

How is Emotional Intelligence Related to Academic Success?

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Abstract

University students are frequently in stressful situations. High workloads, high pressure exams, and the ramifications of success or failure can combine to cause tension and anxiety. How students cope with their stress may affect their academic performance. The purpose of our study was to determine whether some aspects of Emotional Intelligence are related to success in an academic environment. Previous research has found positive relationships between academic success and understanding and managing emotions (Barchard, 2003). We therefore predicted these two branches of emotional intelligence would have significant relationships with GPA. A total of 168 participants completed the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003) online and provided self-reported GPA. Two branches of emotional intelligence, managing emotions and understanding emotions, had small positive correlations with academic success. Future research should examine the effect of emotional intelligence training on academic success. Training may be useful at all educational levels. Teaching children, adolescents, and young adults how to understand their emotions and how to cope with stress and anxiety may increase their ability to succeed in academic environments. However, different types of training are likely to be effective at different levels.

Introduction

Emotional Intelligence is defined as the ability to perceive emotion, to use emotion to assist in cognitive tasks, to comprehend emotions and their significance, and to consciously regulate emotions in order to improve both emotion and thought (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Emotional Intelligence has four branches (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011). The first branch, emotion perception, is the ability to recognize and express emotions, which include bodily cues and thoughts. The second branch, facilitating thought, is the ability to use emotion to facilitate problem solving. The third branch, understanding emotion, is the awareness of how emotions combine and how we interpret their meanings. The fourth branch, emotion management, is the ability to improve negative emotions and retain positive emotions in oneself and others.

It has been hypothesized that EI may be linked to academic performance. Two studies have found significant relationships between managing emotions and academic success (Barchard, 2003; MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, and Roberts, (2011), and two studies have found significant relationships between understanding emotions and academic success (Barchard, 2003; O'Connor & Little, 2003). However, Rode et al. (2008) found no correlation between EI and academic performance.

Given these conflicting results, the purpose of our study is to determine whether some aspects of emotional intelligence are related to academic achievement. It is important to examine the relationship between these two constructs because we may be able to predict who will be successful in an academic environment. In addition, if there is a relationship, then improving emotional intelligence might increase individuals' chances of success. Based on previous findings, we hypothesize that understanding and managing emotion will be positively correlated to academic performance, while emotion perception and facilitating thought will show little or no correlation.

Method

Participants

A total of 168 participants (108 females and 60 males) completed this study in return for course credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 48 (mean 22.56, SD 5.88). The majority of participants were Caucasian (60.7%), followed by Asian (14.9%), Black (10.7%), Hispanic (7.7%), Native (.6%), and other (5.4%).

Measures

Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test

The MSCEIT is comprised of 141-items, which measure the four branches of emotional intelligence: perceiving emotion, thought facilitation, understanding emotion, and managing emotion. Each branch is measured with two tasks (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003). Emotion perception is measured through the faces and pictures tasks. Thought facilitation is measured with the sensation and facilitation tasks. Understanding emotion is measured with blends

and changes tasks. Emotion management is measured with the emotion management and emotional relationship tasks. Proportion consensus scoring is used to calculate the scores.

Grade Point Average

Academic success was measured through self-reported GPA.

Procedures

The study was completed online in two 90 minutes sessions.

Results

Understanding emotion and managing emotion had small positive correlations with GPA. See Table 1.

Table 1

Correlation between EI Scales and GPA

EI Scales	Correlation
Emotion Perception	.09
Facilitating Thought	-.02
Understanding Emotion	.20*
Managing Emotion	.19*

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

In academic settings, students are constantly exposed to anxiety provoking situations. How they manage this stress may affect their academic performance. The purpose of our research was to determine whether some aspects of emotional intelligence are related to academic success. We hypothesized that understanding emotions and managing emotions would be positively correlated with academic performance. Our results confirmed our hypothesis: understanding and managing emotion are positively related to academic success. However, emotion perception and facilitating thought did not have significant relationships with academic success.

Both this study and previous studies on the relationship of emotional intelligence to academic success has been correlational. Because of this, we do not know whether higher levels of emotional intelligence *cause* academic success. Therefore, future research should examine the effectiveness of emotional intelligence training on academic success. If we teach children, adolescents, and young adults' ways to manage and cope with stress, will we see an increase in areas such as test scores due to lower anxiety levels? Slaski and Cartwright (2003) found promising results that suggested that emotional intelligence can be taught and learned, and can be used to improve the health and well being of an individual. Such training may be useful at all educational levels; however, different types of training are likely to be effective at different levels.

In this study (and in previous research, Barchard, 2003; O'Connor & Little, 2003) the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic success is modest. Barchard (2003) found that cognitive abilities (particularly verbal ability) and personality (particularly conscientiousness and openness) are also good predictors of academic success. If future research were to consider personality and cognitive abilities in addition to academic success in addition to emotional intelligence, it might be better able to predict academic success. In addition, previous research has found that understanding emotions has a moderate positive correlation with verbal ability (Barchard & Hakstian, 2004). Therefore, future research should determine if understanding emotions (and managing emotions) is able to predict academic success after verbal ability has been taken into account.

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