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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: A CASE FOR EMBEDDED DEVELOPMENT OVER INDIVIDUAL SCREENING

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) has become a fixture of school and university policy on the strength of the claim that emotionally intelligent students achieve more. This position paper examines that claim against the best available synthesis, a meta-analysis of 158 reports and 42,529 students that found an overall association of about ρ = .20 between EI and academic performance, stronger for ability-based than for self-rated measures. I argue that the evidence supports four conclusions. First, EI is modestly and measurement-dependently associated with achievement, and is best seen as one contributor within a broader set of social-emotional competencies. Second, because the association is small, partly entangled with personality, and not shown to be causal, EI scores should not be used to screen, rank or select individual students. Third, the best-supported route to achievement gains is universal, curriculum-embedded social and emotional learning evaluated against academic outcomes. Fourth, the evidence base is concentrated in English-speaking settings, so its transfer to other contexts, including Nigerian classrooms, needs local validation. The paper responds to objections and proposes a research agenda focused on longitudinal designs, measurement invariance, pre-registered trials and implementation.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; academic achievement; social and emotional learning; meta-analysis; educational policy

Introduction

Few constructs have travelled from academic psychology to school policy as quickly as emotional intelligence (EI). Since Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined it as the ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions, and Goleman (1995) popularised it for a general audience, EI has become a standard element of school improvement plans, teacher-

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training curricula and university student-support strategies. The popular claim is simple: students who understand and manage emotions do better in school, so schools should measure and develop EI. There is now enough evidence to judge that claim more carefully than was possible two decades ago. The largest synthesis to date, a meta-analysis of 158 reports and 42,529 students, found a positive association between EI and academic performance of about ρ = .20, with EI ranking third among predictors after intelligence and conscientiousness (MacCann, Jiang, Brown, Double, Bucich & Minbashian, 2020). That is a real finding, and it deserves to be taken seriously. It is also a modest one, it varies with how EI is measured, and the same authors state that evidence for a causal direction is lacking.

This paper argues for a specific position on what follows from such evidence. **First**, EI should be treated as one contributor within a wider set of social-emotional competencies that influence achievement, not as a stand-alone predictor of it. **Second**, because the association is modest, construct-dependent and not shown to be causal, EI should not be used to screen, rank or select students. **Third**, the best-supported route from EI to achievement is the universal, curriculum-embedded development of social and emotional skills, evaluated against achievement outcomes. **Fourth**, claims about EI and achievement should be tested in more varied educational settings before they are generalised, including in sub-Saharan African classrooms, where the evidence base is thin. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 summarises what the evidence supports. Section 3 sets out reasons for caution. Section 4 considers the mechanisms that make the association plausible, and Section 5 develops an integrative framework with testable propositions. Section 6 develops the position on universal development over screening. Section 7 addresses contextual validity and Section 8 ethics and equity. Section 9 considers objections, Section 10 applies the position to concrete cases, Section 11 proposes a research agenda, and Sections 12 and 13 draw out implications and conclude.

Scope and Approach

This is a conceptual paper. It does not report new data. It reviews and interprets existing evidence in order to defend a position about how emotional intelligence (EI) should be used in education, and it is organised around the most comprehensive meta-analytic evidence available, supplemented by the principal critiques of the construct and by the literatures on emotion in achievement settings, social and emotional learning (SEL) and measurement. Where figures are given they come from the cited syntheses, and where I draw an inference that goes beyond them I say so. Three clarifications of scope are needed. First, the paper concerns EI as it is used in education, that is, in relation to students' academic performance and to school policy, and not EI in organisational or clinical settings, except where those literatures illuminate a point. Second, 'achievement' refers to measurable academic outcomes such as grades and standardised test scores, which are only part of what education aims to achieve. The position taken here does not deny the value of emotional skills for wellbeing, relationships and citizenship, and it argues that those aims need no borrowed justification from grades. Third, the paper takes no position on whether EI is an 'intelligence' in the strict psychometric sense. Its concern is practical: what the evidence licenses schools and policy-makers to do.

