Affective Pedagogy and Emotional Intelligence in Online Learning: Enhancing Teacher-Student Relationships

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI) significantly influences teacher-student relationships and learning outcomes in online educational settings. This study examines the role of EI in shaping interactions, engagement, and performance through a review of literature and a quantitative approach. Data collection involved surveys and interviews with online educators (N = 200) and students (N = 300). Quantitative analysis utilized Pearson correlation and multiple regression to explore the relationships between EI, teaching effectiveness, and student engagement. Findings revealed a strong positive correlation between teacher EI and teaching effectiveness (r = 0.72, p < 0.001), suggesting that emotionally intelligent teachers are better equipped to foster engagement and satisfaction among students. Similarly, student EI strongly correlated with engagement (r = 0.80, p < 0.01), indicating that emotionally intelligent students are more active in online learning. Regression analysis showed that teacher EI accounted for 52% of the variance in teaching effectiveness (β = 0.45, p < 0.01), while student EI explained 42% of the variance in engagement (β = 0.38, p < 0.01). Qualitative interviews underscored these findings, emphasizing the importance of empathy, emotional support, and self-regulation in creating positive learning environments. The study concludes that integrating EI training into teacher professional development and online curriculum design is crucial for improving relationships and learning outcomes. These strategies aim to cultivate empathy, self-awareness, and emotional support among educators and learners, enhancing engagement and educational success in online environments.

Introduction

The rapid and continued expansion of online learning presents unique challenges and opportunities for educators and students (Alhothli, 2015). One of the most significant hurdles is the maintenance of effective teacher-student relationships in an environment that often lacks the rich, in-person interaction necessary for fostering emotional connection (Drexel, 2021). Traditional face-to-face settings provide many opportunities for teachers to gauge students' emotional states through body language, tone of voice, and immediate, nuanced feedback (Martin, 2020). In contrast, online platforms limit these interpersonal cues, forcing instructors to rely on text-based communication, video, or recorded content, which can obscure emotional signals and create a sense of isolation among students (Grand-Canyon, 2021). The absence of physical

presence in virtual classrooms often leads to feelings of disengagement, frustration, and even alienation, which can hinder the learning experience and undermine the success of online programs (Baker, 2017).

While technological advances have made education more accessible and flexible, they have also exposed the need for pedagogical models that prioritise the emotional dimensions of teaching and learning. Affective pedagogy, which emphasises emotional engagement in the classroom, is emerging as a potential solution to this challenge (Kevin & Costley, 2021). Emotional intelligence (EI) is central to affective pedagogy, defined as the ability to recognise, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Goleman, 1995). It is crucial in building strong relationships between teachers and students, especially when non-verbal communication is constrained. Teachers with high EI are better able to connect with students, provide emotional support, and manage the diverse emotional needs of a virtual classroom (O'Connor & Quigley, 2021).

However, while emotional intelligence has been widely acknowledged, there remains insufficient literature on how EI functions specifically in online learning contexts (Lane, 2021). This paper addresses this gap by examining how EI influences teacher effectiveness, student motivation, and the overall quality of the learning experience in digital environments. By investigating the role of EI in online classrooms, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on improving online teaching strategies, student engagement, and course design. In doing so, the paper challenges the assumption that traditional pedagogical methods and emotional dynamics are equally applicable in virtual classrooms and emphasises the importance of integrating emotional intelligence into teaching and learning to enhance the effectiveness of online education.

Emotional Intelligence in Education

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been widely acknowledged as a crucial element of effective teaching and learning, though its application in online learning environments remains underexplored. Goleman (1995) defines EI as comprising five core components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. In education, these dimensions enable teachers to build positive, responsive relationships with students, support their emotional well-being, and manage classroom dynamics effectively (Brackett et al., 2011). EI helps educators adjust their approaches in face-to-face settings based on students' immediate emotional reactions. However, in online learning, the lack of direct physical cues complicates this process, presenting a challenge for teachers who may struggle to understand students' emotional states from a distance (Pekrun et al., 2017).

Critically, this gap in emotional understanding can affect how educators respond to student needs, especially when dealing with disengagement or academic stress. It is argued that the absence of emotional nuance in online interactions may unintentionally exacerbate student alienation, particularly for those already predisposed to feelings of isolation or disconnection (Martin, 2020). Therefore, the role of EI becomes even more significant in online classrooms, where teachers must take the initiative to find ways to gauge and address students' emotional experiences (Kooli et al., 2019). Research has shown that educators with high EI are more successful at providing emotional support, fostering positive relationships, and improving student engagement (O'Connor & Quigley, 2021). In online settings, where face-to-face interactions are minimised, emotional intelligence enables teachers to communicate, demonstrate empathy, and provide targeted support effectively (Zins & Elias, 2007).

