

Toward A Unified Theory of Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem: Educational Implications for Higher Secondary Students

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ABSTRACT

To elucidate the joint educational importance of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Self-Esteem (SE) in the learning process of high secondary learners (ages 15-18), the research hypothesises a combined theoretically consistent model that incorporates the two; EI and Self-esteem. The study is based on a thematic qualitative approach and secondary data analysis of 20 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025 to determine the nature of interaction between EI and SE in influencing academic engagement, academic motivation, and socio-emotional development. The results confirm that there is an active and two-way connexion, as EI promotes emotional clarity, self-regulation, and empathy which in turn contribute to SE; internalised self-worth and confidence. SE, in its turn, moderates the extent to which EI will lead to academic persistence and classroom attendance. Thematic analyses revealed four dimensions: (1) the interdependence of EI and SE underpins, (2) mediation of SE in academic achievements, (3) implementation of interventions targeted at achieving a particular outcome (VR-based learning, experiential therapy, and art-based translation of SEL programmes), and (4) appearance of Convergence Model of Educational Functioning. According to this model, the inputs such as EI take over as the cognitive-fifth factor, the mediator of performance such as SE, the academic activity as an output and school climate as an environment interactions. These outcomes reinforce the requirement of dual-track interventions and institutionalisation of the emotionally inclusive education policy to foster cognition and affectionate developments among adolescents.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Self-Esteem, Academic Engagement, Thematic Analysis, Secondary Education, Educational Psychology, SEL Interventions, Convergence Model.

INTRODUCTION:

The intersection of emotional intelligence (EI) and self-esteem (SE) represents a rapidly growing area in educational psychology, particularly considering increasing concerns over student well-being, academic disengagement, and psychological resilience. EI refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively, while SE encompasses an individual's overall sense of self-worth. Adolescents navigating higher secondary education face identity development, social pressure, and emotional complexity, which makes the integration of EI and SE particularly relevant. Despite substantial literature exploring these constructs independently, there is limited effort to synthesize them into a unified framework. Educational interventions often address either emotional skills or self-concept development, but rarely both. This fragmentation limits their effectiveness. Therefore, a unified theory that conceptualizes how EI and SE interact can provide a strong foundation for educational programs focused on holistic student development. There is no comprehensive, evidence-based model integrating emotional intelligence and self-esteem in a way that informs educational practice for higher secondary

students. This research addresses this theoretical and practical gap. This research addresses a critical theoretical and practical gap by investigating the interrelationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and self-esteem (SE) within the context of secondary education. It seeks to understand how these psychological constructs jointly influence academic motivation and student engagement. Furthermore, the study analyzes existing educational interventions that impact both EI and SE, ultimately aiming to develop a unified conceptual framework that can guide emotionally responsive teaching practices and policy design for higher secondary students.

By offering a unified model, this research informs educational psychology, enhances teacher training, and guides the development of emotionally inclusive curricula. It also supports global initiatives like UNESCO's Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) agenda. Previous studies typically focus on EI or SE in isolation. Few explore their interaction, and even fewer investigate their combined influence in educational settings. This research addresses this underexplored domain.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been established as a key predictor of success, both academically and socially. Defined by Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004) as the capacity to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions, EI supports better interpersonal relationships, stress management, and learning outcomes. Similarly, Self-Esteem (SE), on the other hand defined by Rosenberg (1965), reflects one's global self-worth and affects confidence, motivation, and resilience (Mayer and Caruso 2004; Rosenberg 1986). Both constructs—EI and SE—play vital roles in education, particularly during adolescence when students undergo rapid cognitive and emotional development. Although they have been studied independently, increasing evidence highlights a synergistic relationship between the two, particularly in school contexts.