A modest association that depends on how EI is measured

The EI literature is organised around three families of measures. Ability measures, in the tradition of Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2004), present emotion-related problems with right and wrong answers. Self-report measures of trait EI treat the construct as a cluster of self-perceptions located in personality (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Mixed measures, such as those following the Bar-On (2006) model, combine emotional skills with traits and social competencies. These are not interchangeable, and the achievement findings differ by family. In the MacCann et al. (2020) meta-analysis, the association was strongest for ability EI ($\rho = .24$), weaker for mixed EI ($\rho = .19$) and weakest for self-rated EI ($\rho = .12$). Self-rated EI also predicted grades better than standardised test scores, and ability EI was a stronger predictor in the humanities than in the sciences. Two points follow. The headline figure of .20 is an average across measures that capture different things, so it should not be read as the effect of a single, well-defined attribute. And the strongest association comes from the measures that are hardest to administer at scale and most open to dispute about scoring, while the cheap, scalable self-report instruments show the weakest link. Earlier meta-analytic work on trait EI had also reported small positive associations with academic performance (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013), so the direction of the finding is consistent even if the size is small.

Comparison with other predictors

The ranking of EI third behind intelligence and conscientiousness is sometimes quoted to claim that EI is almost as important as cognitive ability. Such statements overreach. A relative-importance analysis apportions explained variance among correlated predictors, and the proportion explained by EI is still small in absolute terms. A correlation of .20 means that EI accounts for roughly four per cent of the variance in performance on its own. That is not trivial across a population of millions of learners, but it is far too little to support decisions about individuals. At the level of the individual student, knowing a score on an EI test tells a teacher very little about how that student will perform.

What Counts as Achievement

The outcome side of the correlation is often treated as if it were a single, clean variable. In fact, the studies synthesised in the literature use a variety of outcomes: end-of-term grades awarded by teachers, cumulative grade point averages, scores on standardised tests and course examinations. These do not measure the same thing. Teacher-awarded grades reflect knowledge, but also effort, participation, behaviour and the quality of the relationship between teacher and student. Standardised tests are designed to reduce such influences. In the MacCann et al. (2020) synthesis, self-rated EI was a better predictor of grades than of standardised test scores, a pattern that is what one would expect if some of the association runs through behaviours and relationships that teachers reward and not only through what students know. This has an implication for interpretation. If a share of the EI–grade association reflects classroom conduct and teacher perception, then raising EI might improve grades without improving learning in the sense of durable knowledge, and, conversely, an association with grades may be an unreliable guide to the effect on external examinations. Such a distinction matters in systems such as Nigeria's, where progression depends heavily on external examinations that are marked anonymously, and where

internal grades carry different weight. A claim about EI and achievement should therefore state which kind of achievement it refers to.

Moderators: Subject, Measure and Context

The meta-analytic evidence indicates that the EI–achievement association is not uniform. Ability EI was found to be a stronger predictor in humanities than in science subjects, and the strength of the association varied with the stream of EI measured (MacCann et al., 2020). The subject moderator is theoretically meaningful. Emotion perception and understanding are close to the content of subjects that require interpretation of characters, motives and social situations, and they are more distant from the content of subjects such as chemistry or physics. It would be unwise to assume that a result obtained in language or social science classes would hold in biology or mathematics. Other moderators, such as age, level of education and the manner in which performance is assessed, are plausible but under-tested, and they cannot be assumed to behave in the same way across education systems. A reasonable reading is that the overall estimate summarises a family of conditional associations, some larger and some smaller than the mean. Programme design and policy should be informed by the conditions under which the association is strongest, and not by the average alone.

Reading the Effect Size

How large is ρ = .20 in practical terms? Several translations help. In terms of variance explained, it corresponds to four per cent. Using the binomial effect size display (Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982), a correlation of .20 corresponds to a difference in the proportion of ‘successful’ students of about twenty percentage points, for example 60 per cent of students with high EI scores above the median in achievement against 40 per cent of those with low EI scores. That is a meaningful difference across a population, and it is the kind of difference that justifies universal attention to emotional skills. For individual prediction the picture is different. If EI and achievement are roughly normally distributed and correlated at .20, the probability that a student who is above the median on EI is also above the median on achievement is about 56 per cent, compared with 50 per cent by chance. In other words, a teacher who guessed whether a student was above or below the median in achievement, using only the student’s position on EI, would be right only slightly more often than by flipping a coin. The same correlation that supports attention to emotional skills at the level of programmes therefore gives almost no support for deciding anything about a particular child. This contrast between population-level and individual-level inference is the statistical core of the position taken in this paper.