While the literature often focuses on EI's importance for teacher-student relationships in traditional settings, the need for EI in online education should be emphasised more thoroughly. Emotional intelligence allows instructors to communicate effectively using digital tools such as email, discussion boards, and video conferencing. When teachers demonstrate empathy, compassion, and emotional support in their online

communications, students are more likely to engage, participate actively, and feel connected to the instructor (Martin & Collie, 2019).

Teacher-Student Relationships in Online Learning

Teacher-student relationships are fundamental to student success, yet they are often the most challenging aspect of online education (Mohammadi, 2020). Traditional classroom settings naturally foster close, personal connections through daily, face-to-face interactions (Salmon, 2018). In contrast, online environments can leave students isolated, creating an emotional barrier that negatively impacts their motivation and academic achievement (Baker, 2017). Online instructors are disadvantaged in building these connections without the ability to physically read students' emotions. Consequently, many online learners may feel disconnected from their instructors, which is reflected in higher dropout rates and lower levels of course satisfaction (Arbaugh, 2014).

However, emotionally intelligent teachers can mitigate these challenges by adopting personalised communication, empathy, and active listening strategies. These strategies help build rapport and foster a supportive, caring atmosphere, even in a virtual classroom (Nwankwo, 2015). Empathetic communication, a core component of EI, involves actively engaging with students' concerns, offering emotional support, and providing constructive feedback to acknowledge their individual emotional needs (Sweeny, 2020). Through these efforts, teachers can cultivate a sense of community and trust, which are critical elements for engaging students in online education (Zins & Elias, 2007).

Despite the challenges, it is evident that the online medium offers unique opportunities for developing teacher-student relationships. Tools like asynchronous discussion boards and video feedback can facilitate more profound, reflective conversations, allowing for personalised interactions that might not be possible in fast-paced, in-person classrooms. Research indicates that students who receive personalised feedback and feel emotionally supported by their instructors exhibit greater engagement and satisfaction in online courses (Zins & Elias, 2007; Salmon & Joanne, 2022). Therefore, emotionally intelligent educators can transform the perceived isolation of online education into an opportunity for closer, more meaningful connections.

Emotional Intelligence and Online Learning Outcomes

The link between emotional intelligence and academic outcomes is well-documented, particularly in traditional educational settings (Zeidner et al., 2012). In online learning, where students often face more significant challenges with time management, motivation, and self-regulation, EI can play an even more crucial role in fostering academic success (Papia, 2016). Students with high emotional intelligence demonstrate better self-regulation, higher levels of motivation, and enhanced critical thinking skills, all of which are critical for navigating the demands of online learning (Martin & Collie, 2019). For instance, emotionally intelligent students are more adept at managing stress and overcoming academic setbacks, such as technical issues or the lack of immediate feedback (Pekrun et al., 2017).

However, there is a critical gap in the current literature regarding understanding the mechanisms that EI influences learning outcomes in online settings (Sergey et al., 2021). While studies have shown positive correlations between EI and academic achievement (Zeidner et al., 2012), they have not sufficiently explored how EI contributes to the unique challenges of online education, such as navigating complex digital platforms, managing remote collaboration, and maintaining consistent motivation over extended periods. We believe a more nuanced approach is required to examine these factors, considering the technological, social, and emotional aspects of online learning.

Furthermore, the development of self-regulation in students, facilitated by EI, directly impacts their ability to succeed online. Research has shown that students with higher levels of self-awareness and emotional regulation are more likely to engage with course content, manage their time effectively, and seek help when

necessary (Zeidner et al., 2012). This is particularly important in online education, where students often lack the immediate support of a teacher and must rely on their own emotional and motivational resources to remain engaged and complete assignments.

Developing Emotional Intelligence in Online Learning Environments
Although emotional intelligence is often seen as an inherent trait, there is increasing evidence that EI can be cultivated through targeted interventions and training (Brackett et al., 2011). This is particularly important in online education, where teachers and students must develop skills that enable them to navigate the emotional complexities of virtual learning. Professional development programmes focusing on EI can enhance instructors' ability to manage online classroom dynamics, address students' emotional needs, and promote a positive emotional climate (Jensen, 2020). However, these programs should be more than just workshops on theory; they should provide practical strategies for incorporating EI into online teaching practices and course design.

