2011) argued that emotional intelligence contributes to academic and social success through several pathways, including the quality of peer and teacher relationships, the management of stress, and the deployment of emotions in problem solving. Together these accounts suggest that emotional intelligence is not simply correlated with achievement motivation but may partly underpin it. It should be noted, however, that much of this reasoning is theoretical, and the direction of influence remains empirically unsettled.

4. Empirical Evidence on Correlates

4.1 Emotional intelligence and academic achievement

A large body of research has examined the link between EI and school performance. MacCann et al. (2020), in a meta-analysis covering well over a hundred samples of students from primary school to university, reported a positive and moderate association between EI and academic performance that remained after accounting for general intelligence and personality. Perera and DiGiacomo (2013) likewise found a positive though modest relationship between trait EI and academic performance, with the association varying with the measure and educational level.

Studies of adolescents illustrate the pattern. Petrides et al. (2004) found that trait EI moderated the relationship between cognitive ability and academic performance in British secondary school pupils and was also associated with fewer unauthorised absences and exclusions. Mavroveli and Sánchez-Ruiz (2011) reported that children with higher trait EI showed better teacher-rated academic performance and fewer behavioural difficulties. In a longitudinal study of Portuguese secondary school students, Costa and Faria (2015) found that EI predicted later academic achievement, which offers stronger evidence than cross-sectional work. Parker et al. (2004) similarly found that several EI dimensions, including adaptability and stress management, were positively related to academic achievement among high school students. In India, Chamundeswari (2013) reported a positive association between emotional intelligence and academic achievement among higher secondary students, in line with international findings.

The magnitude of these associations is, however, consistently modest. Zeidner et al. (2002) cautioned that claims made in popular treatments of EI were sometimes far ahead of the evidence. Effect sizes vary depending on whether EI is assessed through ability tests or self-report, and some

of the association with achievement appears to overlap with personality traits, particularly conscientiousness and emotional stability (Petrides et al., 2004; Richardson et al., 2012).

4.2 Emotional intelligence and motivational variables

The relationship between EI and motivational constructs is generally stronger and more consistent than its relationship with grades, which is consistent with the mediating role suggested by theory. Pintrich and De Groot (1990), in a study of junior high school students, found that self-efficacy and intrinsic value were positively related to cognitive engagement and self-regulated learning, whereas test anxiety was negatively related to performance. These are precisely the motivational and affective variables that emotional competencies are expected to influence. Mega et al. (2014) showed that positive emotions predicted academic achievement indirectly through self-regulated learning and motivation, although their sample consisted of university students rather than school pupils. Indian studies using standardised scales commonly report that students with higher emotional intelligence also report stronger achievement motivation, higher aspirations and greater persistence, although many of these studies are small, cross-sectional and limited to single institutions.

Emotional competencies also relate to the affective side of motivation. Pekrun et al. (2002) found that positive achievement emotions such as enjoyment and pride were associated with greater effort and self-regulation, whereas negative emotions such as anxiety, hopelessness and boredom were associated with reduced motivation and poorer performance. Because emotionally intelligent students tend to regulate negative emotions more effectively, they may translate difficult experiences into renewed effort rather than disengagement.

4.3 Gender

Gender differences have been examined in both constructs. On EI, self-estimated scores frequently favour males, whereas performance-based measures tend to favour females, particularly on emotion perception and understanding (Petrides & Furnham, 2000; Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2012). These differences are small and appear to be influenced by age and by the type of instrument. Results on achievement motivation are more mixed. Some studies report higher motivation among girls, especially in the middle school years, while others report no difference, and cultural expectations about gender roles in different regions of India are likely to moderate any pattern. The safest conclusion is that gender differences are context dependent and should not be treated as fixed.

4.4 Age and developmental stage

Motivation and emotional competence are both developmentally organised. Emotional skills generally increase with age as children acquire richer emotional vocabularies and self-regulatory strategies, while academic intrinsic motivation often declines across the transition from primary to secondary school, when evaluation becomes more competitive and autonomy is more restricted (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Adolescence is therefore a period in which emotional competence may be especially valuable as a buffer, and Fernández-Berrocal et al. (2012) noted that age is an important mediating factor in interpretations of gender differences in EI.

4.5 Family, school and socioeconomic context

Contextual factors form an important cluster of correlates. Self-determination theory predicts that autonomy-supportive parenting and teaching foster intrinsic motivation, whereas controlling and highly pressurising environments undermine it (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Emotional competence is likewise shaped by family communication about feelings, emotional modelling by parents and a supportive classroom climate (Brackett et al., 2011). In the Indian context, parental expectations, private tuition, examination pressure and differences between urban and rural schooling and between medium of instruction are plausible influences on both constructs. However, rigorous multi-level studies that separate family, school and community effects remain limited, and

socioeconomic differences are often reported descriptively without adequate control of confounding variables.

