

Article

Socio-Emotional Skills as Predictors of Performance of Students: Differences by Gender

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Abstract: Socio-emotional skills seem to have an important influence on the academic performance of students. This performance is usually higher in girls than in boys. Our aim was to determine which socio-emotional skills influence academic performance and whether gender is a variable that can explain these differences. The results indicated that the socio-emotional skills of adolescents were high, highlighting self-awareness, relationship management, and decision-making. The lowest scores were in social awareness and self-management. Girls obtained higher grades, and students with higher grades had a higher level of social-emotional skills, except in self-management, where there were no differences. Self-management was greater in boys and relationship management was greater in girls. Students who failed did not differ from those who obtained very high results, except in decision-making. Overall, decision-making appeared to be the most important variable in students' academic performance. Therefore, it would be necessary to design strategies that promote this ability in students. Hence, the adoption of active and collaborative methodologies that facilitate the achievement of this goal is suggested.

Keywords: socio-emotional skills; academic performance; school



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1. Introduction

Academic performance (AP) is usually understood as the achievement of students in the construction of new knowledge [1,2]. The relationship between cognitive factors and AR has already been extensively analyzed [3]. We must remember that AR is usually conceptualized from its evaluation; therefore, it is necessary to consider not only the individual performance of the student but also the influence of their group of friends, family, or the educational context and their interactions [4–6]. Padua Rodríguez [7] highlighted that individual and family factors influence RA, such as parental autonomy, parental imposition, mastery, work, study strategies, attitudes toward study, academic self-concept, or spiritual beliefs. In addition, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these relationships may have changed since students have fewer social relationships.

It is common for studies to identify emotional intelligence and emotional competencies, although Fragozo-Luzuriaga [8] marked some differences based on the different models of each construct. Currently, there is already important scientific evidence of the impact of socio-emotional skills or emotional intelligence on academic performance [9–20].

However, given the variety of socio-emotional skills, we feel that it is necessary to explore those that may have a stronger relationship with academic tasks. In this case, when we mention socio-emotional skills, we refer to a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that

serves to understand and manage emotions, make decisions, achieve goals and maintain healthy relationships, and feeling and showing empathy for others [21–23]. Therefore, we define these as a group of skills that facilitate the control of one's own emotions and feelings in relation to others [24]. Low-performing students have difficulty in these social and emotional behaviors [25]. However, these skills are not only associated with academic performance, but also with success in life; hence, it is important to detect these deficiencies from an early age [26,27].

Our research interest focused on determining which socio-emotional skills are most related to AP and determining if there are differences based on gender; Ambiel, Pereira and Moreira [26] indicated perseverance, collaboration and responsibility. In our study, we analyzed a set of variables that are considered necessary to adopt socially positive behaviors: self-awareness (the ability to look within oneself, concern for oneself and for how others perceive our appearance or actions), social awareness (the ability to become aware of the needs and problems of people in our family and social environment), self-management (the ability to manage autonomously), relationship management (the ability to maintain good relationships with others and use mechanisms or techniques that allow for obtaining and maintaining good relationships), and decision making (the process through which a choice is made between different options responsibly, analyzing the situation and evaluating the different options) [21,22]. According to Coneus and Laucht [28], the acquisition of these skills at an early age may increase the possibility of academic performance success.

Different studies have already revealed the influence of self-awareness [29], self-reflection [30], and decision-making [31] in academic performance.

In addition, we considered how gender could constitute an intervening variable, as boys tend to achieve higher scores in self-management [32–34] and girls in interpersonal skills [35,36]. However, there are also studies that concluded that there are no differences with respect to gender in socio-emotional skills [37,38].

A pandemic situation like the one we are experiencing can make it difficult to introduce collaborative activities in the classroom that allow for the consolidation of socio-emotional skills. Therefore, it is important to know what mastery of these skills is. Based on previous studies, we considered the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. *Academic performance is mediated by students' socio-emotional abilities.*

Hypothesis 2. *The socio-emotional variables that explain academic performance are different depending on gender.*

2. Materials and Methods

The study design was observational, cross-sectional, and descriptive-correlational; we used non-probabilistic and convenience sampling.