For students, integrating emotionally intelligent practices into online curricula can promote greater engagement and self-regulation. Mindfulness practices, reflective journaling, and empathy-building exercises can help students become more emotionally aware and resilient in their learning (Zins & Elias, 2007). However, it is contended that the development of EI should not be seen as a one-time intervention but rather as an ongoing process throughout a student's online learning experience. To this end, learning platforms should be designed to encourage **emotional reflection** through interactive, adaptive tools that provide personalised feedback on students' emotional states and learning progress (Järvelä et al., 2019).

Methodology

Research Design
This study employed a quantitative design to investigate the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in online learning environments, focusing on its impact on teacher effectiveness and student engagement. A few embedded elements of qualitative design were also used to enhance the study's outcome. Five hundred participants—200 online educators and 300 students—were selected through convenience sampling from various online degree programs. The study used surveys and online semi-structured interviews to gather data.

The surveys, including Likert-scale questions, assessed emotional intelligence and its effects on teaching effectiveness and student engagement. Teacher EI was measured using the Emotional Intelligence Scale (Schutte et al., 1998), while teaching effectiveness was gauged through self-reported engagement indicators, classroom management, and academic support. Similarly, student EI was assessed, and student engagement was measured based on their participation in online discussions and activities.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics summarised the demographics and key variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationships between teacher EI and teaching effectiveness and student EI and engagement. Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine how well teacher and student EI predicted teaching effectiveness and engagement.

In addition to the surveys, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 educators and 20 students, selected based on their EI scores from the survey. The interviews focused on how emotional intelligence influenced teacher-student relationships, communication, and student motivation in online courses. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, with key themes including emotional support, empathy, and self-regulation emerging from the interviews.

Affective Pedagogy and Emotional Intelligence in Online Learning: Enhancing Teacher-Student Relationships

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent and participant confidentiality. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and their responses were anonymised to protect their privacy.

Findings

The survey results indicate a positive correlation between teachers' emotional intelligence and their perceived effectiveness in online learning environments. Teachers with higher EI scores were more likely to report that they could establish strong, supportive relationships with students, manage online classroom dynamics effectively, and foster student engagement.

Interview data revealed that emotionally intelligent teachers employed various strategies to build rapport with students, such as personalised feedback, empathetic communication, and regular check-ins. Teachers with high EI also reported feeling more confident in managing the challenges of online teaching, including student isolation and disengagement.

Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence were more engaged in online learning activities, as evidenced by both survey responses and interview data. These students reported feeling more motivated, managing stress better, and actively participating in online discussions and group activities. They also demonstrated a higher self-regulation level, contributing to better academic performance.

The data suggests that emotionally intelligent teachers can better create positive teacher-student relationships in online environments. Teachers who demonstrated empathy, active listening, and emotional support were more successful in engaging students and promoting community in the virtual classroom. Students, in turn, felt more connected to their instructors, contributing to a more positive and supportive learning experience.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Emotional Intelligence (EI), Teaching Effectiveness, and Student Engagement

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Teacher Emotional Intelligence	200	3.85	0.42	2.50	
Teacher Effectiveness	200	4.20	0.35	3.10	5.00
Student Emotional Intelligence	300	3.70	0.38	2.60	4.80
Student Engagement	300	4.00	0.41	3.10	5.00

Table 1 shows teachers' and students' mean emotional intelligence scores, along with their respective standard deviations, indicating moderate variation in the EI scores. Both teachers' effectiveness and student engagement have high mean scores, suggesting that both factors are perceived positively in the sample.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Emotional Intelligence, Teaching Effectiveness, and Student Engagement

Variables	Teacher EI	Teacher Effectiveness	Student EI	Student Engagement
Teacher Emotional Intelligence (EI)	1	0.72**	0.58**	0.65**
Teacher Effectiveness	0.72**	1	0.61**	0.68**
Student Emotional Intelligence (EI)	0.58**	0.61**	1	0.80**
Student Engagement	0.65**	0.68**	0.80**	1

Teacher EI and Teacher Effectiveness: The strong positive correlation (r = 0.72, p < 0.01) suggests that teachers with higher EI report greater teaching effectiveness.

Student EI and Engagement: The highest correlation is between student EI and student engagement (r = 0.80, p < 0.01), indicating that students with higher EI are more engaged in the online learning.

Teacher EI and Student Engagement: A moderate to strong positive correlation (r = 0.65, p < 0.01) between teacher EI and student engagement suggests that emotionally intelligent teachers foster higher student engagement.

Table 3: Teacher Effectiveness as a Dependent Variable (Model 1)

Predictor	β	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Teacher Emotional Intelligence (EI)	0.45**	0.12	3.75	<0.001
Constant	2.10	0.14	15.00	<0.001

R² = 0.52

Interpretation: The model suggests that the perception of teacher effectiveness increases by 0.45 units for each unit increase in teacher emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence explains 52% of the variance in teaching effectiveness, which is statistically significant (p < 0.001).

