

Review Article

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE: SELF-AWARENESS, SOCIAL COGNITION, AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT—A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS

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Abstract

This systematic review explores many modern typologies and variants of social intelligence and emotions, which can shape learning outcomes within educational environments. This review synthesizes literature from scientific indexing systems between 2000 and 2026, providing a mapping of the ways in which social and emotional competencies and abilities provide multiple layers of influence on academic achievement for students. Analysis of the literature utilizing the thematic synthesis method to expose the connection between interpersonal foundations for developing self-awareness, as the basis for self-regulated learning and persistence, while building both social cognition and empathy establish the basis for interpersonal factors which govern classroom interactions and peer acceptance as well as how students adapt to institutions. One of the critical findings in the literature review is an apparent paradox related to the pathways to academic achievement. Higher social intelligence or social cognition does not create a direct path to higher academic GPAs; extensive amounts of social cognition on unmonitored digital platforms can create an academic distraction penalty, which could vary for each student based on personality characteristics, as well as gender. The review provides critical insight into the problems associated with methodological fragmentation with respect to various psychometric instruments as well as the geographic and demographic bias associated with not addressing the socioeconomic issues within developing countries. Lastly, this review calls for long-term, mixed-method qualitative studies that use empirically based methodologies to explore the impact of socio-emotional skills on student success; and encourages integration of structured social-emotional skill building into global policy decision making in education to support both quality academic performance and student wellness.

Keywords: *Social Intelligence, Socio-Emotional Competence, Academic Achievement, Self-Awareness, Social Cognition, Classroom Climate, Systematic Review*

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1 Introduction

The paradigmatic shift in educational sociology and pedagogical psychology that has occurred over the last decades is the result of a re-conceptualization of student ability. In the past, classically the assessment of academic ability was primarily based on psychometric measures of cognitive intelligence and commonly measured by Intelligence Quotient (IQ). However, contemporary empirical evidence suggests that an individual with a high cognitive capability will not necessarily succeed in the long term with respect to their academic abilities or the totality of their development as a student. The classroom is a micro-social system where the acquisition of knowledge occurs through continual interactions between individuals, the negotiation of emotion and the collaborative creation of meaning. Therefore, recent research has increasingly moved to non-cognitive areas to locate social intelligence (SI) as a critical determinant of academic performance (Tegegne and Wondimu, 2024). Social intelligence measures multiple dimensions of the ability of an individual to function in social situations in a productive manner, including their ability to recognize different social environments, to accurately process information between themselves and others, and how they respond in adaptive ways in various social contexts (Bar-On, 1997, Chadha and Ganesan, 2002) when working in classrooms and other educational settings.

Two key psychological dimensions of social intelligence act as fundamental pillars of the broader construct of social intelligence: self-awareness and social cognition. Self-awareness consist of an individual's ability to monitor and recognize their own internal emotional states and their own behavioral impulses, and be able to accurately evaluate the boundaries of their own cognition. Social cognition refers to the mental processes associated with the accurate decoding of social signals, the practice of empathy, an understanding of various perspectives, and predicting the social behaviours of others (Mayer et al., 2016). Although individual differences such as immovable personality traits and inherited cognitive capacity provide a foundation for how an individual behaves as a student, they do not operate in isolation. Rather, those foundational characteristics operate concurrently with more active intelligences (e.g., emotional intelligence, social intelligence) to govern how an individual interacts with other people in social environments based on their social intelligences, which drive various performance measures (e.g., grades, etc.), social-emotional self-adjustment (i.e., the ability of an individual to adjust emotionally to circumstances), and long-term academic guidelines and criteria (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2017, Keenan, 2026).