2.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 964 students, 48.3% (466) boys and 51.7% (498) girls between 11 and 18 years old ($\bar{x} = 14.18$) attending compulsory secondary education in 16 different schools located in different settings: urban (cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants), semi-urban (cities with a number of citizens between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants), and rural (cities with less than 10,000 inhabitants). The study was carried out in the Autonomous Community of Galicia (Spain). The study was carried out during home confinement, imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over a period of three weeks, teaching was online. When face-to-face classes started again, collaborative work was avoided to maintain a safe distance.

2.2. Instruments

The following measures were used for data collection:

1. General data sheet: Data on gender, age, academic year and average grade in the last completed year were recorded. This rating was grouped into fail (score < 5), pass (score between 5.1 and 6.9), merit (score between 7 and 9), and distinction (score > 9) categories to facilitate some statistical calculations.
2. Self-reporting socio-emotional skills: The Social Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ) by Zhou and Ee [39] was used, following the guidelines of Casel [21,22] which was already validated in other populations in Eastern countries and Asia [32,38], Spain [40], and other European countries [41]. The instrument includes five described domains organized into 25 items on a Likert type scale from 1 to 6, where 1 means totally disagree with the proposed statement and 6 means totally agree with the proposed statement. The factors on the scale are as follows: self-awareness; social conscience; self-management; relationship management; responsible decision making.

2.3. Procedure

The students completed the instrument after authorization from the directors of the educational centers to carry out the study in their centers during physical education classes. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous and all the ethical procedures for data collection were respected, following the deontological standards recognized by the Declaration of Helsinki (revision of Fortaleza, Brazil, 2013) and in accordance with the recommendations of Good Clinical Practice of the EEC (document 111/3976/88 of July 1990) and the current Spanish legal regulations on research, as well as the AERA standards.

2.4. Statistical Data Analysis

First, the mean and standard deviation of the factors that comprise the social-emotional skills scale for both genders and the total were calculated. In order to verify the parametric assumption of normality, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test ($p > 0.05$) was used. Levene's test also confirmed the homogeneity of the variances ($p > 0.05$). In turn, procedures were carried out to detect missing values and outliers. Independent sample comparisons were carried out using Pearson's chi-square for categorical data, Student's *t*-test, and ANOVA for quantitative data, depending on whether the variables were dichotomous or polytomous. Subsequently, Tukey's was calculated to determine in which groups there were differences. Finally, Pearson's bivariate correlations were calculated to establish the relationships between the different constructs, and the influence of socio-emotional variables on academic performance for each gender was determined through the regression model [42]. The statistical analyses were carried out with the statistical program SPSS v. 23 (IBM Corp., 2012; Chicago, IL, USA). The level of significance for all analyses was $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

3. Results

The socio-emotional skills of adolescents was high ($\bar{x} = 4.02$), highlighting self-awareness first ($\bar{x} = 4.47$), relationship management second ($\bar{x} = 4.42$), decision-making third ($\bar{x} = 4.06$), social awareness fourth ($\bar{x} = 3.77$), and self-management last ($\bar{x} = 3.38$). Analyzing the differences between gender and socio-emotional skills, we found no differences, except in self-management and relationship management, where the former was greater in boys and the latter in girls (Table 1).

The confidence interval indicated that the range of values of the mean socio-emotional competence (SECQ) was very close for both boys and girls (95% CI: boys, 3.93–4.12; girls, 3.84–4.06).

We investigated if there were differences with respect to academic performance based on the different socio-emotional skills described in the theoretical framework.

Table 1. Results of the association between gender and different socio-emotional skills.

	Gender	N	Mean	SD ¹	t	Sig. (Bilateral)
SECQ	boy	466	4.0455	0.75116	0.832	0.406
	girl	498	4.0069	0.6886		
Self-awareness	boy	466	4.4811	0.8387	0.214	0.831
	girl	498	4.4703	0.7334		
Social awareness	boy	466	3.7601	0.9179	−0.538	0.591
	girl	498	3.7912	0.8762		
Self-management	boy	466	3.6258	1.1033	6.604	0.0001
	girl	498	3.1558	1.1047		
Management relations	boy	466	4.2815	0.9647	−4.928	0.0001
	girl	498	4.5679	0.8378		
Decision making	boy	466	4.0790	0.9660	0.455	0.649
	girl	498	4.0494	1.0468		

¹ SD = standard deviation

As we can see, there were differences between the social skills of students based on their academic performance, especially between those that passed and those with higher grades (Table 2). The higher the score, the higher the score in social skills. Interestingly, there were no differences between those that failed and those that acquired the highest grade of distinction, except in decision making, which indicated that students with worse grades did not have worse self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, or relationship management than those with better grades but lacked decision-making skills. This ability seems to stand out as fundamental as there were also significant differences with respect to the other groups, with no difference between them.

