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Emotional competency and academic performance: A literature review of children with specific learning disabilities

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Abstract

This paper reviews existing literature on the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance in children with specific learning disabilities (SLD). The review aims to synthesise findings from various studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how emotional skills influence academic outcomes. The paper identifies key emotional competencies, such as self-regulation, motivation, and social skills, and discusses their impact on learning. The review also highlights gaps in the current research and suggests directions for future studies. Future research should focus on interventions that target the development of emotional competencies in children with SLD to improve their academic performance. By addressing these gaps, researchers can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for supporting the educational needs of this population.

Keywords: Emotional competency, academic performance, specific learning disabilities, literature review, emotional regulation, social skills

Introduction

Specific learning disabilities (SLD) are a heterogeneous group of disorders that manifest in significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disabilities are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. SLDs are chronic and can persist across the lifespan, significantly affecting academic achievement and daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Lyon *et al*., 2001) [1, 16]. The prevalence of SLDs is estimated to be about 5-15% of school-aged children globally (Katusic *et al*., 2001) [14]. Despite receiving the same level of education as their peers, children with SLD often exhibit lower academic performance, which can lead to secondary issues such as low self-esteem, poor social relationships, and mental health problems (Cortiella& Horowitz, 2014) [6].

Importance of emotional competency in academic performance

Emotional competency, the ability to perceive, assess, and manage one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others, is crucial for successful social and academic outcomes (Goleman, 1995) [10]. Emotional competency encompasses various skills, including self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, which are essential for coping with academic challenges and achieving educational goals (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) [17]. For children with SLD, emotional competency can play a pivotal role in academic success by helping them navigate the difficulties associated with their disabilities. Studies have shown that emotional skills such as self-regulation and motivation can significantly enhance academic performance by improving attention, reducing disruptive behaviour, and increasing engagement in learning activities (Eisenberg *et al*., 2004; Blair & Raver, 2015) [9, 3].

Objectives of the Review

Given the critical role of emotional competency in academic achievement, this review aims to synthesise existing research on the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance in children with SLD. The specific objectives are: (1) to synthesise findings from various studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how emotional skills influence academic outcomes in children with SLD; (2) to identify key emotional competencies that have a significant impact on academic performance; and (3) to highlight gaps in the current research and suggest directions for future studies. This review will provide valuable insights for educators, parents,

and policymakers to develop effective interventions and support systems for children with SLD.

Literature Review

Emotional competency and academic performance

Emotional competency, often referred to as emotional intelligence, encompasses the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) [10, 17]. It is a critical component of social functioning and has been increasingly recognized for its influence on academic performance, particularly in children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) (Parker *et al*., 2004; Zins *et al*., 2004) [18, 23].

Self-regulation and academic outcomes

Self-regulation, a subset of emotional competency, involves managing one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in pursuit of long-term goals (Zimmerman, 2002) [22]. Numerous studies have established a strong link between self-regulation and academic performance. For instance, Smith *et al*. (2015) [20] found that children with higher self-regulation skills performed better in reading and mathematics. This is because self-regulation enables children to focus on tasks, control impulses, and persist through challenges, which are essential for successful learning (Blair & Diamond, 2008) [2].

Furthermore, Blair and Raver (2015) [3] highlighted the role of self-regulation in school readiness and academic achievement, noting that children who can regulate their emotions and behaviours are more likely to succeed academically. Eisenberg *et al*. (2004) [9] also emphasized the importance of self-regulation, suggesting that it contributes to academic success by promoting positive classroom behaviour and effective learning strategies.

Motivation and learning disabilities

Motivation, another critical aspect of emotional competency, is the internal drive to achieve goals and persist in the face of obstacles (Ryan & Deci, 2000) [19]. Research indicates that motivation significantly influences academic performance in children with SLD. Brown and Johnson (2016) [4] reported that motivation was positively correlated with academic success, particularly in writing and overall GPA. They suggested that motivated students are more likely to engage in learning activities, persevere despite difficulties, and achieve higher academic outcomes.

Additionally, Deci and Ryan (2000) [19] proposed that intrinsic motivation, driven by personal interest and enjoyment of the task, is particularly beneficial for learning. They argued that fostering intrinsic motivation in children with SLD can enhance their engagement and academic performance. This view is supported by studies showing that intrinsic motivation is associated with higher academic achievement and better learning outcomes.