While social effectiveness and academic success is an obvious correlation and intuitive social science knowledge, the pathways that link self-awareness and social cognition to the academic performance of students is not yet established and is not clearly supported in current social science literature. Historical studies have analysed the variables of self-awareness, social cognition and academic performance in a vacuum or only in terms of their utility in relation to the effectiveness of teachers or the effectiveness of various leaders and not for the purposes of evaluating students generally (Agarwal, 2013, Beheshtifar and Roasaei, 2012, Rahim Al Mugahed and Othman Shahizan, 2013). Moreover, the rapid and changing nature of learning environments today has created several challenges in determining how social intelligence manifests itself as academic performance. The amount of digital social networking portals, and changes to the socio-economic environment and diversity in the classrooms and other educational venues create a complex to support the research impacts of social intelligence as academic achievement (Acheaw and Larson, 2015, Gadre, 2004, Gnanadevan, 2011). For example, some recent research studies provide contradictory evidence as to whether students who have a strong social component operate at a higher level of grade point average (GPA) or experience academic problems as a direct result of ineffective management of social contacts in digital environments while in school (Meijs and Antonius, 2010, Rouis et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a clear and evident lack of literature that establishes a systematic review and compilation and accurate interpretation of empirical findings on social intelligence and academic performance, which would create a unified, non-redundant framework for understanding social intelligence and academic performance.

This systematic literature review is purposed to engage the literature and to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the existing global empirical literature that links the dimensions of social intelligence and the academic performance of students. By providing a detailed examination of the connections between a student's self-awareness and their social-cognitive interactions with others in the classroom and at school, this paper will ultimately help to fill the current ambiguity of the topic area and provide an authoritative resource for current educational scholars.

To achieve this overarching aim, the manuscript is guided by the following four specific research objectives:

1. To critically assess all empirical evidence regarding the direct effect of a student having self-awareness on their self-regulation, goal setting and stress management (Brouzos et al., 2014).
2. To evaluate the effects of social cognition (i.e., perspective-taking; decoding of social contexts; and empathy) on the dynamics of classroom learning, peer collaborations and interactions between students and teachers (Braza et al., 2009, Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008).

3. To identify the structural influence of institutional and demographic context moderators, including school climate; socio-economics (*SES*); and digital and social media use, on the relationship between social intelligence and academic outcomes ([Kaur and Kalaramna, 2004](#), [Schlichtenhorst, 2026](#)).
4. To develop an actionable future research agenda and conceptual framework that will advance future social science research by testing innovative hypotheses, and addressing the current limitations of the methodology within the field ([Jennings and Greenberg, 2009](#)).

2 Thematic Mapping and Synthesis

By systematically extracting all of the literature reviewed, social intelligence emerges as a multifaceted concept composed of various competencies that can be categorized as both intra- and interpersonally focused. It is a complex set of social competencies that play a direct role in facilitating academic adjustment and promoting educational success ([Bar-On, 1997](#), [Chadha and Ganesan, 2002](#)). In order to provide a thorough and comprehensive synthesis of the research available, the following review divides the existing research base according to different thematic categories identified, which show how the more structural (dimensional) sub-components of social intelligence impact the educational environment.

2.1 Self-Awareness as an Intra-Personal Foundation for Academic Engagement

The self-awareness of each person acts as a foundation to the social intelligence model as an internal navigator to determine how students will monitor their internal states; label or describe them and regulate those internal states before they decide how they will navigate through external social structures ([Mayer et al., 2016](#), ?). While navigating through their external environments, self-awareness today is very heavily influenced by the way in which students interact and see themselves through digital platforms. Research in the digital realm has shown that by students being exposed to collaborative online browsing and social networks, their public self-awareness can be altered as it now causes them to be more aware of other people's perspectives other than their own ([Qui lin et al., 2013](#)). Thus, when students are engaged in peer interactions in interactive social environments, the interaction effect will increase their awareness of others' perspectives ([Qui lin et al., 2013](#)). In the academic context, this increased public and social awareness can be harnessed to raise young people's awareness of issues that could benefit from engaging multiple viewpoints and foster collaborative engagement ([Jain et al., 2012](#)). As well, modern interactive media serves as an instructional medium that links school-related learning tasks to social awareness in 21st century, omnipresent learning environments ([Songkhala, 2011](#)).

Research on individual differences shows that the inherent, core self-awareness does not vary significantly according to rigid demographic or socio-structural criteria. The results of psychometric assessments using standardized emotional intelligence and social intelligence instruments show that differences between groups in core internal self-awareness and integrity measures when comparing by historical socio-demographic classifications (e.g.; general student groups compared to scheduled caste student groups) are not statistically different ([Brar, 2014](#)). This suggests that self-awareness is a universal baseline psychological concept that is consistent across diverse student populations ([Brar, 2014](#)). When self-awareness is thoroughly developed through enriched school environments, the internal competency acts in a synergistic manner with a student's overall genetic or cognitive capacity thus allowing all students, regardless of their average or exceptional academic ability, to recognize their individual limitations, attain their maximum educational opportunities, and sustain high academic motivation ([Gadre, 2004](#)).