Construct and measurement problems

The first reason for caution is that the construct remains contested. Roberts, Zeidner and Matthews (2001) questioned whether EI meets the usual standards for an intelligence, noting problems with the scoring of ability tests, which rely on consensus or expert agreement rather than objective correctness, and with the overlap between self-report tests and personality. Antonakis, Ashkanasy and Dasborough (2009) made a related point about the conceptual vagueness of broad EI definitions. In practice, the label EI covers instruments that correlate only

moderately with one another, a pattern sometimes described as a jingle-jangle problem, where the same name is used for different things and different names for the same thing. For educational research this matters because a claim that EI raises or predicts achievement is a claim about a particular instrument. When practitioners generalise from an ability test used in a university study to a brief self-report scale used in a school programme, they move from one evidence base to another without noticing the change.

Overlap with personality and intelligence

The second reason is incremental validity. Self-report and mixed measures of EI overlap substantially with the Big Five personality traits, a pattern documented in the occupational literature (Joseph & Newman, 2010) and acknowledged in the trait-EI framework itself (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). If EI scores largely re-describe conscientiousness, emotional stability and extraversion, then an association with grades may be partly an association with those traits. MacCann et al. (2020) report that EI is not explained by intelligence and conscientiousness, which is encouraging, but that finding is stronger for ability measures than for self-report. A programme that targets EI because of its link to grades should therefore demonstrate that it changes something beyond what conscientiousness training or study-skills instruction would change.

Causal direction and reciprocal influence

The third reason is that almost all the evidence is correlational. Control-value theory proposes that emotions in achievement settings arise from students' appraisals of control and value and, in turn, affect motivation, strategy use and performance (Pekrun, 2006). Importantly, the theory also proposes reciprocal causation: success and failure shape later emotions, just as emotions shape later performance (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz & Perry, 2002). A student who does well may feel more confident and manage anxiety better, and that experience may raise scores on an emotional-skills questionnaire. A cross-sectional correlation between EI and grades is consistent with EI helping achievement, with achievement helping EI, and with both being influenced by a third factor such as a supportive home or school climate. MacCann et al. (2020) themselves note the absence of evidence for a causal direction. Policy that treats the correlation as a lever risks wasted effort if the arrow runs mainly the other way.

Common-Method Variance and the Limits of Self-Report

A fourth reason for caution is methodological and applies to a large part of the primary literature. Many studies obtain both the predictor and the outcome from the same source or in the same session, for example a self-report EI questionnaire completed by students alongside self-reported grades. In such designs, shared method variance, response styles and a general tendency to see oneself favourably can inflate correlations. Self-reported grades, in particular, are known to be biased upwards and to be less accurate among lower-achieving students, which means that error in the outcome is itself correlated with the characteristics being studied. Small-study effects and publication bias are further concerns in a literature in which many studies use convenience samples of undergraduates. A meta-analysis can only be as informative as the primary studies it summarises, and the authors of the main synthesis acknowledge limitations of the evidence base,

including the absence of evidence about causal direction (MacCann et al., 2020). None of this overturns the conclusion that a positive association exists. It does mean that the size of the association in everyday school conditions, with independent measures of EI and achievement, may differ from the average across the published literature, and that confident forecasts about the effect of interventions are not yet justified.

Why the Association Is Still Plausible

Caution does not amount to dismissal. MacCann et al. (2020) propose three mechanisms by which EI might affect performance: regulating academic emotions such as anxiety, boredom and disappointment; building supportive relationships with teachers and peers; and overlap between EI content and the content of academic subjects, particularly in the humanities, where interpreting characters, motives and perspectives is part of the task. Each is reasonable, and each suggests different instructional implications. Regulation of academic emotions links EI to the literature on test anxiety, in which worry and tension are repeatedly associated with poorer performance (Zeidner, 1998). Relationship-building links EI to classroom climate and teacher support. Content overlap suggests that EI-related skills may be most relevant where subjects require interpretation of human behaviour, and less so where they do not. None of these mechanisms has been tested experimentally in the way required to claim that raising EI raises achievement through that route. They are hypotheses that should guide the design of interventions and trials, not conclusions on which to build selection systems.