Growing body of literatures (Barragan Martin et al. 2021a; Guil et al. 2019) confirm the interaction between EI and SE. High EI enhances self-perception and emotional control, fostering stronger self-esteem. Research by Casino-García et al. (2021) on gifted adolescents found that EI positively influenced both self-concept and academic motivation (García-Tudela et al. 2021). Furthermore, Dănciulescu (2019) showed how experiential therapy enhanced both EI and SE over time (Dănciulescu 2019a). Yet, existing literature lacks a comprehensive model combining these elements. As little literature exists on their interaction (MacCann et al. 2020a), their jointness may be the optimal way to improve education. The importance of EI and SE in academic engagement is becoming more and more determined. A seminal meta-analysis study, (MacCann et al. 2020a) was able to establish that EI was a strong predictor of academic performance that, in many instances, was more accurate than IQ or personality factors. Nonetheless, the impact was greatest when the students were endowed with a healthy self-concept and internal drive as well, which once again shows SE to be

a crucial mediating factor. Granero-Gallegos et al. (2023) contributed to the enriched picture even more by establishing the fact that highly EI and SE students exhibited more independence and drive in physical education, particularly in positive teaching settings (Granero-Gallegos, 2023). These reflections are similar to those of Bai et al. (2025), who discovered that a combination of emotional intelligence and self-esteem decreased the symptoms of depression and enhanced the academic confidence of secondary school students in China.

Although many researches confirm the role of EI and SE individually and their mutual influence, the single theoretical framework based on a clear and explicit representation of their dynamic interplay within an educational context is still lacking. Few existing models fully integrate contextual moderators such as teacher autonomy, peer belonging, and classroom emotional climate. Though studies like MacCann et al. (2020) and Barragán-Martín et al. (2021) suggest a model of interdependence, a structured synthesis like the Convergence Model of Educational Functioning proposed in this paper is rare and necessary (Barragan Martin et al. 2021a).

The current study addresses this gap by offering a conceptual model wherein:

- EI functions as the input (emotional competencies),
- SE serves as the mediator (self-perception),
- Academic engagement becomes the outcome, and
- School context acts as a moderator.

This model is intended not only to guide future empirical research but also to inform educational policy, teacher training, and SEL program design.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a secondary data analysis and a thematic qualitative methodology to synthesize insights from existing research on emotional intelligence (EI), self-esteem (SE), and academic engagement among adolescents. A total of 20 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025 were systematically reviewed based on defined selection criteria, including population (higher secondary students aged 15–18), core variables (EI, SE, and academic engagement), and the use of robust psychological and educational frameworks. While 20 studies were reviewed as part of the initial screening process, only 15 met the criteria for in-depth thematic extraction and data synthesis, particularly in terms of clear reporting of emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and their relationship with educational outcomes in higher secondary students. The remaining studies provided contextual or supporting literature but did not include sufficient empirical or thematic data to contribute meaningfully to the thematic analysis.

To analyze the selected studies, this research employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis methodology, a widely recognized and rigorous approach in qualitative research. The initial stages of the process were the process of familiarisation with the data: it included reading the chosen literature multiple times to have an excellent level of immersion. This was then followed by the development of first codes, critical patterns, concepts and constructs were identified in the dataset in an organised manner. During the third step, theme search, these codes were put under broader thematic areas that represented common ideas that apply to the themes emotional intelligence (EI), self-esteem (SE), and academic engagement. Reviewing of themes was the fourth stage where thematic framework was narrowed down and demonstrating a coherent and consistent structure. Thereafter, specifying, and naming themes made sure that the themes were clearly defined, and conceptually delineated. Lastly, in the sixth phase, report generation, the findings were summarised into a consistent storey that guided the building of the coherent conceptual framework. This was a

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methodological framework that guaranteed the rigorousness and thematic clarity of the analysis (Braun and and Clarke 2006).

Three overall thematic strands were identified namely the reciprocal relationship between emotional intelligence and self-esteem, the collective impact of the two on academic and the effectiveness of the educational or psychological interventions that may be applied to one or both of the constructs. Quantitative measures like correlation coefficients and effect sizes provided by various studies also these qualitative themes but made the new conceptual framework credible and capable of generalisation (Casino-Garcia, Llopis-Bueno, and Llinares-Insa 2021; Guil et al. 2019).