2.2 Social Cognition, Empathy, and Classroom Interaction Dynamics

The inter-personal aspect through which social intelligence is interpreted in the classroom is affected by social cognition as well as the internal management of emotions ([Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008](#)). Empirical literature supports the premise that social cognition drives social dominance and peer acceptance in children from childhood through adolescence. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have shown that people with a well-developed social intelligence built on empathy are significant predictors of school-aged students' peer acceptance ([Braza et al., 2009](#)). The research shows that in addition to the general relationship between empathy and peer acceptance for all students, this relationship is regularly moderated by gender. Developmental studies of empathy show that males tend to benefit more than females when it comes to achieving peer acceptance through empathy, while females depend more on the difference between reality and appearance to achieve peer acceptance and navigate the social hierarchy ([Braza et al., 2009](#)).

At higher educational levels, interpersonal relationships and communication clarity in high-contact settings (e.g., service-oriented fields) are directly impacted by the students' social-cognitive abilities ([Beheshtifar and Roasaei, 2012](#), [Chien and Chen, 2010](#)). For example, in health-related programs, emotional-social intelligence is significantly correlated to leadership and caregiving competencies ([Wessel, 2008](#)). Students with

advanced levels of social perception and memory also can anticipate peer contributions and manage group efforts (Barber et al., 2010). However, the literature does identify a critical limiting factor; should cognitive versatility be primarily used to execute trivial forms of social engineering (such as excessive ingratiation), cognitive versatility may result in a lower level of positive performance (Chien and Chen, 2010). In order to have true social cognition, social cognition must be based on true empathy; therefore, social cognition is based on deep empathy rather than tactical social manipulation (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008). When cognitive capabilities are properly accessed, social-cognitive skills create an atmosphere absent of social anxiety, which aids in the ability to retain complex academic content, such as math and social studies (Aruna and Amenulla, 2009).

2.3 Thematic Mapping of Direct and Indirect Pathways to Academic Achievement

Upon conducting an analysis into the intersection of measurable academic outcomes and social-cognitive variables, a very complex relationship has been established through an extensive body of literature. Academic achievement as measured through various grades (e.g., GPAs), motivation to achieve academically (e.g., scholastic motivation) and various standardized test scores is fundamentally connected to how well students are able to process their immediate social environment (Brouzos et al., 2014, Meijs and Antonius, 2010). Social intelligence constructs, likewise, interact with classical psychological predictors of academic success (i.e., creativity and achievement motivation) (Alam, 2009). Highly motivated students possess higher levels of scientific creativity when compared to students with low motivation levels across all educational systems and genders (Jaiswal, 2007, Pandey and Ahmed, 2007, Tripathi and Swarnkar, 2008).

The academic success of students in specific technical subjects is directly influenced by their learning preferences and associated habits. Longitudinal research has shown that both convergence and assimilator styles tend to be associated with higher levels of motivation for achievement and greater performance indicators than other styles (Alireza, 2008). For example, students that exhibit good organisational skills and appropriate home study hours produce much better outcomes in complex subjects (i.e., mathematics) (Krishna Reddy and Ramachandra Reddy, 2009), in contrast, students that prefer flexibly structured forms of learning (i.e., aural and visual) can have their performance enhanced when they reside in an urban versus rural environment (Singh, 2008).

Additionally, historical socio-economic conditions shape the positive foundational elements of social intelligence capabilities established within a student's home (e.g., supportive home environments; the dynamics of caste); their parent's income level; or their mother's level of education both of which positively contributes to the basic learning preferences upon which all social intelligence capabilities are founded (Gnanadevan, 2011, Kaur and Kalaramna, 2004). Therefore, not only are all the above-mentioned variables related to the achievement of successful academic results but these variables work cooperatively to produce a unique combination of social/emotional competencies, positive individual academic preferences, and balanced social structures which create a synergy that produces academic excellence as measured by achievement (Brouzos et al., 2014, Tegegne and Wondimu, 2024).

