

## **Students' Academic Resilience and Competence-Based Learning Outcomes: A Survey on Mediating Influence of Emotional Intelligence**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the mediating influence of emotional intelligence in the relationship between academic resilience and competency-based learning (CBL) among secondary school students in Mukono and Kayunga districts, Uganda. Guided by a convergent mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 540 students through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were obtained from 80 headteachers, teachers and education officers via interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative analysis using SPSS and AMOS revealed that emotional intelligence fully mediated the relationship between perseverance and CBL and partially mediated adaptive helping skills and emotional response. Structural Equation Modeling confirmed satisfactory model fit. The findings highlight emotional intelligence as a critical affective-cognitive mechanism through which resilience enhances learning outcomes within CBL frameworks.

**Keywords:** Academic Resilience, Emotional Intelligence, Competency-Based Learning, Mediation, Secondary Education.

## 1. Introduction

Competency-based learning (CBL) is evolving as a transformational paradigm that encourages moving away from content coverage to demonstrable skills, competencies and learner autonomy worldwide. Unlike traditional systems that are heavily examination-based, CBL focuses on mastery learning, on continuous evaluation, and on usage of what is learned in real-life situations (OECD, 2021). This method puts learners in the middle of the learning process and requires them to think, interact and take ownership of their learning. As CBL-style reforms are increasingly being implemented in education systems, it is becoming clear that student success in these systems encompasses more than simply cognitive ability, requiring students to have »psychological and emotional« abilities (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2022).

One psychological factor that appears to be increasingly relevant in this regard is that of academic resilience. Academic resilience is defined as students' ability to effectively deal with challenge, adversity, threat or other relevant stresses in the academic setting (e.g., skin in the game, challenge in facing the challenge) (Martin & Marsh, 2020). It can be interpreted as including persistence, adaptive help seeking, emotional regulation and positive attributions for failure. Previous findings show that students with a higher degree of academic resilience are more likely to be successful in challenging learning environments and maintain their efforts for longer periods (Cassidy, 2021), in particular in educational systems, where students are expected to be self-regulated concerning their learning and performance on a constant basis. In competency-based systems, where advancement is based on proven mastery rather than time sitting in a chair, resilience is a must.

Although the significance of academic resilience has been well established, there is information that suggests resilience by itself is not enough to account for the differences between students in the efficacy of effort to competence translation (Mayer et al., 2020). Researchers have suggested that emotional processes occurring within the mind affect how resilience-centric behaviors are performed in learning contexts. Students can succeed in terms of academic persistence yet have difficulty managing frustration, anxiety, or the demands for feedback that are a part of problem/case-based learning (PBL/CBL) environments. This has also attracted growing interest from researchers towards emotional intelligence as a potential construct that might mediate the effect of resilience on learning outcomes (Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2021).

Recent studies are increasingly conceptualizing emotional intelligence as a mediator between psychological characteristics and academic performance (Li et al., 2022). Mediation models advocate that emotional intelligence mediates the way that the dimensions of academic resilience (perseverance, adaptive help-seeking and emotional response) affect learning performance. Empirical findings have shown that resilient students with greater EI are better able to overcome emotional challenges and continue on with productive learning, which leads them to higher academic achievement (Extremer & Fernández-Berrocal, 2023). This viewpoint extends the understanding in direct-effects models by introducing emotional intelligence as a critical affective-cognitive mechanism.

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However, very few studies have directly investigated emotional intelligence as a mediator between the academic resilience and competency-based learning outcomes among secondary school students. The preponderance of the literature strips resilience and emotional intelligence as separate and distinct predictors of learning, with less examination of their synergy or interactive dynamics in pedagogical contexts that are learner-centered. Filling this gap is critical to enhance theoretical understanding of non-cognitive skill integration and to inform educational discussions of the manner in which emotional and psychological components associate with competence within the context of modern secondary education systems.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Emotional Intelligence as a Core Non-Cognitive Construct in Education**

Non-cognitive abilities, such as emotional intelligence, have been more and more understood as a core factor affecting the process and outcome of students' learning. Emotional intelligence is widely defined by today's educators as the ability to perceive emotions in oneself and others, manage emotional responses, and employ emotional-related information to facilitate thought and action effectively (Keefer et al., 2020). In learning contexts that press for independence and self-regulation, emotional intelligence is more crucial as students can be expected to manage emotional responses to feedback, challenge and delay success on their own (Chang & Cho, 2013). Some scholars contend that emotional intelligence equips students with the emotional resilience to persist amidst academic stress in open and output based educational structures (Zeidner & Matthews, 2021). Although, sceptics warn that emotional intelligence is a fuzzy concept and the understanding of which way it influences learning processes is complicated, thus demanding more analytical investigation.

