This underrated type of intelligence could predict academic success

No amount of flashcards or practice problems can build this crucial skill.

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Bagging a perfect SAT score and all-A grade results often means months spent poring over prep books and completing hundreds of practice problems. But one key factor for academic success won't be found in the pages of a textbook — emotional intelligence.

Successful students don't just have high IQs — they are also better able to understand and manage their emotions effectively than their peers, a new meta-analysis suggests.

Along with other non-cognitive factors like grit and being hardworking and detail-oriented, emotional intelligence equips students to thrive academically. They better regulate their test anxiety or boredom, navigate social problems, and build relationships with teachers — all skills that boost their chances of academic success.

The results were published this week in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

"It's not enough to be smart and hardworking," Carolyn MacCann, of the University of Sydney and lead author of the study, said.

"Students must also be able to understand and manage their emotions to succeed at school."

What is emotional intelligence?

For most of the 20th century, research into academic success has harped on the role of IQ and cognitive factors, like attention and focus. But in the past thirty years, interest has grown in the role of "soft skills," like being able to regulate one's emotions and social ability.

In 1990, researchers Peter Salovey and John Mayer coined the phrase emotional intelligence, to mean "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions."

Since then, emotional intelligence research has linked this skill to success both in school and beyond graduation. Emotionally intelligent people appear to perform better in their job, and have higher health and well-being than their peers.

In this study, researchers analyzed over 160 studies published in the last two decades that examine emotional intelligence's role in academia. The data set includes more than 42,000 students from 27 countries, ranging from elementary school children to college students.

Across all age groups, students with higher emotional intelligence tended to get higher grades and test scores than those with lower emotional intelligence scores. This finding held true even when controlling for IQ and other personality traits.

Of the traits that are most important to academic success, emotional intelligence ranks third under intelligence and conscientiousness, the study suggests.

Emotional regulation

Emotional intelligence offers three major academic advantages, the researchers say.

Managing emotions like anxiety, boredom, or disappointment can stop students from being thrown off-course in school — keeping them on the right track towards success.

High emotional intelligence may also enable students to better interpret course material in courses that require more than problem-solving skills, like history, literature, or theater. While calculus and biology offer explicit, concrete subject matter, the humanities can be more abstract. Interpreting *Animal Farm* or performing the Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy requires a different set of thinking skills to take meaning from the source material.

Emotionally intelligent students also better understand the feelings of others — including their classmates and teachers. Being able to infer others' emotions can help build and leverage positive social relationships. An emotionally intelligent student may be more able to ask a peer for help on chemistry homework, while someone with low emotional intelligence might not have the right social skills to ask for a favor.

“These students may be better able to manage the social world around them, forming better relationships with teachers, peers and family, all of which are important to academic success,” MacCann said.

Strong social skills can also help students cope with stress, participate in group projects, and live independently away from home. Emotional intelligence can also help people interpret negative feedback positively, and even bounce back from failure.

Emotions in the classroom

Around the globe, most educational systems rely heavily on national standardized tests — and America is no exception. SAT scores — derived from tests done in the last years of high school — can determine a person’s entire future. But these tests use a narrow range of academic measurements to capture students’ performance, the researchers say.

Teachers are under pressure to focus on curriculum that improves scores on these tests. In this high-stakes environment, shifting teaching time towards the development of emotional intelligence and other “soft skills” may be considered a waste of time. But this paper and other studies suggest including emotional intelligence programming translates to higher test scores and grades, too.

The researchers don’t go as far to say schools should start screening for emotional intelligence among students. Instead, teachers should focus on offering emotional intelligence programming for all students, the researchers say.

Outside of formal programming, emotional intelligence can be built up outside the classroom. Experts suggest using techniques like focusing on the feelings of others, and engaging with your own anger, boredom, or anxiety to strengthen emotional intelligence.

Perhaps instead of measures of IQ dictating how successful we are, we need a test of EQ, too.

Abstract:

Schools and universities devote considerable time and resources to developing students’ social and emotional skills, such as emotional intelligence (EI). The goals of such programs are partly for personal development but partly to increase academic performance. The current meta-analysis examines the degree to which student EI is associated with academic performance. We found an overall effect of □ □ .20 using robust variance estimation (N □ 42,529, k □ 1,246 from 158 citations). The association is significantly stronger for ability EI (□ □ .24, k □ 50) compared with self-rated (□ □ .12, k □ 33) or mixed EI (□ □ .19, k □ 90). Ability, self-rated, and mixed EI explained an additional 1.7%, 0.7%, and 2.3% of the variance, respectively, after controlling for intelligence and big five personality. Understanding and manage- ment branches of ability EI explained an additional 3.9% and 3.6%, respectively. Relative importance analysis suggests that EI is the third most important predictor for all three streams, after intelligence and conscien- tiousness. Moderators of the effect differed across the three EI streams. Ability EI was a stronger predictor of performance in humanities than science. Self-rated EI was a stronger

predictor of grades than standardized test scores. We propose that three mechanisms underlie the EI/academic performance link: (a) regulating academic emotions, (b) building social relationships at school, and (c) academic content overlap with EI. Different streams of EI may affect performance through different mechanisms. We note some limitations, including the lack of evidence for a causal direction.

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