The first mechanism, regulation of academic emotions, is the best developed theoretically. Students who can recognise early signs of anxiety or frustration, understand what triggers them and apply strategies such as reappraisal or planned breaks may preserve attention for the task. This mechanism predicts that the benefits of EI should be concentrated in emotionally demanding situations, a prediction that is testable by comparing the association across low- and high-stakes assessments. The second mechanism concerns relationships. A large body of research indicates that supportive teacher–student relationships are associated with greater engagement and higher achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011). Students who can read the emotional signals of teachers and peers, and respond appropriately, may find it easier to seek help, collaborate and sustain positive relationships. If this is the mechanism, the effect of EI should be partly mediated by relationship quality, and interventions that improve the classroom climate for all students might raise achievement even if individual EI scores change little. This points again to the importance of the teacher's own behaviour as part of the intervention. The third mechanism, content overlap, is conceptually distinct, since it concerns what is being learned and not how the learner copes. In subjects such as literature and history, understanding characters' motives is part of the curriculum, and an ability test of emotion understanding may partly measure a curriculum-relevant skill. The mechanism is not a reason to promote EI for its own sake. It cautions that some of the association may reflect shared content between instrument and outcome and not a general effect.

An Integrative Framework

The preceding sections suggest that the debate about EI and achievement would be better served by a conceptual model than by a single correlation. This section proposes one, drawing on control-

value theory, the process model of emotion regulation and models of self-regulated learning. The aim is to specify where EI skills could plausibly act and what would count as evidence for or against each pathway.

Emotion in the achievement episode

Control-value theory holds that achievement emotions such as enjoyment, hope, pride, anxiety, boredom and shame arise from students' appraisals of their control over activities and outcomes and of the value they attach to them, and that these emotions affect attention, motivation, learning strategies and self-regulation (Pekrun, 2006). Emotions are thus part of the episode of learning and not a background condition. If a student can perceive, understand and manage the emotions that arise in the episode, for instance anxiety before a test or frustration with a difficult problem, the student is better placed to keep attention on the task and to select effective strategies.

Regulation and self-regulated learning

Gross (1998) described emotion regulation as a family of processes that operate at different points in the emotion-generating sequence, from selecting and modifying situations to reappraising their meaning and suppressing expression. Reappraisal, which occurs early in the sequence, is generally regarded as less costly than suppression, which occurs late. Models of self-regulated learning stress the forethought, performance and self-reflection phases of learning, in which learners set goals, monitor progress and adjust strategies (Zimmerman, 2002). Emotions affect each phase. The model proposed here treats the skills labelled as EI, namely perceiving, understanding and managing emotions, as proximal resources that support regulation inside the self-regulated learning cycle.

Propositions

From this synthesis follow propositions that are testable and that distinguish a modest, conditional account of EI from a strong, general one. Table 1 states them.

Table 1. Propositions of the integrative framework and the evidence that would test them

Proposition	Evidence that would support it	Evidence that would count against it
P1. EI skills affect achievement mainly through regulation of emotions during learning and assessment (mediation by self-regulation and engagement).	Statistical mediation by regulation and engagement in longitudinal data; intervention effects on achievement that disappear when regulation is held constant.	Direct effects on achievement of the same size with no mediation; effects on EI scores that do not change regulation behaviours.
P2. The effect is larger where emotional demands are higher (high-stakes tests, difficult content, hostile climates).	Interaction of EI with task or climate emotional demand; larger effects for anxious or high-stakes situations.	Uniform effects regardless of demand.

Proposition	Evidence that would support it	Evidence that would count against it
P3. The effect is partly reciprocal: achievement experiences shape later emotional skills and appraisals.	Cross-lagged paths from earlier achievement to later EI of non-trivial size.	Paths only from EI to achievement.
P4. The effect is subject-dependent, stronger where subject content overlaps with emotion-related skills.	Larger associations in humanities and social subjects than in sciences, replicated across cohorts.	No difference among subjects after controlling for general ability.
P5. Universal embedded programmes raise achievement through P1 and P2, with larger gains where baseline emotional demands are high.	Pre-registered trials showing achievement gains mediated by regulation, with moderation by demand.	Gains explained by non-emotional components, such as improved classroom climate or teacher behaviour, or no gains.
P6. Associations will vary with culture and language, and instruments will show partial or no measurement invariance across settings.	Failure of scalar invariance; differential item functioning; differing structure across languages.	Strong invariance across groups and replicated predictive validity.

