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Case study analysis of emotional competency and academic performance in children with specific learning disabilities

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance through detailed case studies of children with specific learning disabilities (SLD). By examining individual cases, the research aims to uncover how specific emotional skills affect learning outcomes. The case studies highlight the experiences of children with different types of SLD, providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges and successes in their academic journeys. The findings offer valuable insights for educators and parents on supporting emotional and academic development. Additionally, the research delves into the strategies and interventions that have been effective in enhancing emotional competency and improving academic performance in children with SLD. By identifying best practices, this study aims to inform future interventions and support systems for children with specific learning disabilities.

Keywords: Emotional competency, academic performance, specific learning disabilities, case study, emotional skills, educational support

Introduction

Specific learning disabilities (SLD) encompass a range of disorders that affect the ability to acquire and use academic skills, including reading, writing, and mathematics. These disabilities are intrinsic to the individual and often manifest in significant academic underachievement despite adequate intelligence and educational opportunities (Lyon *et al.*, 2001; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) ^[16, 1]. The prevalence of SLD is estimated to be about 5-15% among school-aged children, making it a critical area of focus for educators and researchers (Lyon GR *et al.*, 2001) ^[16]. Early identification and intervention are crucial in supporting individuals with SLD to reach their full potential and succeed academically. It is important for educators to be knowledgeable about the characteristics of SLD and implement evidence-based interventions to address the specific needs of these students.

Children with SLD often face unique emotional and academic challenges. Emotional competency, which includes skills such as self-regulation, motivation, and social skills, plays a crucial role in their academic success. Emotional competency enables children to manage their

emotions, stay motivated, and interact positively with peers and teachers, which can mitigate the impact of their learning disabilities on academic performance (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) ^[10, 17]. Implementing evidence-based interventions that focus on developing emotional competency can help children with SLD overcome these challenges and succeed academically. By addressing both their academic and emotional needs, educators can create a supportive environment that maximizes the potential of students with SLD.

Purpose of the Case Study Approach

The case study approach is particularly suited for exploring complex phenomena within their real-life context. By examining individual cases of children with SLD, this research aims to provide a detailed understanding of how emotional competency influences academic performance. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the interplay between emotional skills and learning outcomes, highlighting the specific challenges and successes experienced by children with different types of SLD.

Research Questions

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do specific emotional competencies affect the academic performance of children with SLD?
2. What are the common emotional and academic challenges faced by children with SLD?
3. How can educators and parents support the development of emotional competency to enhance academic outcomes for children with SLD?

Literature Review

Emotional competency and academic performance

Emotional competency, often referred to as emotional intelligence, encompasses the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) ^[10, 17]. It is a critical component of social functioning and has been increasingly recognized for its influence on academic performance, particularly in children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) (Parker *et al.* 2004; Zins *et al.* 2004) ^[18, 26].

Self-regulation and academic outcomes

Self-regulation, a subset of emotional competency, involves managing one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in pursuit of long-term goals (Zimmerman, 2002) ^[25]. Numerous studies have established a strong link between self-regulation and academic performance. For instance, Smith *et al.* (2015) ^[21] found that children with higher self-regulation skills performed better in reading and mathematics. This is because self-regulation enables children to focus on tasks, control impulses, and persist through challenges, which are essential for successful learning (Blair & Diamond, 2008) ^[2].

Furthermore, Blair and Raver (2015) ^[3] highlighted the role of self-regulation in school readiness and academic achievement, noting that children who can regulate their emotions and behaviours are more likely to succeed academically. Eisenberg *et al.* (2004) ^[8] also emphasized the importance of self-regulation, suggesting that it contributes to academic success by promoting positive classroom behaviour and effective learning strategies.

Motivation and learning disabilities

Motivation, another critical aspect of emotional competency, is the internal drive to achieve goals and persist in the face of obstacles (Ryan & Deci, 2000) ^[20]. Research indicates that motivation significantly influences academic performance in children with SLD. Brown and Johnson (2016) ^[4] reported that motivation was positively correlated with academic success, particularly in writing and overall GPA. They suggested that motivated students are more likely to engage in learning activities, persevere despite difficulties, and achieve higher academic outcomes. Additionally, Deci and Ryan (2008) ^[5] proposed that intrinsic motivation, driven by personal interest and enjoyment of the task, is particularly beneficial for learning. They argued that fostering intrinsic motivation in children with SLD can enhance their engagement and academic performance. This view is supported by studies showing that intrinsic motivation is associated with higher academic achievement and better learning outcomes (Gottfried, 1990) ^[11].

Social skills and academic engagement

Social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution, are essential for positive interactions with peers and teachers, which in turn contribute to a supportive learning environment (Wentzel, 1991) ^[24]. For children with SLD, social competence is particularly important as it can mitigate the negative effects of their disabilities on academic performance. Lee *et al.* (2017) ^[15] demonstrated that social skills improved classroom engagement and test scores, highlighting the importance of social competence in academic success for children with SLD.