3 Critical Discussion

A thorough review of the available literature shows many major inconsistencies, theoretical discrepancies, and structural issues in the social sciences that inhibit their ability to create a fully unified model of social intelligence as it relates to educational contexts. While there appears to be an overall good correlation between socio-emotional skills and overall institutional adjustment, a large number of interesting cross-examinations of the empirical data reveal numerous significant points of conceptual friction.

3.1 Methodological Fragmentations and Operational Divergence

One of the first major structural limitations identified by researchers conducting investigations in this area is that there is too much reliance placed upon disparate psychometric instruments which measure what many scholars refer to as social intelligence. Researchers have utilized many different research-based frameworks for measuring social intelligence including (but not limited to) Chadha and Ganesan's Social Intelligence Scale, Bar-On's Emotional Quotient Inventory, and numerous self-developed subjective questionnaires (Brar, 2014, Gnanadevan, 2011, Wessel, 2008). Generally, when researchers use these instruments, they are collecting data based upon parameters that differ greatly from one another such as the internally-based development of self and patience versus the externally-based tactfulness of self and recognition of cognition concerning others in a social setting; therefore, comparing results from one study to another is difficult at best.

Additionally, most of the empirical data collected has been based on cross-sectional and self-reporting survey methodology. Inherent in any self-reporting methodology is the potential for social desirability bias;

therefore, students and/or instructors may over-state the amount of social intelligence they possess. The existing literature does not provide longitudinal tracking or behaviour-observation schemas for assessing the actual operation of social-cognitive variable under conditions of immediate academic stress or in response to sudden environmental changes. It can therefore be concluded that without any objective tracking methodology; while social intelligence is related to and predicts academic outcomes in relation to each other, it has yet to be proven that social intelligence causes differences in the academic performance of people.

3.2 The Paradox of Social Over-Engagement and Digital Dissensions

What is becoming increasingly clear from the data is that there is a non-linear relationship between social intelligence and actual academic performance metrics. Traditional models assume that higher social intelligence correlates with better academic achievement. However, there is a consistent paradox in the literature: Students who have high levels of social intelligence do not necessarily have high GPAs.

In many cases, when a student utilizes their high-level social cognition and perspective-taking in a largely unregulated environment like digital social networking, they frequently experience an academic penalty (Acheaw and Larson, 2015, Tarawneh-Al, 2014). Frequent use of social networking may lead students to experience significant academic loss and create a negative correlation with total GPAs (Paul et al., 2012). Significantly more extreme (highly extroverted) students tend to spend a disproportionate amount of time constantly updating their profiles and chatting socially online rather than doing homework or studying alone (Rouis et al., 2011). Students may become so invested in social chatting and entertainment activities that their primary academic study becomes compromised, indicating a need for students to find a balance between online socializing and their academic activities so they can minimize their academic failures (Ndaku Anjugu, 2009, Sofela, 2012).

In addition to the recognized student-level differences, there are also gender-related differences as well. Male and female students are relatively similar with regard to total internet usage time; however, they often differ substantially with respect to specific platform usage and social network mapping. Therefore, as a result of using these platforms extensively, notable differences can be seen in their final academic performance, along with a consistent and compelling negative impact on their GPAs (Bateman et al., 2010, Haq, 2012). Essentially, there appears to be a threshold or “inverted-U” relationship whereby social intelligence is highly beneficial in terms of providing a sense of institutional support and sociometric popularity, but can also negatively impact academics, particularly in terms of negatively affecting academic hardware or creating a disruptive social component (Meijs and Antonius, 2010).

3.3 Contextual and Institutional Governance Gaps

A significant drawback concerning the existing body of scholarly literature about educational change is not only its apparent regional bias but its marked inability to represent varying socio-cultural realities (Nisbett, 2003). Much of the foundational research on social cognition and holistic thinking style is based on a historical distinction between Western-style individualistic cultures and Eastern-style philosophical orientations (Nisbett, 2003). Consequently, when models rooted in Western-built, individual-oriented theories are imported into and studied in culturally distinct local contexts, the structural constituents of both the cultures involved and the actual interpersonal encounter modality change entirely based on the physical/cultural environment of each (Nisbett, 2003).