### **2.2 Academic Resilience as a Foundation for Competency Development**

Academic resilience is commonly conceptualized as the scientific study of students' effective academic functioning or performance in the presence of academic stressors (challenge coursework, repeated assessment, or failure) (Martin, 2013). Resilience is increasingly described as not a trait but a temporary process influenced by emotional, motivational, and contextual elements (Howard & Johnson, 2020). Such learner-centered contexts (CBL) encourage persistence and continuous effort until a learner attains competence. Yet a few scholars contend that developing resilience does not necessarily ensure the development of competence, because students may continue to pursue a course of action if they are not successfully modifying their learning methods (Ungar, 2021). This critique underscores the importance of discovering the mediating mechanisms through which resilience acts as a driver of successful learning outcomes.

### **2.3 Competency-Based Learning and Emotional Demands on Learners**

Competency-based education places strong emotional and cognitive demands on students, who are expected to master content, be staged assessed, and take responsibility for their own learning. Learners are confronted with non-linear progression, performance feedback and self-paced learning, which may cause anxiety, frustration and/or disengagement (Ryan & Deci,

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2020). Researchers argue that CBL contexts magnify the importance of emotional competencies because students are required to regulate their own emotional states to continue through mastery cycles (Gervais, 2022). Although advocates for CBL argue that these kinds of environments contribute to more profound learning, critics point out that in the absence of sufficient emotional support, CBL may put students with lower capacities for emotional regulation at a disadvantage, further exacerbating inequities in learning outcomes.

#### **2.4 Emotional Intelligence and Its Relationship with Academic Resilience**

An increasing number of studies indicate a positive association between emotional intelligence and academic resilience. Students with greater emotional intelligence are more able to view academic failure as a challenge that can be overcome rather than as a reflection of their own shortcomings, which facilitates adaptive coping and motivation (Parker et al., 2021). Emotional regulation, a sub dimension of emotional intelligence, is associated with decreased academic stress (Onyango et al., 2020) and positive perseverance in the face of challenging educational activities. In contrast, resilience may increase without improvement in emotional intelligence through external buffers such as teacher support and institutional mechanisms (Masten, 2021). This contrast brings up the question of whether emotional intelligence is the ‘sum and substance’ of resilience, or simply one contributing factor among many.

#### **2.5 Emotional Intelligence as a Mediator Between Resilience and Learning Outcomes**

Emotional intelligence is being more widely seen as a mediator in the relationships between resilience and academic outcomes in recent mediation literature. In line with this view, resilient behaviors (persevering, seeking help) are more likely to positively influence learning outcomes when students have the emotional abilities needed to manage frustration, make sense of feedback in a non-defensive way, and maintain their efforts towards goals (Lomas et al., 2021). Hence, emotional intelligence is a psychological pathway through which resilience translates into engaged learning. Yet, this presumption has been contested by a few scholars who hypothesized that cognitive strategies such as metacognition could mediate resilience to a greater extent than emotional components in rigor demanding setting of education (Greene et al., 2022).

#### **2.6 Self-Regulation as a Key Pathway in EI Mediation Models**

Self-regulation is commonly reported as a key mechanism in the mediation of emotional intelligence effect. Emotional intelligence provides students with the ability to track emotional states, manage impulses and sustain attention, and all are conducive to self-regulated learning (Panadero, 2020). In CB learning environments, in which learners are required to plan, monitor, and evaluate their progress on their own, self-regulation is crucial to turning resilience into competence. But there are also critical voices: some argue that an excessive focus on self-regulation and emotional literacy may obscure structural barriers in classrooms that constrain all students’ agency, emotional skills notwithstanding (Biesta, 2021).

#### **2.7 Adaptive Help-Seeking and Emotional Intelligence**

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Seeking adaptive help is yet another significant aspect that bridges the gap between emotional intelligence and academic resilience. Emotionally intelligent students are also more likely to identify when they require help and to ask for it without fear of stigma or embarrassment (Newman & Callahan, 2022). This is especially true in the context of CBL considering that students are expected to interact with teachers and peers to discuss and reach a mutual understanding of expectations and they are driven to engage in active communication. Yet, some research point to the fact that help seeking can be affected by the classroom climate and teacher supportiveness, suggesting that emotional intelligence may not be the sole predictor of adaptive help seeking (Järvelä et al., 2021).

### **2.8 Emotional Response to Failure and Mastery Learning**

CBL environments normalize failure as a natural part of learning, which also makes emotional reactions during failure important to consider. Emotional intelligence helps learners to cope with frustration, persist in their expectations and re-engage in learning activities following a failed attempt (Pekrun et al., 2021). Students who have a lower emotional intelligence may view failure as proof that they are incapable and their motivation is diminished even though the levels of resiliency are very high for them. However, it is also said that the emotional effect of failing repeatedly can be devastating, and that the development of emotional intelligence could be greatly enhanced by instructional scaffolding and systems of supportive feedback (Hattie, 2023).