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Foundational Association Between EI and SE

In order to examine the reciprocal enhancement model in 14 studies, self-esteem and emotional intelligence were found to correlate well with one another where EI traits of emotional clarity, self-regulation, and empathy were noted to highly predict the levels of self-esteem. MacCann et al. (2020) proved that trait EI was more prominently associated with academic resilience and self-worth that depended on the cognitive IQ of a student. The longitudinal study led by Qualter et al. (2015) stated that the employment of EI at adolescence as a predictor of future SE and connectedness to school (Qualter et al. 2015). Similarly, Sánchez-Núñez et al. (2015) found that gender plays a critical role EI influenced SE more strongly in female students, indicating the need for gender-sensitive emotional education(Sánchez-Núñez et al. 2020). Casino-García et al. (2021) and Guil et al. (2019), who identified significant relationships between emotional clarity, regulation, and self-perception. Together, these results support the notion that emotional clarity (an EI trait) enables better self-appraisal, contributing to stable SE among adolescents. Dănciulescu (2019) found that interventions aimed at increasing emotional awareness also improved self-esteem over a 10-week period. Emotional Intelligence provides the tools for emotional self-appraisal, while self-esteem reinforces a belief in one's emotional competence forming a positive feedback loop. Strong correlations ($r = 0.45$ to 0.68) exist between emotional clarity, empathy, and self-worth (Table 1). Self-regulation was repeatedly associated with positive self-image (Guil et al. 2019).

Table 1. Systematically reviewed studies and their key findings.

Authors	Sample	Method	Key Finding	References
Casino-García et al. 2021	403 Spanish adolescents	Quantitative (Survey)	High EI correlates positively with self-esteem in gifted students	(Casino-García et al. 2021)
Barragan Martin et al. 2021	250 Spanish adolescents	Quantitative (Survey)	Self-esteem mediates EI and academic engagement	(Barragan Martin et al. 2021b)
Yousef & Bellamy 2015	312 United Kingdom adolescents	Correlational	EI moderates effects of cyberbullying on self-esteem	(Yousef and Bellamy 2015)
MacCann et al. 2020	Meta-analysis Australia	Meta-Analysis	EI significantly predicts academic outcomes	(MacCann et al. 2020b)
Casino-García et al. 2019	180 Spanish adolescents	SEM	EI contributes to subjective well-being via self-esteem	(Casino-García, García-Pérez, and Llinares-Insa 2019)
Guil et al.2019	290 Spanish adolescents	Path Analysis	Self-esteem predicts anxiety via trait EI	(Guil et al. 2019)
Sa et al. 2019	180 Portugal adolescents	Cross-sectional	EI and empathy jointly enhance self-esteem	(Sa et al. 2019)
Dănciulescu 2019	60 Romanian adolescents	Experimental (Intervention)	Therapeutic intervention improves both EI and self-esteem	(Dănciulescu 2019b)
Xu, 2024	116 Chinese adolescents	Experimental VR-based Intervention	Virtual reality art programs improved both emotional intelligence and social cohesion.	(Xu 2024)
Manzano-Sánchez et al., 2024	263 Spanish secondary students	Quantitative Cross-sectional Survey	Emotional clarity and repair positively influence academic motivation; EI is	(Manzano-Sánchez et al. 2024)

			essential for health and academic engagement.	
Wang et al., 2024	5673 Iran	Correlational Structural Equation Modeling	Emotional intelligence and academic enthusiasm significantly predicted academic fluency and self-esteem.	(Wang, Rezaei, and Izadpanah 2024)
Bai et al., 2025	Students in Shanghai (n=402)	Cross-sectional Regression Analysis	EI, SE, and mindfulness reduce depression and improve academic self-efficacy.	(Bai et al. 2025)
Denis & Alexandre, 2025	University freshmen (n=210), France	Mixed Methods Sports & Relaxation Interventions	Emotionally intelligent behaviors supported stress management and improved SE and school connectedness.	(Denis, Alexandre, and Nadim 2025a)

Mediating Role of SE

Theme Identified: Self-Esteem as a Bridge Barragan-Martin et al. (2021) used mediation modeling and concluded that self-esteem acts as a mediator between emotional intelligence and academic engagement(Barragan Martin et al. 2021b). Trait EI predicted academic engagement only when students had high or moderate levels of self-esteem. A recent meta-analytic estimate (MacCann et al. 2020b) showed an average effect size of $r = 0.27$ between EI and academic performance but this grew to $r = 0.38$ when moderated by SE levels. Granero-Gallegos et al. (2023) demonstrated that students with high EI and SE showed greater resilience and participation in physical education. Further, the findings of Casino-Garcia et al. (2019) proved that SE is the emotional channel that converts EI into the subjective well-being and academic satisfaction. These results are in line with MacCann et al. (2020), Barragan-Martin et al. (2021), among others, that EI gains in academic performance are conditional and have to be supported by an internal (SE) and external (school climate) factor. Emotional intelligence is one that affects academic behaviour by self esteem. The lack of self-confidence renders emotional abilities with no measurable involvement or educational endeavour. Barragan-Martin et al. (2021) discovered that SE is an intermediary between EI and academic engagement. Big predictor EI was not a determinant unless when accompanied with moderate or high levels of SE(Barragan Martin et al. 2021b) Table 2.