Furthermore, research by Elias and Haynes (2008) ^[9] suggested that social-emotional learning programs that enhance social skills can lead to improved academic outcomes. These programs teach children how to manage their emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions, thereby creating a conducive environment for learning (Durlak *et al.*, 2011) ^[7].

Emotional regulation and academic resilience

Emotional regulation, the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences appropriately, is linked to better academic outcomes (Gross, 2002) ^[14]. Children who can regulate their emotions are better equipped to cope with stress, stay focused on their studies, and maintain positive relationships with peers and teachers (Thompson, 1994) ^[22]. Green and Thompson (2018) ^[12] found that emotional awareness and self-regulation enhanced academic resilience and grades, suggesting that emotional regulation is a crucial competency for children with SLD.

Additionally, studies have shown that emotional regulation skills are associated with fewer behavioural problems and better classroom behaviour, which in turn positively impact academic performance (Raver, 2004; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007) ^[19, 23]. Blair and Razza (2008) ^[2] emphasized that children who can effectively regulate their emotions are more likely to engage in learning activities and achieve academic success.

Impact of emotional competency on academic performance

The reviewed studies consistently show that higher levels of emotional competency are associated with better academic performance in children with SLD. This relationship is evident across various academic domains, including reading, writing, mathematics, and overall GPA. Emotional competencies help children with SLD navigate the academic challenges they face, leading to improved outcomes (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Durlak *et al.*, 2011) ^[6, 7].

For example, Durlak *et al.* (2011) ^[7] conducted a meta-analysis of school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and found that these programs significantly improved students' social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance. The authors concluded that SEL programs that promote emotional competency can enhance academic success by creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Gaps in the current research

Despite the growing body of evidence on the importance of emotional competency for academic performance in

children with SLD, several gaps remain in the current research. First, most studies have focused on short-term outcomes, and there is a need for longitudinal research to examine the long-term effects of emotional competency on academic performance (Parker *et al.*, 2004) ^[18]. Second, intervention studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to enhance emotional competency in children with SLD (Zins *et al.*, 2004) ^[26]. Third, more research is needed to explore the role of emotional competency in different cultural and educational contexts to generalise findings (Greenberg *et al.*, 2003) ^[13].

Recommendations for future research

Future research should address these gaps by conducting longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of emotional competency on academic performance. Additionally, intervention studies should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to enhance emotional competency in children with SLD. Finally, researchers should explore the role of emotional competency in different cultural and educational contexts to ensure the generalizability of findings (Parker *et al.*, 2004; Zins *et al.*, 2004) ^[18, 26].

Materials and Methods

Case Selection Criteria

The case studies were selected based on the following criteria: (1) children diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, (2) children between the ages of 8 and 12, (3) children enrolled in mainstream educational settings, and (4) children who consented to participate in the study along with their parents. This selection criteria ensured a diverse representation of children with different types of SLD and varying levels of emotional competency and academic performance.

Data collection Methods

Data were collected through a combination of interviews, observations, and assessments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the children, their parents, and their teachers to gather detailed information about their emotional and academic experiences. Observations were conducted in classroom settings to capture real-time data on the children's emotional behaviours and interactions with peers and teachers. Standardised assessments were used to evaluate the children's emotional competency and academic performance.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns across the case studies. Thematic analysis involved coding the data, categorising the codes into themes, and interpreting the themes to answer the research questions. The analysis focused on understanding how specific emotional competencies influenced academic performance and identifying the common emotional and academic challenges faced by children with SLD.

Case Studies

Detailed Description of Each Case

Case 1: Aditi

Aditi, a 10-year-old girl, was diagnosed with dyslexia. Despite her average intelligence, Aditi struggled with reading and writing tasks. Interviews with Aditi's parents and teachers revealed that she often became frustrated and disengaged during literacy activities. Observations showed that Aditi exhibited poor self-regulation, frequently giving up on tasks and displaying disruptive behaviour. Assessments indicated low levels of emotional regulation and motivation. Despite these challenges, Aditi demonstrated strong social skills, making her well-liked by her peers. Aditi's academic performance in subjects requiring extensive reading and writing was below average, but she excelled in hands-on and visual-spatial tasks.

Case 2: Rohan

Rohan, an 8-year-old boy with dyscalculia, had significant difficulties with mathematical concepts. Rohan's parents reported that he often felt anxious and overwhelmed by math tasks. Teachers noted that Rohan displayed avoidance behaviours, such as procrastination and reluctance to participate in math lessons. Observations highlighted Rohan's lack of self-confidence and high levels of anxiety. However, Rohan showed a strong intrinsic motivation for subjects he enjoyed, such as science and physical education. His emotional regulation skills were moderate, allowing him to manage stress in non-academic contexts. Despite his struggles with math, Rohan's overall academic performance was satisfactory, with strengths in verbal and physical activities.