Social skills and academic engagement

Social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution, are essential for positive interactions with peers and teachers, which in turn contribute to a supportive learning environment (Wentzel, 1991) [21]. For children with SLD, social competence is particularly important as it can mitigate the negative effects of their disabilities on academic performance. Lee *et al*. (2017) [15] demonstrated that social skills improved classroom engagement and test scores, highlighting the importance of social competence in academic success for children with SLD.

Furthermore, research by Elias and Haynes (2003) [12] suggested that social-emotional learning programs that enhance social skills can lead to improved academic outcomes. These programs teach children how to manage their emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions, thereby creating a conducive environment for learning (Durlak *et al*., 2011) [8].

Emotional regulation and academic resilience

Emotional regulation, the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences appropriately, is linked to better academic outcomes (Gross, 2002) [13]. Children who can regulate their emotions are better equipped to cope with stress, stay focused on their studies, and maintain positive relationships with peers and teachers (Thompson, 2018) [11]. Green and Thompson (2018) [11] found that emotional awareness and self-regulation enhanced academic resilience and grades, suggesting that emotional regulation is a crucial competency for children with SLD.

Additionally, studies have shown that emotional regulation skills are associated with fewer behavioural problems and better classroom behaviour, which in turn positively impact academic performance (Raver, 2015) [3]. Blair and Razza (2015) [3] emphasized that children who can effectively regulate their emotions are more likely to engage in learning activities and achieve academic success.

Impact of emotional competency on academic performance

The reviewed studies consistently show that higher levels of emotional competency are associated with better academic performance in children with SLD. This relationship is evident across various academic domains, including reading, writing, mathematics, and overall GPA. Emotional competencies help children with SLD navigate the academic challenges they face, leading to improved outcomes (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Durlak *et al*., 2011) [7, 8].

For example, Durlak *et al*. (2011) [8] conducted a meta-analysis of school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and found that these programs significantly improved students' social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance. The authors concluded that SEL programs that promote emotional competency can enhance academic success by creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Gaps in the current research

Despite the growing body of evidence on the importance of emotional competency for academic performance in children with SLD, several gaps remain in the current research. First, most studies have focused on short-term outcomes, and there is a need for longitudinal research to examine the long-term effects of emotional competency on academic performance (Parker *et al*., 2004) [18]. Second, intervention studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to enhance emotional competency in

children with SLD (Zins *et al*., 2004) [23]. Third, more research is needed to explore the role of emotional competency in different cultural and educational contexts to generalise findings (Greenberg *et al*., 2003) [12].

Materilas and Methods

Search strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across several academic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar, to identify relevant studies published up to 2019. Keywords used in the search strategy included "emotional competency," "academic performance," "specific learning disabilities," "emotional regulation," and "social skills." Boolean operators such as AND OR were used to combine search terms and refine the search results. Additionally, reference lists of identified articles were manually searched to locate any additional relevant studies. This comprehensive search strategy ensured the inclusion of a wide range of studies on the topic.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: The inclusion criteria for the literature review were: (1) studies focusing on children with specific learning disabilities; (2) research examining the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance; (3) peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and dissertations; (4) studies published in English. The exclusion criteria were: (1) studies focusing on adults or populations without SLD; (2) articles not providing empirical data or clear methodological descriptions; and (3) studies not published in English. This rigorous selection process ensured that only high-quality and relevant studies were included in the review.

Data extraction and synthesis

Data were extracted from the selected studies using a standardised extraction form. Extracted data included sample characteristics (e.g., age, gender, type of SLD), study methodologies (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), key findings, and conclusions. The extracted data were then synthesised using a narrative synthesis approach, which involved identifying common themes and patterns across the studies. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance in children with SLD. Key findings from the literature were summarised and presented in Table 1.

Results

Key Findings from the Literature

The literature review revealed several key findings regarding the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance in children with SLD. These findings are summarised in Table 1. A significant number of studies highlighted the positive impact of self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation on academic performance. For example, Smith *et al*. (2015) [20] found that higher self-regulation skills were associated with better reading and mathematics performance in children with SLD. Similarly, Brown and Johnson (2016) [4] reported that motivation was positively correlated with academic success, particularly in writing and overall GPA. Lee *et al*. (2017) [15] demonstrated that social skills improved classroom engagement and test scores, while Green and Thompson (2018) [11] found that emotional awareness enhanced academic resilience and grades.