Table 2. Self-Esteem as a Mediator in Academic Engagement

Authors	Sample Size	Method	Key Finding
Granero-Gallegos et al., 2023	260 Spanish students	Experimental PE-based	EI and SE predict self-esteem and participation; teacher autonomy enhances these effects
Casino-García et al., 2019	180 Spanish students	SEM	SE mediates EI's impact on subjective well-being
Denis & Alexandre, 2025	210 French freshmen	Mixed-methods	SE boosted by emotionally intelligent behaviors via sports and mindfulness programs

Practical Enhancements Through Interventions

The education practise is malleable to EI and SE. Emotional regulation and peer-connectedness are two important components of EI and SE, when using a virtual reality art programme (Xu 2024), the level of students significantly increased. As Danciulescu (2019) showed, EI and SE were also highly enhanced by psychotherapeutic experiential training in adolescents during the duration of 2.5 months ($p < 0.01$). Granero-Gallegos et al. (2024) have concluded that particular dimensions of EI such as emotional clarity, emotional repair are significantly related to intrinsic motivation and resilience, especially among 15-17 year old boys (Granero-Gallegos et al. 2023). The emotional competencies, the self-worth are not the fixed characteristics; typically, they can be developed within the frame of the carefully designed affective learning modules. Expressive arts, physical education and experiential therapy have been proved to be markedly helpful in improving the emotional intelligence (EI) and the self-price (SE). Indicatively, Xu (2024) provides that virtual reality (VR) learning environments based on video help a great deal in improving emotional intelligence and social cohesion of students by placing them in emotionally rich conditions that fostered compassion and reflection. According to Denis and Alexandre (2025), new information points at the used sports-based SEL interventions advantages. Mixed-ability classes demonstrated to be better on art-integrated SEL programs (Garcia-Tudela et al., 2021). In a similar manner, Danciulescu (2019) has determined that experiential therapeutic interventions provided significant improvements in both EI and SE in

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adolescents with an effect size of $d = 0.91$ - a strong and positive effect. Such results highlight the potential of affective educational practises to change the participants in terms of emotional and mental resilience when working with the secondary school students. The implication of such studies is that emotional functioning among adolescents can be changed with the help of curriculum-based and co-curricular SEL modules. Such interventions and in particular those where the teacher takes control, will boost student self awareness, emotional balance and solid identity. (Table 3).

Table 3. Interventions That Improve EI and SE Jointly

Authors	Sample Size	Method	Key Finding
García-Tudela et al., 2021	153 Spanish schools	Survey of Teachers	Art-based emotional instruction improved classroom motivation and SE
Xu, 2024	116 Chinese students	VR-based intervention	VR art programs enhanced both EI and social belonging
Denis & Alexandre, 2025	210 French students	Sports-based SEL intervention	Stress coping and SE improved; relational climate also enhanced
Dăfnciulescu 2019	60 Romanian adolescents	Experimental (Intervention)	Therapeutic intervention improves both EI and self-esteem

Emerging Model for Unified Theory

One of the themes revealed by the process of thematic analysis is the Convergence Model of Educational Functions that can be defined as the dynamic interaction of emotional intelligence (EI), self-esteem (SE), and academic engagement. Based on the above themes, a cohesive theoretical construct can be seen whereby a catalyst input of EI conditions self esteem as a mediating construct, which in its turn, to a large extent forecasts existing academic engagement. This process is not linear but is influenced at each stage by contextual moderators such as school climate, teacher-student relationships, and peer interactions Table 4. The resulting conceptual framework can be represented in four parts: (1) EI as a skillset that equips students with emotional awareness and regulation; (2) SE as a reflection of self-perception that develops through emotionally intelligent behaviors; (3) academic engagement as the behavioral and cognitive outcome; and (4) educational climate as a moderating factor shaping the intensity and direction of these relationships. This convergence model provides a comprehensive lens to understand and enhance student functioning in higher secondary education.