Case 3: Priya

Priya, a 12-year-old girl, was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and a specific learning disability in reading comprehension. Priya's impulsivity and hyperactivity affected her ability to concentrate on reading tasks. Interviews with Priya's parents and teachers revealed that she had difficulty staying focused and often disrupted the classroom environment. Observations showed that Priya had low self-regulation and emotional awareness, frequently acting out when frustrated. However, Priya exhibited high levels of motivation in hands-on activities and art, where she excelled and received positive reinforcement. Her academic performance in reading and writing was poor, but she performed well in creative and practical subjects.

Emotional Competencies Observed

Self-Regulation

The ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviours was found to be a critical factor influencing academic performance across all cases. For example, Aditi's poor self-regulation led to frustration and disengagement, significantly impacting her performance in literacy tasks. Similarly, Priya's low self-regulation contributed to her inability to stay focused, resulting in poor academic

outcomes in reading comprehension. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of self-regulation for academic success (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2004)^[2, 8].

Motivation

Motivation emerged as another key emotional competency affecting academic performance. Rohan's intrinsic motivation for science and physical education helped him excel in these subjects despite his difficulties with math. Priya's motivation in creative activities also contributed to her success in art and hands-on tasks. These cases support the notion that fostering motivation in children with SLD can enhance their engagement and academic performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gottfried, 1990)^[5, 11].

Social Skills

Strong social skills were observed in Aditi, who was well-liked by her peers despite her academic struggles. Social competence helped Aditi maintain positive relationships, which could potentially provide emotional support and mitigate the negative effects of her learning disability on academic performance. This aligns with research indicating that social skills contribute to a supportive learning environment and academic success (Lee *et al.*, 2017; Wentzel, 1991)^[15, 24].

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation varied across the cases, with significant implications for academic performance. Aditi and Priya, who exhibited low emotional regulation, struggled more with academic tasks, particularly those requiring sustained attention and effort. In contrast, Rohan's moderate emotional regulation skills allowed him to manage stress in non-academic contexts, though his anxiety still impacted his math performance. These observations highlight the critical role of emotional regulation in coping with academic challenges and achieving better outcomes (Gross, 2002; Thompson, 1994)^[14, 22].

Academic Performance Outcomes

The academic performance of the children in the case studies varied based on their emotional competencies. Aditi's strengths in social skills did not compensate for her poor self-regulation and low motivation, leading to underperformance in literacy tasks. Rohan's intrinsic motivation helped him excel in subjects he enjoyed, though his anxiety hindered his performance in math. Priya's impulsivity and low self-regulation resulted in poor outcomes in reading comprehension, but her motivation in creative tasks led to success in art. These findings underscore the complex interplay between emotional competencies and academic performance in children with SLD (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005)^[7, 6].

Discussion

Cross-Case Analysis

The cross-case analysis revealed several common themes and differences. All three children faced challenges with specific academic tasks related to their learning disabilities, such as reading for Aditi and Priya, and math for Rohan.

Emotional competencies such as self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation played significant roles in their academic performance. Children with higher levels of these competencies tended to perform better academically, even in the presence of learning disabilities.

Common themes and differences

A common theme across the cases was the impact of self-regulation on academic performance. Children with poor self-regulation, like Aditi and Priya, struggled more with academic tasks, leading to frustration and disengagement. In contrast, motivation emerged as a critical factor that could compensate for some of the challenges posed by learning disabilities. Rohan and Priya, who had high motivation in specific areas, showed better performance in those subjects despite their overall academic difficulties.

Another theme was the role of social skills in providing emotional support. Aditi's strong social skills helped her maintain positive relationships, which could buffer the negative effects of her academic struggles. However, emotional regulation appeared to be a more significant predictor of academic success, as children who could manage their emotions effectively were better equipped to cope with academic challenges.

Implications for education and intervention

The findings from these case studies have important implications for education and intervention. Enhancing emotional competencies such as self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation should be a key component of interventions for children with SLD. Educators should implement programs that focus on developing these skills to support the academic success of children with SLD. For instance, social-emotional learning programs that teach self-regulation and emotional regulation can help children manage their emotions and behaviours, leading to better academic outcomes (Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Durlak *et al.*, 2011)^[13, 7].

Parents also play a crucial role in supporting the development of emotional competencies in their children. Encouraging positive social interactions, providing opportunities for children to engage in activities they are motivated by, and teaching effective emotional regulation strategies can help children with SLD succeed academically. Collaboration between educators and parents is essential to create a supportive environment that fosters emotional and academic development.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This study explored the relationship between emotional competency and academic performance through detailed case studies of children with specific learning disabilities. The findings revealed that emotional competencies such as self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation significantly influence academic performance. Children with higher levels of these competencies tended to perform better academically, even in the presence of learning disabilities. The case studies highlighted the complex interplay between emotional skills and learning outcomes, providing valuable insights for educators and parents on supporting emotional and academic development.

Recommendations for practitioners

Practitioners should focus on enhancing emotional competencies in children with SLD to support their academic success. Implementing social-emotional learning programs that teach self-regulation, motivation, social skills, and emotional regulation can help children manage their emotions and behaviours, leading to better academic outcomes. Collaboration between educators and parents is essential to create a supportive environment that fosters emotional and academic development.

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