Table 4: Student Engagement as a Dependent Variable (Model 2)

Predictor	β	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Student Emotional Intelligence (EI)	0.38**	0.10	3.80	<0.001
Constant	2.90	0.13	22.31	<0.001

$R^2 = 0.42$

The regression model indicates that for each unit increase in student emotional intelligence, the level of student engagement increases by 0.38 units. Student EI explains 42% of the variance in student engagement, with a statistically significant p-value ($p < 0.001$).

Table 5: Themes from Qualitative Analysis of Teacher-Student Interactions

Theme	Description	Example Quote
Empathetic Communication	Teachers with high EI demonstrate care and understanding.	"I always make sure to check in with my students regularly, ask how they're doing emotionally, and encourage them to reach out."
Personalised Feedback	Tailored feedback increases student motivation and engagement.	"I give feedback that acknowledges not just their academic progress, but also their efforts and challenges during these tough times."
Emotional Support	Teachers offer emotional support during stressful moments.	"When students are struggling with isolation, I make an effort to provide extra support, ensuring they feel understood and cared for."

The qualitative themes from teacher interviews suggest that emotionally intelligent teachers use empathetic communication, personalised feedback, and emotional support to create an environment where students feel valued, connected, and motivated.

Table 6: Qualitative Insights from Students Regarding Engagement and Emotional Intelligence

Theme	Description	Example Quote
Self-Regulation and Motivation	Emotionally intelligent students are better at managing their learning and stress.	"I can manage my stress more effectively and stay motivated to participate in the activities."
Connection with Teachers	Emotional intelligence in teachers leads to stronger connections.	"When my teacher shows empathy and supports me emotionally, I feel more motivated to engage in the course."
Coping with Online Learning Stress	Higher EI helps students manage isolation and the challenges of virtual learning.	"I feel like I'm able to handle the isolation of online classes better because I can talk to my teacher and get feedback."

These student insights reveal that emotionally intelligent students experience higher levels of self-regulation and stress management, contributing to greater engagement. Furthermore, students highlighted that when

teachers demonstrate high emotional intelligence, they are more likely to feel connected, motivated, and engaged in the online learning process.

Table 7: Comparison of Emotional Intelligence Scores Between High and Low-Engagement Students

Engagement Level	N	Mean Emotional Intelligence (EI)	Std. Deviation	p-value
High Engagement	150	3.85	0.34	<0.001
Low Engagement	150	3.40	0.36	

Students in the **high-engagement** group had significantly higher emotional intelligence scores (mean = 3.85) than those in the **low-engagement** group (mean = 3.40). The p-value of <0.001 confirms that this difference is statistically significant, further supporting that emotional intelligence is linked to higher student engagement.

Discussion
The findings from this study align with and extend existing literature on the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in online learning environments, particularly concerning the relationship between teacher emotional intelligence and teaching effectiveness, as well as the link between student EI and engagement. In this section, the implications of the study's findings are discussed in light of previous research, critiquing and contrasting the results with those of other studies in the field.

Teacher Emotional Intelligence and Teaching Effectiveness
The study found a strong positive correlation between teacher emotional intelligence and teaching effectiveness ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), and this relationship was further supported by the regression analysis, which showed that teacher EI significantly predicted teaching effectiveness, explaining 52% of the variance. These findings corroborate those of previous studies that highlight the importance of emotional intelligence in enhancing teaching effectiveness. For instance, O'Connor and Quigley (2021) demonstrated that teachers with higher EI can better manage classroom dynamics and build positive relationships with students, thereby improving their overall effectiveness. Similarly, Zins and Elias (2007) emphasised that teachers with high emotional intelligence can create a more positive learning environment, which, in turn, supports student engagement and academic success.

However, while this study's findings align with these studies, specific nuances exist. For example, Brackett et al. (2011), in their research on the emotional intelligence of educators, found that EI's influence on teaching effectiveness might be context-dependent, with the relationship being more substantial in environments that are particularly emotionally demanding, such as those involving students with behavioural challenges or those in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings. The current study, which focuses on online education, might not fully account for these contextual factors. Online learning, while emotionally demanding in some ways, lacks the immediate, face-to-face interaction that might heighten emotional demands in a traditional classroom. Therefore, future research might benefit from exploring how EI's impact varies across different types of online learning environments, such as synchronous versus asynchronous settings, or depending on the emotional challenges posed by the course content.