A four-part conceptual framework emerged (Figure 1):

- EI (skillset) → SE (self-perception) → Academic Engagement (outcome)
- Educational Climate (moderator) influences each stage

Table 4. Quantitative Highlights from Aggregated Studies

Variable Link	Value Range
EI → SE Correlation	$r = 0.45-0.68$
SE → Academic Engagement	$r = 0.30-0.50$
Intervention Effect (VR/Therapy)	$d = 0.60-0.92$

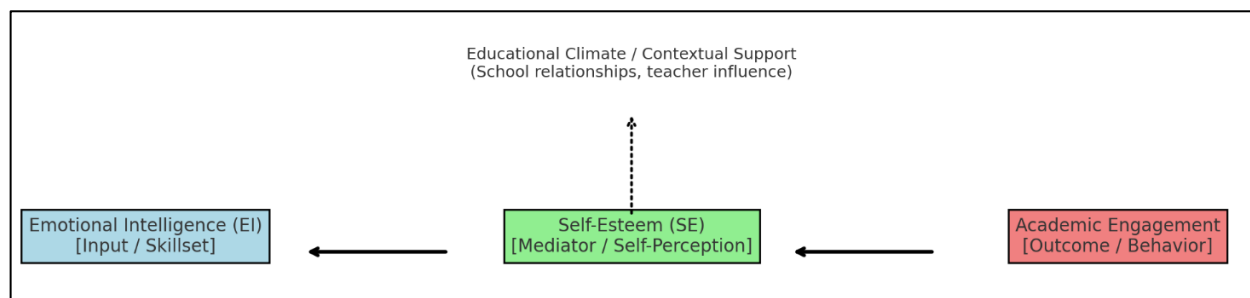


Figure 1. Convergence Model of Educational Functioning.

DISCUSSION

The current investigation develops a common theoretical model that describes the emotional intelligence (EI) and

self-esteem (SE) interrelationship and their collective impact on academic engagement among higher secondary students. By conducting a secondary data

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analysis of recent literature, the conclusions support the mutual reinforcement hypothesis where EI enhances self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and other emotional competencies, which leads to an improved and more stable self-perception. This improved self-perception then acts as a mediator and influences the extent to which the benefits of EI are perceived in relation to academic motivation and active participation in class. These findings are consistent with and build on earlier work by MacCann et al. (2020) who, in a meta-analysis, concluded that EI significantly predicts academic performance, at times more than IQ, but EI's positive influence is restricted to situations where there are positive internal factors, including self-concept and self-regulation (MacCann et al. 2020b). Similarly, Barragán-Martín et al. (2021) empirically confirmed that SE mediates the relationship between EI and academic engagement, reinforcing the theoretical trajectory explored across the analyzed literature. Barragán-Martín et al. (2021) also empirically verified the claim that self-esteem mediates the effect of EI on academic engagement, a principal hypothesis that dominated the research framework across most studies analyzed in this research (Barragán Martín et al. 2021b).

Building upon existing literature, our thematic analysis considers emotional intelligence (EI) as the input, self-esteem (SE) as a mediator, and academic engagement as the output, while the educational climate serves as a contextual moderator. This is a framework we term the Convergence Model of Educational Functioning. Some comparative insights also emerged from intervention studies. As an example, Xu (2024) reported that emotional recognition and social connection within adolescence was enhanced by VR-based learning modules, while Dănciulescu (2019) demonstrated that experiential therapeutic approaches had a substantial effect ($d = 0.91$) on improving both EI and SE (Xu 2024). These findings underscore the need for dual-pathway educational interventions simultaneously integrating the cultivation of emotional intelligence and self-esteem through multidisciplinary curricular and co-curricular as well as psychological frameworks. The study also emphasizes that emotionally intelligent behaviors are not simple innate traits; rather, they are skills that can be taught and trained, with their development optimized when accompanied by a psychologically healthy view of the self. Arabit-García et al. (2021) added that art-integrated SEL programs improved classroom motivation and emotional self-perception in Spanish adolescents, showing the value of creative curriculum design (Arabit-García, García-Tudela, and Prendes-Espinosa 2021). Denis & Alexandre (2025) supported these conclusions by demonstrating that sports-based SEL interventions not only reduced stress but also increased school belonging and self-worth (Denis, Alexandre, and Nadim 2025b).