Table 2. Differences in socio-emotional skills based on academic performance.

		N	Mean	SD ¹	Min.	Max.	F	Sig.	Tuckey
SECQ	Fail	27	3.88	0.636	2.72	5.48	10.38	0.0001	Pass–Distinc. = 0.0001 Merit–Distinc. = 0.007
	Pass	333	3.79	0.713	1.00	5.96			
	Merit	259	3.99	0.706	1.76	6.00			
	Distinction	345	4.18	0.712	2.32	6.00			
Self-Awareness	Fail	27	4.46	0.697	3.40	5.80	6.142	0.0001	Pass–Distinc. = 0.0001
	Pass	333	4.35	0.819	1.00	6.00			
	Merit	259	4.46	0.748	1.60	6.00			
	Distinction	345	4.60	0.768	2.20	6.00			
Social Awareness	Fail	27	3.51	1.024	2.00	5.60	5.802	0.001	Pass–Distinc. = 0.001
	Pass	333	3.45	0.910	1.00	6.00			
	Merit	259	3.76	0.871	1.20	6.00			
	Distinction	345	3.92	0.872	1.40	6.00			
Self-Management	Fail	27	3.26	1.102	1.60	6.00	2.311	0.075	No differences
	Pass	333	3.19	1.096	1.00	6.00			
	Merit	259	3.35	1.064	1.00	6.00			
	Distinction	345	3.51	1.199	1.00	6.00			
Management Relations	Fail	27	4.43	0.794	2.80	5.80	6.413	0.0001	Pass–Distinc. = 0.0001
	Pass	333	4.28	0.933	1.00	6.00			
	Merit	259	4.42	0.937	1.00	6.00			
	Distinction	345	4.58	0.858	1.80	6.00			
Decision Making	Fail	27	3.74	0.785	2.40	5.20	12.61	0.0001	Fail–Distinc. = 0.021 Pass–Distinc. = 0.0001 Merit–Distinc. = 0.0001
	Pass	333	3.88	1.022	1.00	6.00			
	Merit	259	3.98	1.00	1.00	6.00			
	Distinction	345	4.31	0.953	1.80	6.00			

¹ SD = standard deviation.

Observing the minimum scores, we verified that the suspended students had higher minimum scores than the other groups in all skills.

Through Tukey's test, we verified that the groups whose means did not differ from each other were grouped in the same subset (failed, passed, and merit), while those that did differ formed different subsets (merit and distinction).

We analyzed if there were differences with respect to academic performance between female and male students. As shown in Table 3, the percentage of girls with the highest grades was significantly higher than that of boys (p -value = 0.019 < 0.05). Specifically, 31.1% of boys acquired an outstanding grade, but this percentage was 40.2% in girls; the percentage of boys who failed (3.4%) was also higher than girls (2.2%).

Table 3. Results of the association between gender and academic performance.

Pearson's Chi-Square; 10,002; $p = 0.019$			Academic Performance				Total
			Failure	Passed	Merit	Distinction	
Gender	Boy	Count	16	177	128	145	466
		% Gender	3.4%	38.0%	27.5%	31.1%	100.0%
		% AP ¹	59.3%	53.2%	49.4%	42.0%	48.3%
	Girl	Count	11	156	131	200	498
		% Gender	2.2%	31.3%	26.3%	40.2%	100.0%
		% AP ¹	40.7%	46.8%	50.6%	58.0%	51.7%
Total	Count	27	333	259	345	964	
	% Gender	2.8%	34.5%	26.9%	35.8%	100.0%	
	% AP ¹	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

¹ AP: academic performance.