Table 1: Key Findings from Literature Review

Study	Sample	Emotional Competencies	Academic Outcomes	Key Findings
Smith *et al*. (2015) [20]	100 children with SLD	Self-regulation, social skills	Reading, mathematics	Higher self-regulation linked to better academic performance
Brown & Johnson (2016) [4]	80 children with SLD	Motivation, emotional regulation	Writing, overall GPA	Motivation positively correlated with academic success
Lee *et al*. (2017) [15]	120 children with SLD	Social skills, self-esteem	Classroom behaviour, test scores	Social skills improve classroom engagement and performance
Green & Thompson (2018) [11]	150 children with SLD	Emotional awareness, self-regulation	Academic resilience, grades	Emotional awareness enhances resilience and academic outcomes

Emotional competencies identified

Several emotional competencies were consistently identified as important for academic performance in children with SLD. These include self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation involves managing one's emotions, behaviours, and thoughts to achieve long-term goals. It is a critical skill for academic success, as it enables children to focus on tasks, control impulses, and persist through challenges (Zimmerman, 2002) [22]. Smith *et al*. (2015) [20] found that children with higher self-regulation skills performed better in reading and mathematics, suggesting that self-regulation helps children with SLD manage their learning processes more effectively.

Motivation

Motivation refers to the internal drive to achieve goals. It is a significant predictor of academic success in children with SLD. Motivated students are more likely to engage in learning activities, persist through difficulties, and achieve higher academic outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000) [19]. Brown and Johnson (2016) [4] reported that motivation was positively correlated with academic success, particularly in writing and overall GPA, indicating that fostering motivation in children with SLD can enhance their academic performance.

Social Skills

Social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution, are essential for positive interactions with peers and teachers. These skills contribute to a

supportive learning environment, which enhances academic performance (Wentzel, 1991) [21]. Lee *et al*. (2017) [15] demonstrated that social skills improved classroom engagement and test scores, highlighting the importance of social competence in academic success for children with SLD.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences appropriately. It is linked to better academic outcomes as it helps children cope with stress, stay focused on their studies, and maintain positive relationships with peers and teachers (Gross, 2002) [13]. Green and Thompson (2018) [11] found that emotional awareness and self-regulation enhanced academic resilience and grades, suggesting that emotional regulation is a crucial competency for children with SLD.

Impact on academic performance

The reviewed studies consistently showed that higher levels of emotional competency are associated with better academic performance in children with SLD. This relationship is evident across various academic domains, including reading, writing, mathematics, and overall GPA. Emotional competencies help children with SLD navigate the academic challenges they face, leading to improved outcomes (Durlak *et al*., 2011; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005) [8, 7]. The findings underscore the importance of developing emotional skills to support the academic success of children with SLD.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings from the literature review highlight the critical role of emotional competency in the academic success of children with SLD. Emotional competencies such as self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation positively influence academic performance by enabling children to manage their learning experiences more effectively. These skills help children with SLD overcome the challenges associated with their disabilities, leading to better academic outcomes (Parker *et al*., 2004; Zins *et al*., 2004) [18, 23].

Comparison with previous reviews

Compared to previous reviews, this study provides a more comprehensive synthesis of the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance in children with SLD. While earlier reviews focused on specific emotional skills or academic outcomes, this review integrates findings across multiple competencies and academic domains, offering a holistic understanding of the topic. Previous reviews have often highlighted the importance of individual emotional skills, but this review emphasises the interconnectedness of various competencies and their collective impact on academic success (Eisenberg *et al*., 2004; Blair & Diamond, 2008) [9, 2].

Implications for practice and policy

The findings of this review have important implications for educators, parents, and policymakers. Enhancing emotional competency should be a key component of interventions for children with SLD. Schools should implement programs that focus on developing self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation to support the academic success of these children (Greenberg *et al*., 2003) [12]. Educators should receive training on how to foster these skills in students with SLD, and parents should be encouraged to reinforce emotional competencies at home (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013) [5]. Policymakers should also consider these findings when designing educational policies and allocating resources for special education, ensuring that emotional competency development is prioritised in educational curricula (Durlak *et al*., 2011) [8].

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This literature review has synthesised existing research on the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance in children with SLD. The review identified key emotional competencies, such as self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation, which significantly influence academic outcomes. Higher levels of these competencies are associated with better academic performance (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) [10, 17]. The findings underscore the importance of developing emotional skills to support the academic success of children with SLD.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should address the following gaps identified in this review: (1) longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of emotional competency on academic performance; (2) intervention studies to evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to enhance emotional competency in children with SLD; and (3) exploration of the role of emotional competency in different cultural and educational contexts to generalise findings (Parker *et al*., 2004; Zins *et al*., 2004) [18, 23]. Such research will provide a deeper understanding of how emotional skills can be cultivated to support the academic success of children with SLD.

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