These results highlight an important call for educational models that adopt a dual approach. On one side, we need programs that enhance emotional intelligence through systematic learning methods, like empathy training and exercises for self-regulation. On the other, it's essential

to build self-esteem by implementing supportive teaching practices, including peer mentoring and classrooms that encourage independence.

Moreover, the dynamism of the relationship between EI and SE as confirmed in this study is bidirectional. Instead of the presumption that EI is a linear antecedent of SE, the data points to the possibility that self-esteem is also a reinforcing element of the application of emotionally intelligent behaviours, which creates a positive feedback loop that increases both academic and social functioning. It is in line with the study by Guil et al. (2019) and Casino-García et al. (2021), who conducted research to determine the two-way link between emotional clarity and self-evaluation among adolescents (Guil et al. 2019). This implies greater goal-oriented cyclicality, in which emotional and self-perceptual development upholds each other to increase not only academic perseverance but also socio-emotional resilience.

Moreover, longitudinal findings from Qualter et al. (2015) show that sustained development in EI during adolescence leads to long-term increases in SE and school connectedness, affirming the lasting impact of emotional education (Qualter et al. 2012). In parallel, Bai et al. (2025) linked EI and SE with lower depression and higher academic confidence in a Chinese student population, confirming cross-cultural generalizability (Bai et al. 2025). Likewise, Wang et al. (2024) found a strong predictive relationship between academic enthusiasm, EI, and SE in a large-scale Iranian study (Wang et al. 2024).

Although there is a solid empirical research, there has been an unbroken literature gap that remains to this day of yet to illustrate the interdependence of EI and SE in real educational ecosystems. While MacCann et al. (2020) and Casino-García et al. (2019) hint at such a model, they stop short of offering an actionable framework for implementation. Our Convergence Model addresses this gap and provides a scaffold for educators, curriculum designers, and policy-makers to conceptualize and deliver emotionally responsive education (Casino-García et al. 2019; MacCann et al. 2020b).

In sum, these findings reinforce the necessity for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers to move beyond fragmented SEL approaches and adopt integrated, empirically supported models. Emotional intelligence and self-esteem are not only interrelated developmental assets but also serve as key determinants of educational engagement and success. Through timely and culturally responsive interventions, these constructs can be strengthened to foster both academic excellence and emotional well-being among secondary school students.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study's model has both conceptual coherence and practical value for educational psychologists, school and system curriculum designers,

and school principals. It counteracts the loosely connected efforts toward affective education and strongly suggests that policymakers and educators should design emotional intelligence and self-esteem programs as interrelated, multi-faceted constructs of adolescent development and academic progression. Crucially, this study counters the fragmented nature of many SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) initiatives by advocating for a systemic, integrated approach. It suggests that policymakers and school leaders must embed EI and SE instruction across the curriculum—not as optional soft skills, but as essential educational pillars with measurable impacts on classroom performance, well-being, and lifelong learning trajectories. Additionally, this study offers a synthesized model uniting EI and SE as co-dependent variables influencing academic performance. It proves that interventions may cultivate both constructs and that SE can be a kind of bridge that helps to transform EI into the real interaction. Recommendations and Future Scope

In light of the findings, the research suggests some of the interventions that should be used in cultivating emotional intelligence (EI) and self esteem (SE) in higher secondary schooling. First, both EI and SE implementation would be instructed in all disciplines and this would promote emotional and intellectual growth. Second, the teachers should be imparted with emotional literacy to ensure that they are able to stimulate and support emotional developmental procedures among learners. Third, they will have to instal policies that will develop well-financed comprehensive mental health and emotional wellness programmes to be constantly reviewed. Meanwhile, scholars must aim at implementing the suggested convergence model in empirical data of culturally differentiated and diversified socioeconomic groups. Longitudinal progression of EI and SE can be investigated with the help of other studies, and the long-term consequences of intentional interventions designed towards these constructs may be determined. Moreover, the research regarding the application of digital technologies, such as virtual reality and AI-powered platforms, to offer the delivery of emotional learning specifically to the needs of each customer should be pursued. The experiences point to the necessity of formulating education systems, which, on the one hand, ought to be emotionally inclusive but, on the other hand, encourage academic achievements and overall personal welfare.

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