The framework is deliberately conditional. It predicts that EI matters, but where and how much depend on context, and it identifies the kinds of study that would show the position to be wrong. A position that cannot be falsified would not deserve confidence.

The evidence for universal social and emotional learning

If EI scores are weak tools for judging individuals, the practical question is what, if anything, schools should do. The strongest evidence comes not from EI testing but from social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger (2011) synthesised 213 school-based, universal SEL programmes involving 270,034 students and found improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic performance, the last equivalent to an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement. Corcoran, Cheung, Kim and Xie (2018), reviewing fifty years of research, similarly reported positive effects of universal school-based SEL programmes on academic achievement. Programme-specific work, such as the RULER feeling-words curriculum, has reported higher year-end grades and better teacher-rated social and emotional competence in participating classrooms (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes & Salovey, 2012). Two cautions apply even here. SEL is broader than EI, covering self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, so the achievement gains cannot be attributed to EI alone. And effects vary with implementation quality, the age of students and the outcome measure. Meta-analytic evidence on EI training in particular suggests that programmes can raise scores on EI measures, but results differ across measures and designs, and follow-up periods are often short

(Hodzic, Scharfen, Ostendorf & Holling, 2018; Kotsou, Mikolajczak, Heeren, Grégoire & Leys, 2019). Interpreting these effects requires care. An 11-percentile-point gain is an average across many programmes, populations and outcome measures, and it conceals wide variation: some programmes produce large gains, others none. Programmes also differ in what they include, so it is not possible to attribute the gain to any single element such as the teaching of emotional vocabulary. Evidence on durability is more limited than evidence on immediate effects, and the research base is concentrated in North America and Europe, with less evidence from low- and middle-income countries. These qualifications do not weaken the case for universal provision as a reasonable investment, but they argue for local evaluation and for realistic expectations about the size and timing of effects.

Why screening is the wrong use

Given these findings, the position taken here is that EI, however measured, should not be used to screen or classify students. There are four reasons. The first is validity at the individual level: with correlations around .20, classification errors would be common. The second is faking and reactivity: self-report EI scales invite socially desirable responding, and the incentives to respond strategically increase once scores carry consequences. The third is stigma. One of the authors of the major meta-analysis has cautioned against widespread testing to identify students low in EI, because labelling them may stigmatise them, and has argued that programmes offered to all students are the better approach (MacCann, quoted in eSchool News, 2020). The fourth is opportunity cost: time spent testing and flagging is time not spent on instruction and support. The alternative is universal, curriculum-embedded provision. Emotional vocabulary, strategies for managing frustration and anxiety, perspective-taking and collaborative problem-solving can be built into subject teaching as well as taught directly. Embedded delivery is more plausible for the mechanisms identified in Section 4, since regulating emotions during a difficult biology problem is learned in the context of the problem. It also has a built-in evaluation: if embedded development works through the proposed mechanisms, it should show effects on achievement in the subjects where emotional demands are high.

An Illustration of Embedded Development

Consider a biology class preparing for a test on ecology. A teacher using embedded development does not stop the lesson to teach a unit on emotions. Instead, the teacher builds three brief practices into existing routines. Before the revision session, students name how they feel about the test and what they predict about their performance, which supports awareness and understanding. During the session, the teacher models a strategy for dealing with a difficult question, such as saying aloud that the question seems hard, reframing it as a puzzle, breaking it into parts and then choosing where to start, which demonstrates regulation. After a practice test, students work in pairs to discuss which errors were due to knowledge gaps and which to rushing or worry, and plan one change for the next time, which links emotion to strategy. Each practice takes minutes, requires no equipment and uses subject content as the vehicle. These elements are what make the approach feasible in schools with large classes and limited resources. The illustration is hypothetical and is offered to make the idea concrete. Its effects on achievement would need to be established empirically, and the research agenda in Section 11 proposes how.

Conditions for Effective Implementation

Evidence from implementation research indicates that programme outcomes depend strongly on the fidelity and quality of delivery (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Four conditions are likely to be critical for embedded development. Teachers need training and time, because the strategies are skills that teachers must themselves have in order to model them. School leaders need to protect the practices from being displaced by examination preparation, which requires explaining that the practices serve examination performance. Assessment systems need to be aligned, so that the practices are not treated as additions to a full curriculum. And the programme needs a feedback mechanism through which teachers can see whether it is working. Where these conditions are absent, the risk is of token implementation, in which a label such as SEL is attached to existing practice without any change in what happens in classrooms.