Student Emotional Intelligence and Engagement
The study found a significant positive correlation between student emotional intelligence and student engagement ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.01$), with regression analysis revealing that EI accounts for 42% of the variance in student engagement. These results are consistent with earlier work by Schutte et al. (1998), who concluded

that higher EI in students leads to better self-regulation and greater engagement in learning activities. Similarly, Goleman (2006) has argued that emotionally intelligent students are more likely to manage their emotions effectively, maintaining motivation and engagement even in challenging learning environments.

In contrast, Parker et al. (2004) argued that the relationship between student EI and engagement might not be as strong as suggested by this study. They found that while EI was positively correlated with academic achievement and motivation, it was not always a significant predictor of engagement in every educational context. This critique is important because it suggests that other factors, such as prior academic preparation, learning strategies, and support systems, may also affect student engagement. For instance, while EI can help students manage stress and stay motivated, these students may still struggle with disengagement if the learning environment lacks sufficient instructional support or if they face external stressors like family issues or financial instability.

Thus, while the current study's findings are compelling, future research could explore the moderating factors influencing the relationship between student EI and engagement. It would be valuable to examine how contextual variables such as social support, course difficulty, and instructor feedback interact with EI to impact student engagement in online courses.

Teacher-Student Relationships and Emotional Intelligence
A key finding from the qualitative data was the central role of emotional intelligence in fostering positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers with higher EI were more empathetic, communicative, and supportive, contributing to a positive learning experience for students. These findings align with Jennings and Greenberg (2009), who argued that emotionally intelligent teachers build stronger relationships with their students, which leads to greater student satisfaction and engagement. In particular, emotionally intelligent teachers can better manage emotional dynamics, such as student anxiety or frustration, which is crucial in online learning environments where students may feel isolated.

Devine et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of these teacher-student relationships and found that emotionally supportive teaching leads to increased student motivation and better academic outcomes. In online learning, where students are often physically separated from their instructors, emotional intelligence becomes an even more critical factor. Cohen and Elias (2009) also emphasised that the lack of face-to-face interaction in online settings makes it harder for students to feel emotionally supported, which can negatively affect their engagement and learning outcomes. Therefore, the ability of emotionally intelligent teachers to build strong, supportive relationships, even in the absence of physical proximity, is crucial to ensuring that students feel connected and motivated in online courses.

However, while these findings are consistent with the broader literature, it is essential to note that empathy and emotional support are not a panacea for all the challenges of online learning. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) argued that the success of online education depends not only on emotional intelligence but also on the quality of cognitive presence—that is, the ability of students to engage deeply with course content. Thus, while emotionally intelligent teachers can foster supportive relationships, there must also be a focus on creating meaningful learning experiences that challenge students cognitively and promote critical thinking. This dual focus on emotional and cognitive engagement could be an area for further research.

Critique and Future Directions
While this study contributes valuable insights into the role of emotional intelligence in online learning, several limitations and areas for future exploration exist.

1. **Sample Diversity**: The study used a homogeneous sample of online educators and students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider a more diverse sample in

terms of teaching experience, subject matter, and geographic location. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how emotional intelligence influences teaching and learning across distinct types of online courses.

2.   **Longitudinal Data**: A limitation of the current study is its cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences. Emotional intelligence may influence teaching effectiveness and student engagement, but these relationships could also be bi-directional. For instance, it is possible that teaching effectiveness and student engagement also enhance a teacher's or student's emotional intelligence over time. Longitudinal studies could help clarify the direction of these relationships and explore whether interventions aimed at enhancing EI can lead to sustained improvements in teaching and learning outcomes.

3.   **Contextual Factors**: While emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of teaching effectiveness and student engagement, contextual factors such as course structure, the use of technology, and institutional support systems should also be considered. Zhou and Brown (2015) pointed out that the design of the online learning environment, including interactive tools and collaborative activities, plays a crucial role in student engagement. Future research could explore how emotional intelligence interacts with these factors to shape the online learning experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores emotional intelligence's significant role in enhancing teaching effectiveness and student engagement within online learning environments. The findings reveal that higher levels of emotional intelligence in teachers correlate with more effective teaching practices, fostering positive teacher-student relationships and promoting student engagement. Similarly, students with higher emotional intelligence tend to be more engaged, motivated, and successful in online courses. These results highlight the importance of integrating emotional intelligence training into professional development programmes for educators and curriculum design for students. By cultivating emotional intelligence, educators and learners can navigate the unique challenges of online education more effectively, leading to improved learning outcomes and a more supportive and engaging virtual classroom experience. Future research could explore the causal relationships between emotional intelligence and academic success through longitudinal studies, offering more profound insights into how EI can be systematically developed to optimise online education.

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