4.6 Personality and related psychological correlates

Both EI and achievement motivation overlap with personality dispositions. Conscientiousness, in particular, is a robust predictor of academic performance and is correlated with trait EI (Richardson et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2004). Self-efficacy, academic self-concept, self-regulation and low test anxiety recur across the literature as proximal correlates of motivation and achievement (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Richardson et al., 2012). Any claim that EI has unique explanatory power must therefore be tested against these overlapping constructs.

5. Measurement and Methodological Issues

The evidence base is constrained by several methodological problems. The first is measurement heterogeneity. Achievement motivation has been assessed through projective techniques, questionnaires and domain-specific goal or self-efficacy scales, and in India studies commonly use standardised instruments such as the Deo-Mohan Achievement Motivation Scale (Deo & Mohan, 1985). EI has been measured through ability tests, trait self-report questionnaires such as the Schutte self-report inventory (Schutte et al., 1998) and locally standardised scales such as the Emotional Intelligence Scale of Hyde et al. (2002) or the measures described by Singh (2003). Because these tools rest on different definitions of EI, results are not always comparable, and the same label can refer to different constructs.

A second problem is overreliance on self-report, which is vulnerable to social desirability, limited insight and shared method variance. When both EI and motivation are measured by questionnaire from the same respondent, correlations may be inflated. Third, most studies are cross-sectional and correlational, which makes it impossible to determine whether emotional competence promotes motivation, whether successful and motivated students develop greater emotional confidence, or whether a third variable such as personality or family climate produces both. Fourth, many studies rely on small convenience samples from a single district or school type, which limits generalisability. Finally, few studies adequately control for intelligence, prior achievement and personality, so unique contributions of EI are often overstated (Zeidner et al., 2002; MacCann et al., 2020).

6. Educational Implications

Despite these limitations, the evidence supports several practical conclusions. The most robust evidence for intervention comes from social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes. In a meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal programmes involving more than 270,000 students, Durlak et al. (2011) found significant improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic performance, including an average gain in achievement of roughly eleven percentile points. Although these programmes were mostly delivered in Western settings, they suggest that emotional competencies are teachable and that developing them need not compete with academic goals.

For Indian schools, several implications follow. First, emotional skills such as identifying feelings, managing test anxiety, resolving conflict and setting realistic goals can be integrated into existing subjects, homeroom periods and co-curricular activities rather than added as separate content. Second, teacher preparation is critical. Teachers who understand achievement emotions and attributional processes can reshape feedback so that it emphasises effort and strategy instead of fixed ability (Weiner, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Third, counselling services and life-skills education should be strengthened so that students facing examination pressure have structured support. Fourth, schools should engage parents, since autonomy-supportive and emotionally responsive parenting reinforces classroom efforts. Finally, assessment practices that give weight to

formative feedback and mastery, rather than only ranking and comparison, can support the competence and autonomy needs that sustain motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Caution is nevertheless warranted. Zeidner et al. (2002) argued that programmes should be grounded in defensible models of EI, evaluated rigorously, and not oversold as a remedy for every educational problem. Emotional intelligence training is a complement to, not a substitute for, good instruction, adequate resources and equitable access to schooling.

7. Research Gaps and Directions for Future Research

Several gaps emerge from this review. First, longitudinal and cross-lagged designs are needed to clarify the direction of influence between EI, motivation and achievement, building on the small number of studies such as Costa and Faria (2015). Second, mediation and moderation analyses should test whether self-efficacy, self-regulation and achievement emotions transmit the effects of EI to performance, as theory suggests (Pekrun, 2006; Mega et al., 2014). Third, multi-method assessment combining ability tests, teacher and peer ratings and behavioural indicators would reduce dependence on self-report. Fourth, research in India should move beyond small single-site surveys to larger, stratified samples that represent rural and urban settings, government and private schools, and diverse linguistic and socioeconomic groups. Fifth, culturally sensitive validation of instruments is required, since emotional expression and achievement norms differ across societies, and collectivist family structures may shape motivation differently from the individualist settings in which many theories were developed. Finally, intervention studies in Indian schools that evaluate SEL programmes with control groups and follow-up measures would provide the evidence base needed to align policy with practice.

8. Conclusion

This review indicates that achievement motivation and emotional intelligence are meaningfully connected constructs that jointly contribute to the school experience. Emotional intelligence shows a modest but reliable positive relationship with academic performance and a more consistent relationship with adaptive motivational orientations such as self-efficacy, persistence and positive achievement emotions. Gender, age, family environment, school climate and personality are important correlates, but their effects are context dependent and frequently confounded. The strength of the conclusions is limited by cross-sectional designs, reliance on self-report and inconsistent measurement.

The most defensible conclusion is that emotional competencies are one of several psychological resources that help students convert ability into achievement, and that they can be strengthened through well-designed school-based programmes. For educators and policy makers, this supports the view, reflected in current Indian education policy, that emotional and motivational development deserves deliberate attention alongside academic instruction. For researchers, the priority is to develop rigorous, longitudinal and culturally grounded evidence that clarifies how emotional intelligence and achievement motivation influence each other across the school years.

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