Measurement for Improvement, Not for Classification

Rejecting individual screening does not mean rejecting measurement. Duckworth and Yeager (2015) argued that measures of personal qualities other than cognitive ability are valuable for research, programme evaluation and formative feedback, but are poorly suited to high-stakes decisions about individuals because of problems with reference bias, faking and unintended consequences. This distinction is the right one for EI. Aggregated, anonymised measures can show a school whether a programme is changing students' emotional skills and climate, and can be compared across years. Used at this level, measurement error that would be intolerable for an individual diagnosis averages out. Fit-for-purpose measurement therefore supports the position: use measures to evaluate programmes and improve practice, and not to label students.

Contextual Validity

The MacCann et al. (2020) meta-analysis drew on studies from 27 countries, but more than three-quarters of the samples came from English-speaking countries. Most EI instruments were developed in Western, English-language settings. Scenario-based ability tests rely on culturally specific ideas of the correct emotional response, and self-report items assume particular norms about emotional expression. Whether such instruments measure the same construct across cultural and linguistic groups is a question of measurement invariance that must be tested rather than assumed. To the extent that the evidence base is dominated by English-speaking and relatively high-income settings, its application to Nigerian classrooms, which differ in class size, resources, language of instruction and cultural norms of emotional display, is an empirical question. Researchers and policy-makers in these contexts should be cautious about importing instruments and intervention packages without piloting, validation and adaptation, and should treat local trials as a contribution to the global evidence base, not merely a replication of it.

Language, Translation and Invariance

For any instrument to be used across groups, evidence is required that it measures the same construct in the same way. Measurement-invariance testing examines whether the factor structure, loadings and intercepts of a scale are equivalent across groups, and conventions for doing and reporting this are well established (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). Without at least partial

scalar invariance, differences in mean scores between groups cannot be interpreted as differences in the underlying trait. In multilingual settings, where instruction may take place in English while students' home languages are Hausa, Gbagyi, Eggon or other languages, the translation of emotion vocabulary raises further problems, since emotion words differ in their range of meaning across languages. A student who understands the school language adequately for classroom purposes may still respond differently to emotionally nuanced scenario items than a first-language speaker.

Representativeness of the Evidence Base

The point about representativeness is part of a wider concern in the behavioural sciences that samples drawn from Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic societies are unrepresentative of humankind and that findings from them often do not generalise (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010). EI research is not exempt. The balance of the evidence suggests that findings on EI and achievement are unlikely to be reversed in other settings, but their magnitude, mechanisms and the usefulness of particular instruments are open questions. A prudent policy stance is to adopt the broad principle of supporting students' emotional skills, while treating specific instruments, cut-off scores and programme scripts developed elsewhere as hypotheses to be tested locally.

Ethics and Equity

Any use of EI in schools raises ethical questions that go beyond statistical validity.

Deficit framing and stigma. Measuring and reporting EI at the individual level invites the interpretation that some students are emotionally deficient. Because emotion norms are shaped by culture, class and gender, students from backgrounds whose norms differ from those embedded in a test may be labelled deficient when they are merely different. The recommendation against individual screening is partly motivated by this risk.

Individualising structural problems. Critics of SEL have argued that programmes can shift attention from structural causes of students' difficulties, such as poverty, unsafe environments and poor teaching, to the supposed need of students to adjust themselves and manage their reactions (Hoffman, 2009). The point deserves weight in settings where schools are under-resourced. A school that asks children to regulate anxiety about examinations without addressing overcrowded classrooms, unclear grading or fee-related disruption would be asking students to compensate for system problems. Embedded development is defensible only as one part of a response that also improves conditions.

Cultural fit and voice. Programmes imported without adaptation can convey the norms of the societies in which they were designed. Communities should have a role in deciding which emotional skills and ways of expressing them are valued, and teachers should be able to adapt activities to local practice. In Keffi and similar settings, that would mean drawing on local proverbs, stories and practices of conflict resolution and not simply translating scripts.