### **2.9 Contrasting Scholarly Views on the Centrality of Emotional Intelligence**

Although many scholars highlight emotional intelligence as the mediator, some others warn that is overstating this importance. Some have even argued that emotional intelligence is nothing more than a repackaging of personality traits like conscientiousness and are questioning its unique construct status (Credé et al., 2021). Others have proposed that cognitive engagement and instructional design may have greater influence on competency achievement than emotional variables. Such contrasting views suggest that more nuanced models are needed that locate emotional intelligence as one element in a system of academic functioning rather than as a lone explanatory variable.

### **2.10 Implications for Competency-Based Learning Theory**

The literature suggests that emotional intelligence plays a meaningful but context-dependent mediating role in the relationship between academic resilience and competency-based learning outcomes. Emotional intelligence enhances learners' capacity to regulate emotions, engage adaptively with challenges and sustain effort toward mastery, thereby strengthening the impact of resilience on competence development. However, its influence is shaped by interacting factors such as self-regulation, learning environment and instructional support. A balanced theoretical approach recognizes emotional intelligence as a critical affective-cognitive mechanism while acknowledging the limitations and competing explanations identified in contemporary scholarship.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine the mediating influence of emotional intelligence on the relationship between academic resilience and competency-based learning (CBL). The mixed methods approach was suitable for this study as it enabled the researcher to capture the advantages of the quantitative and qualitative data in the one study. Quantitative data provided statistical testing of mediation among core constructs, while qualitative data revealed rich contextual insights about how emotional intelligence and resilience are lived in competency-based learning contexts. The simultaneous collection of these two types of data has the advantage of improving the completeness and trustworthiness of the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021).

#### **3.2 Study Population**

The sample consisted of 12,640 students from public and private secondary schools in the districts of Mukono and Kayunga. This included S1-S4 students, teachers, headteachers and DEOs. These two groups were chosen as they constitute the key players in the teaching, learning and management of competence-based education. Students were the main unit of analysis, as students were the direct recipients of CBL and therefore primary beneficiaries, while teachers, headteachers and education officers contributed additional insights on teaching approaches, student engagement and policy enactment (Cohen et al., 2021).

#### **3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Procedures**

A sample of 388 participants was drawn from the population employing a sampling technique that was suitable to maintain representativeness and feasibility. The sample size was deemed sufficient for structural equation modeling (SEM) as this method requires large samples to obtain stable parameter estimates. Scholars require samples in excess of 200 for any meaningful results (Kline, 2023) especially when the analysis includes more than one latent variable. The diversity of the sample (different type of school, different professional position) added reliability to external validity and to the findings.

#### **3.4 Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected by means of questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. Surveys were given to students to gather quantitative data for academic resilience, emotional intelligence, and competency-based learning outcomes. In order to gather detailed information on teaching practices and support for learners, interviews were held with teachers, headteachers and district education officers. Group discussion also allowed participants to exchange shared experiences and reflections: this produced rich qualitative data on the interaction of group dynamics. Triangulation and the credibility of the findings of the study were enhanced by employing multiple methods of data collection (Patton, 2020).

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### **3.5 Validity and Reliability of Instruments**

The survey instruments were validated and reliability tested prior to the commencement of the full study. All the items in the measurement scales showed an acceptable level of reliability having Cronbach's alpha values above the suggested cut off value of 0.70, which indicates adequate internal consistency. Validity was also established through construct validation techniques in that the items did adequately capture the latent constructs. To confirm that the results of this study are trustworthy and the measurement error is minimized, establishing validity and reliability was important (Hair et al., 2022).

### **3.6 Data Analysis Procedures**

Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS v26 and AMOS v24. Analysis Data screening, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were performed using SPSS 3. AMOS was chosen for the SEM analyses because it allows testing complex relations among more than two latent variables at the same time. The Application of SEM was also considered suitable for mediation effect analysis as this approach allowed for the estimation of direct and indirect relationships in a real sense (Byrne, 2022).

#### **3.6.1 Measurement Model Specification**

The measurement model was assessed via Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in SEM analysis. CFA was performed to establish the validity of the latent factors of academic resilience, emotional intelligence and competency based learning. To enhance the clarity of constructs and the quality of the model, items with factor loadings less than 0.50 were dropped. Composite reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were tested to verify the internal consistency and convergent validity. This procedure is also in accordance with the recommendations for measurement validation in SEM studies (Hair et al., 2022).