To check whether socio-emotional competence intervened in a different way in the academic performance of boys and girls, a regression analysis was carried out; this eliminated the SECQ variable to avoid collinearity and introduced in the model the skills that were significant in the association statistics for both genders. Table 4 shows that the Durbin-Watson statistic verified the independence of the errors, since 1868 and 1164 were between 1.5 and 2.5. The model defined on academic performance explained only 4% of the variance of the dependent variable for girls and only 2.3% for boys. It showed that the variable that influenced performance was decision-making in both sees.

Table 4. Linear regression results for boys and girls.

	Sign Expected	Coefficient of Model	Model for Girls			Model for Boys			
			B	t	Sig.	B	t	Sig.	
(Constant)		6.359		18.803	0.0001 **	5.875		18.242	0.0001 **
SM	+	0.023	0.018	0.368	0.713	0.031	0.024	0.432	0.665
MR	+	-0.089	-0.054	-0.992	0.322	0.058	0.040	0.695	0.487
DM	+	0.302	0.232	4.097	0.0001 **	0.185	0.127	2.011	0.035 *
R ²			0.045			0.029			
Adjusted R ²			0.040			0.023			
Adjusted Durbin-Watson			1.641			1.868			
N			498			466			

*, ** $p < 0.05$, 0.01 Dependent variable: AP; SM = self-management; MR = management relations; DM = decision making.

All socio-emotional skills were related to each other in a meaningful way. The skill that was most closely related to socio-emotional competence was decision-making. The lowest correlation occurred between self-management and relationship management (Table 5).

Table 5. Correlations between the different factors of the scale, N = 964.

		SECQ	Self-Awareness	Social Awareness	Self-Management	Management Relations
Self-Awareness	r	0.746	1			
	Sig.	0.0001				
Social Awareness	r	0.729	0.441	1		
	Sig.	0.0001	0.0001			
Self-Management	r	0.738	0.425	0.395	1	
	Sig.	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001		
Management relations	r	0.755	0.497	0.471	0.366	1
	Sig.	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	
Decision Making	r	0.830	0.563	0.500	0.501	0.574
	Sig.	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001

4. Discussion

Some authors think that socio-emotional variables are more relevant than cognitive skills for both school success and life success [26,27,43,44]. During the confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, these variables seem to be even more relevant as students have acquired social skills that allow them to interact with their peers through digital technologies.

The analysis of the results confirmed H1, given that academic performance was mediated by the socio-emotional abilities of the students, fundamentally by decision-making. Other authors confirmed this result [5,11,14,25,28,45–48]. Therefore, as stated by Sánchez [49], we confirmed that the role emotions play in an educational context is fundamental.

We also confirmed that women present better academic performance [11,50]. This may be due, as the OECD [51] stated, to girls tending to score higher than boys in reading, while boys tend to obtain better scores in mathematics and science. Balart and Oosterveen [52] reached similar results, and added that when longer cognitive tests are carried out, the gender gap in mathematics and science is reduced. They also perform some of the tactics of the acquisition and treatment of information with greater success [53].

In this study, there were no differences in socio-emotional competencies based on gender, except in self-management, which was greater in boys, and relationship management, which was greater in girls. There is controversy on this issue, as some studies found that no differences, whereas others did. However, it seems clear that boys tend to better manage their emotions [33,34] but girls tend to manage them and perceive and understand them better [32,39,54]. This management can also be influenced by their interpersonal skills, which are usually higher [55]. It is important to remember that, up to now, the education of girls during childhood is usually more focused on managing emotions than that of boys [56]. However, although girls perceive and understand emotions better than their peers, they present greater emotional problems [54].

In the study by Heras, Cepa, and Lara [48], women obtained higher scores in emotional and social competencies. In this case, these differences could be explained by the greater social acceptance of expressiveness traits in women [57]. Social behaviors can be determined by people's gender orientation, environmental influences, and cultural patterns [58]. Therefore, the male role could be linked to instrumentality, the expression of negative feelings, and assertiveness; the female role would be associated with greater openness and emotional strength, and with social skills linked to the expression of positive feelings, empathy, and acceptance [58–60]. Men behave more actively in the social sphere than women, who are more dependent and conformist [60].