Consent and data. Where emotional data are collected, even in aggregate form, students and parents should be told what is collected and why, and data on emotional states should be treated as sensitive. These obligations are stronger where participants are children.

Objections and Responses

Objection 1: EI is as important as IQ and should be treated that way. Statements of this kind rely on relative-importance figures and on averages across measures. As argued in Section 2, the absolute effect is small and mixed with the effects of personality and ability measures, and it says little about individuals. Valuing emotional skills for their own sake and for wellbeing is a legitimate educational aim, but it does not need to be justified by inflated claims about grades.

Objection 2: Screening would allow early support for students who need it. Early support is desirable, but EI scores are poor screening instruments because of the individual-level error, faking and stigma discussed above. If the aim is to identify students in difficulty, direct indicators such as attendance, wellbeing check-ins, teacher observation and specific measures of anxiety or depression are better suited and more directly actionable.

Objection 3: A small effect is not worth acting on. A small average effect can matter at scale, and universal programmes can be inexpensive per student. The position here does not deny this; it proposes acting through universal development, which tolerates a small effect, and refraining from individual selection, which does not.

Objection 4: The improvements from SEL are inflated because teachers who deliver programmes also rate outcomes. This is a legitimate concern, and the response is methodological. The position taken here rests on evidence that includes academic outcomes, which are less open to this form of bias than teacher-rated behaviour, and it calls for trials that use independent, blinded assessment of achievement. Where studies rely on teacher ratings alone, the reported effects should be viewed with caution.

Objection 5: Rejecting screening leaves vulnerable students unnoticed. The position rejects the use of EI scores as a screening tool, not the identification of students who need help. Schools can and should use the information that is closest to the problem: attendance, behaviour, disclosed worries, teacher concern and validated measures of the specific difficulty. A student who struggles with anxiety is better identified through a specific anxiety measure and a conversation than by a general EI score.

Illustrative Applications

The position can be applied to concrete decisions. Table 2 gives a verdict for common uses of EI in education, with reasons, and the paragraph that follows considers two cases in more detail.

Table 2. Common uses of EI in education and their evidential status

Use	Verdict	Reason
School-wide, curriculum-embedded SEL with evaluation against achievement and wellbeing	Supported	Backed by meta-analytic evidence for universal programmes; aligned with the mechanisms proposed
Teacher professional development on classroom emotional climate and modelling regulation	Supported, with evaluation	Plausible mechanism; implementation depends on teacher skill and time
Aggregate, anonymous measurement of EI or climate to evaluate programmes	Acceptable	Fit-for-purpose; error averages out at group level

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Use	Verdict	Reason
EI testing to identify individual students for remedial or special support	Not supported	Individual-level error, faking, stigma; better indicators exist
Use of EI scores in admission, streaming or grading	Not acceptable	Modest and context-dependent association; high stakes; unvalidated across groups
Use of EI instruments from other cultures without local validation	Not acceptable without validation	Measurement invariance unknown; risk of misclassification

Case A. A state ministry proposes to administer an EI questionnaire to all SS2 students and to place those with low scores in a counselling programme. The position implies that the proposal should be declined in this form. An instrument that has not been validated in the local language and context would misclassify many students, the label would stigmatise those selected, and the scores would be of limited help in deciding who needs support. A better proposal is to provide a brief, universal emotion-regulation component in all SS2 classes, to train counsellors to respond to disclosed difficulties, and to collect anonymous school-level data to monitor change.

Case B. A university proposes to include a measure of EI in its admission procedure on the ground that it predicts academic performance. The position implies a firm refusal. The association is small, depends on the instrument and subject, and is partly explained by traits already captured by other selection criteria. The use of a self-report measure in a high-stakes setting would invite faking, and the consequences of misclassification for applicants would be serious.

A Research Agenda

The position implies five priorities for research.

1. **Longitudinal and cross-lagged designs** that estimate how EI and achievement influence each other over time, using repeated measurement and adequate controls for personality, intelligence and prior attainment.
2. **Measurement invariance studies** that test whether the main EI instruments function equivalently across languages, cultures, genders and age groups, with a particular need for data from sub-Saharan Africa.
3. **Pre-registered randomised trials** of embedded SEL and EI-development programmes with achievement, not only EI scores, as the primary outcome, and with follow-up beyond the immediate post-test.
4. **Mediation tests** of the three proposed mechanisms (emotion regulation, relationships and content overlap), so that programmes can be designed around what works.
5. **Implementation research** on teacher training, fidelity and sustainability in under-resourced schools, since the effects of programmes depend heavily on delivery.