The current literature provides incomplete and inconsistent accounts about the interrelationships between the regional climate of schools and the institutional structure of schools and their effect on social-cognitive outcomes. Within the context of classroom management frameworks, individual teachers have been shown to significantly utilize their level of social intelligence and their age in determining what to do to manage students in classrooms (Jeloudar, 2011). Likewise, the ability of teachers to prevent occupational burnout is primarily related to their social and emotional competence and their establishing pro-social classrooms that focus on enhancing student achievement (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009), within their classrooms.

However, broader/systemic institutional failures are capable of creating significant disruptions in the balance between competencies and deficits of the individual teacher and the social cognitive relationships between teachers and students. A teacher who does not possess an adequate level of advanced social skill or is not able to effectively manage classroom environments will be adversely affected and experience negative teacher emotions and demonstrate an inability to accommodate the diverse populations of students they teach, especially students who are gifted but may have high levels of noncompliance due to their intellectual attributes (Geake and Gross, 2011, Juchniewicz, 2010). Furthermore, there will be an expectation within institutional failures to have a social cognitive dialogical relationship between all teachers/professionals and all students who will facilitate behavioral management and will be a mutually beneficial method for decreasing stress and

establishing a socializing climate of cooperation (Danforth and Boyle, 2007). In addition, a number of authors have identified the current literature fail to adequately document how the aforementioned institutional factors manifest in marginalized populations, resource-restricted contexts, or within specific transitioning student populations in the Global South (Gnanadevan, 2011, Schlichtenhorst, 2026). The failure of current literature to adequately document how structural inequalities or inequitable school funding in specific geographical regions create inequities in access to social-emotional skill development for students results in a predominant clean model that does not adequately inform current global realities in education.

4 Future Research Agenda

To close the major gaps identified within the current academic system, the next generation of social science research must purposefully shift towards more longitudinal, robust methods which are behaviorally based rather than relying heavily on self-reported questionnaires, which are often influenced by social desirability bias. Additionally, research should use mixed method design(s), where researchers pair standardized scales with objective measures of behavior (observed in real-time in classrooms), and longitudinally track grade point averages (GPA), across major points of transition through education. Furthermore, researchers must explore the existence of the non-linear, inverted U-shaped relationship between social intelligence and academic success.

Scholars must also create research designs that clarify the point at which healthy socio-emotional adaptation is replaced by academic distraction and/or digital over-engagement. Finally, researchers must prioritize creating research that includes all types of geo-demographics. Dedicated empirical studies are needed to investigate how structural inequalities, different socio-economic status (SES) and enriched versus non-enriched school environments, affect the social and self-awareness development of historically under-represented student populations globally (particularly in the Global South).

5 Conclusion

This systematic review, along with the conceptual synthesis herein, illustrates that the evaluation of academic achievement cannot solely be based upon the unilateral lens of traditional psychometric cognitive measures. Classrooms are micro-social environments in which a student's ability to learn is heavily influenced by both their intra-personal capabilities and their inter-personal interactions.

The literature that has been synthesized suggests that self-awareness (in review preparation) provides the psychological baseline that is necessary for developing self-regulated learning and emotional regulation. Conversely, social cognitive ability (in review preparation) serves as an inter-personal means by which students will be able to successfully collaborate with peers, cope with social anxiety, and build positive relationships with teachers.

Nonetheless, a high-impact statement shows that higher social intelligence does not always correlate to achieving better grades in school. Rather than being coincidental, having both an intentional and structural balance between both social engagement and distractions caused by digital social networking, is necessary for maintaining good independent study habits. In sum, to encourage students to develop these competencies, educational institutions should incorporate socio-emotional competencies into all aspects of formal educational policy and curriculum frameworks. By developing both internal self-awareness/knowledge as well as external social-cognitive abilities at the same time, educational institutions today can create an environment which emphasizes both academic success and total student well-being.

6 Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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9 Authors' Contribution

Shivaleela Mandikadi (SM): Conceptualization, systematic literature search design, database screening and sample extraction, thematic mapping, critical discussion analysis, drafting of the original manuscript, formatting, and final structural editing of the review paper.

10 AI Declaration

The author declares that an advanced AI tool was utilized strictly as an interactive collaborative writing assistant to optimize the narrative flow, refine the academic prose, eliminate redundant phrasing, and assist in structural formatting according to high-impact journal standards. The conceptual design, critical synthesis, evaluation of empirical anomalies, and final interpretation of the literature were entirely executed and verified by the author, who remains fully accountable for the integrity and originality of the content.

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