No differences were identified between students who failed and those who acquired the highest grade of distinction, except in their decision-making ability.

Therefore, it appears that students with the lowest grades did not have worse self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, or relationship management than those with better grades, but they lacked decision-making skills.

Regarding H2, which held that gender is a differentiating factor in the model that explains academic performance based on socio-emotional variables, we stated that the model explained only 4% for girls and 2.3% for boys, for which the effect size can be considered low [61].

However, decision-making seemed to be a fundamental factor for student academic performance. To a large extent, it seems that our social-emotional perseverance and decision-making skills are linked fundamentally with the awareness and regulation of our emotions [62,63].

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, students have the basic right to participate in decision-making issues that affect them [64]. The literature reviewed indicates possible areas of student participation, such as the choice of their schools or the design of their rules [65,66].

According to Mati, Gatumu, and Chandi [31], the participation of students in the key decisions of their educational process increases their motivation towards school tasks, as well as their sense of belonging; therefore, there is a greater inclination to comply with established rules, which affects their academic performance.

We must remember that students acquire greater independence in their decisions as they age; however, there is always influence from their group of friends and, according to Loos-Sant'Ana and Trancoso [25], they perceive the expectations of their parents, teachers, and peers as positive and challenging. However, Almanza [47] reported that students have a low perception of their decision-making, which would explain the negative results in the dynamics of coexistence and in academic results.

Based on these conclusions, we confirm the need to maintain collaborative activities during the pandemic situation that allow the mastery and consolidation of socio-emotional skills.

5. Limitations and Educational Implications

We must consider that this study was carried out during a pandemic situation caused by COVID-19. For a more than a year, students have not been able to directly carry out collaborative or teamwork activities and have used digital applications to work with these skills. However, we consider that these skills, once acquired, remain consolidated over time. It must also be taken into account that this study did not have a probabilistic sample; therefore, its representativeness cannot be assured.

Based on the results, it seems important to establish lines of action in current educational policies so that dynamics are promoted that favor student decision-making in relation to personal problems or their immediate environment. Decision making is limited by managing emotions. In turn, both affect academic performance. Therefore, the adoption of active and collaborative methodologies that facilitate the achievement of this goal is important.

Teaching students to make decisions is to teach them to think and be consistent with their principles and values, and they must have adequate guidance for this. Students make better decisions with proper guidance as they must be aware that every decision has consequences and that there are moral and ethical factors that must also be considered. In this pandemic situation, it is even more important that students master this strategy in a way that allows them greater autonomy in learning.

Furthermore, the importance of handling and managing feelings seems to be clear. However, the actions of a young person seem to be determined by what they feel and the circumstances in which they live [67]. Therefore, according to Valenzuela-Santoyo and Portillo-Peñuelas, it is necessary for them to be able to identify their emotions; understand their causes and circumstances, so that they can modify their thoughts and promote their correct development through good decisions; and search for alternatives in solving problems. Healthy coexistence translates into good judgment and conduct, and can prevent decisions from having negative effects.

Along these lines, it would be important to promote the ability to self-manage in girls and the ability to maintain positive and lasting relationships with others in boys to eliminate the gap between both genders in these areas.

A school is expected to consider the interests, needs, and social and behavioral issues of students. Along these lines, Maynard, Solis, Miller, and Brendel [68] stated that schools face increasing challenges to respond to the growing emotional and behavioral needs of their students. Furthermore, socio-emotional development and competencies have been linked to learning and academic achievement, and have become a target of school intervention as a means to improve learning and increase academic achievement [10,69].

It would also be necessary to promote socio-emotional skills in classroom dynamics so that students acquire the ability to recognize, master, and regulate their emotions.

A motivating aspect could be the use of gamification as a tool to increase the skills, knowledge, capacities, abilities, and attitudes necessary to understand, express, and regulate the emotional phenomena of one's own self and those of others in an appropriate way [70].

In addition, digital applications that allow collaborative work should be incorporated.

To verify gender differences more precisely, the gender roles that still persist in the sociocultural context (instrumentality and expressiveness), the socioeconomic level, or the family environment, among other factors, could be taken into account. In addition, qualitative cutting instruments could be used to provide a deeper information and understanding of the differences found.

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