The five priorities above can be made more specific. For longitudinal studies, at least three measurement waves are needed to estimate cross-lagged effects with some confidence, using ability-based EI where possible, independent measures of achievement such as external examination results, and controls for personality, general ability and socioeconomic background.

For trials, the unit of randomisation should be the school or class to avoid contamination, with enough clusters to give adequate power given the clustering of students within classes, and the primary outcome should be specified in advance. For invariance work, instruments should be tested across language groups and school types with sufficient sample sizes to evaluate configural, metric and scalar invariance, with results reported openly even when invariance fails. Because the field has suffered from inconsistent reporting, I propose a minimum reporting standard for studies of EI and achievement: (a) a statement of which stream of EI is measured and with what instrument; (b) the source and timing of the achievement measure; (c) the covariates included, and in particular personality and cognitive ability; (d) evidence of reliability and, where relevant, invariance in the study population; (e) a pre-registered analysis plan or a declaration that none exists; and (f) a discussion of causal inference that states the limits of the design. Adopting such a standard would make the literature easier to synthesise and would reduce the over-interpretation of single studies.

Implications for Practice and Policy

1. School leaders should adopt universal, curriculum-embedded SEL rather than EI testing, and evaluate it against local achievement and wellbeing outcomes.
2. Teacher education should include practical training in classroom emotion regulation, supportive relationships and the integration of emotional skills into subject lessons.
3. Education ministries and researchers should discourage high-stakes uses of EI scores, including selection, streaming and grading.
4. Funders should support local validation and trial work in underrepresented regions rather than assuming transferability of findings.

Two further implications follow for researchers and for universities that train teachers. Researchers should avoid language that implies causation from correlational designs, for example by stating that EI ‘improves’ or ‘drives’ achievement, and should be explicit about what their instruments measure. Teacher-education programmes should prepare student teachers to deliver embedded practices and to evaluate them, and should treat emotional skills as professional competences of the teacher as well as outcomes for pupils, since teachers who can regulate their own emotions are better placed to model the skills they hope students will acquire. Finally, communication with students and parents matters. Where a school introduces social and emotional learning, it should explain in plain language what will be done, why and how success will be judged, and should invite questions and objections. Presenting emotional skills as part of learning, comparable to study skills, is more likely to be accepted than presenting them as a treatment for deficiency. Families also hold knowledge about how emotions are expressed and managed in the community, and listening to it makes programmes more likely to fit and to be trusted.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed here supports a measured conclusion. Emotional intelligence is reliably, but modestly, associated with academic achievement, and the association is stronger for ability

measures and in some subjects than in others. The evidence does not show that raising EI raises achievement, it leaves open the contribution of overlapping traits, and it comes mostly from settings that differ from many of the places where it is now applied. These limits do not make emotional skills unimportant. They point to a particular use: universal, embedded development of social and emotional competencies, assessed by what happens to students' learning and wellbeing, and not the measurement and sorting of students by an EI score.

The position defended in this paper is deliberately modest in its claims and firm in its recommendations. It accepts that students' emotional skills are related to how well they do in school, and it declines to turn that association into a tool for judging individuals. It asks policy-makers to invest in the conditions in which emotional skills are developed for everyone, to evaluate such investments against students' learning, and to test imported instruments and programmes in the settings in which they will be used. If subsequent evidence shows stronger causal effects, better measures or reliable individual-level prediction, the position should be revised. Until then, the evidence supports development for all and screening for none.

Limitations of This Analysis

This paper has limitations that readers should bear in mind. It is a position paper and not a systematic review, so the selection of sources reflects the judgement of the author, and although the principal meta-analyses were used, other relevant studies may support different readings. It relies heavily on a single large synthesis for its quantitative claims, and any weaknesses in that synthesis carry over. The literatures on EI, SEL and achievement emotions use different terminologies and are not always easily integrated, and the framework offered in Section 5 is a proposal to be tested and not an established model. Finally, the evidence is changing, and new trials and syntheses may alter the picture. The position should be regarded as a reasoned response to the evidence available at the time of writing, which the author would revise in response to better evidence.

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