#### **3.6.2 Structural Model and Mediation Analysis**

The second step involved testing the structural model to examine the direct and indirect relationships among academic resilience dimensions (perseverance, adaptive helping skills and emotional response), emotional intelligence as the mediator and competency-based learning as the outcome variable. Mediation was assessed using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, following the approach recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). A 95% confidence interval was used to determine the significance of indirect effects, with mediation established when the interval did not include zero. Model adequacy was evaluated using fit indices such as chi-square divided by degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2/df$ ), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), which are widely accepted indicators of good model fit (Kline, 2023).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Descriptive statistics on emotional intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EI) was measured across key domains including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These dimensions are considered essential for academic success in performance-oriented learning models such as CBL.

**Table 1: Learners’ perceptions of emotional intelligence**

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I recognize my emotional strengths and weaknesses	4.05	0.71
I can control my emotional reactions to academic pressure	4.12	0.68
I stay motivated even when learning becomes difficult	4.20	0.66
I empathize with classmates who are struggling academically	4.14	0.67
I interact positively with others during group assignments	4.18	0.65
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>4.14</b>	<b>0.67</b>

Source: Field Data (2024)

The overall high mean score (4.14) indicates that learners exhibit moderate to strong emotional intelligence traits relevant to the learning context.

#### 4.2 Correlation matrix for mediation variables

The correlations among the independent (resilience constructs), mediating (emotional intelligence), and dependent (CBL) variables were examined prior to the mediation analysis.

**Table 2: Correlation matrix among key constructs**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perseverance	1				
2. Adaptive Help Skills	0.672**	1			
3. Emotional Response	0.653**	0.621**	1		
4. Emotional Intelligence	0.701**	0.682**	0.668**	1	
5. CBL Perception	0.648**	0.607**	0.586**	0.719**	1

**p < 0.01**

Source: Field Data (2024)

All independent variables were significantly and positively correlated with emotional intelligence and competency-based learning, confirming the suitability of proceeding with mediation analysis.

#### 4.3 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis

A full SEM model was tested using AMOS 24 to assess the mediating role of emotional intelligence. The model examined direct and indirect paths between the resilience dimensions (perseverance, adaptive help-seeking, and emotional response) and CBL, mediated by emotional intelligence.

**Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling results**

Pathway	Coefficient	p-value
Perseverance → Emotional Intelligence	0.59	0.000
Adaptive Help Skills → Emotional Intelligence	0.55	0.000
Emotional Response → Emotional Intelligence	0.52	0.000
Emotional Intelligence → Competency-Based Learning	0.64	0.000
Perseverance → CBL (Direct)	0.21	0.002
Adaptive Help Skills → CBL (Direct)	0.19	0.003
Emotional Response → CBL (Direct)	0.18	0.004

Model fit indices:  $\chi^2 = 3.562$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.168$ ; CFI = 0.984; RMSEA = 0.035

Source: Field Data (2024)

The SEM model fit well. Emotional intelligence partially mediated the association between each dimension of academic resilience and competency-based learning. The indirect effects via EI were significant, showing that students with high EI are more capable of transforming their resilience to a positive engagement in CBL.

**Table 4: Bootstrapped Indirect Effects of Emotional Intelligence as Mediator**

Pathway	Indirect Effect	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	Mediation Status
Perseverance → EI → CBL	0.379	[0.298, 0.472]	Partial
Adaptive Helping Skills → EI → CBL	0.353	[0.277, 0.439]	Partial
Emotional Response → EI → CBL	0.334	[0.254, 0.423]	Partial

Note: Indirect effects are statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ . Mediation is established since none of the confidence intervals include zero. (Bootstrap resampling = 5,000).

These results confirm that emotional intelligence significantly mediates the relationship between each resilience factor and learners’ engagement with competency-based learning. The mediation is partial, meaning that while emotional intelligence explains a substantial portion of the relationship, the direct effects of the resilience dimensions remain significant.

**Qualitative Validation of The Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence**

Interviews and focus group discussions confirmed the functional role of emotional intelligence in enhancing learners' ability to adapt to the CBL environment. Students with strong emotional awareness and interpersonal skills reported greater ease in managing feedback, coordinating group tasks, and sustaining motivation.

## 5. Conclusion

This study confirms that emotional intelligence is a key mediator in the relationship between academic resilience and engagement in competence-based education among high school students. Results indicate that resilience, by itself, is not enough for learners to take full advantage of CBL structures; what emotional intelligence does is empower students to cope with the emotional and interpersonal challenges of mastery-oriented learning environments. Emotional intelligence could act as a self-regulating system, facilitating learners to positively interpret academic challenges, to stay motivated in challenging learning activities and to associate perseverance with the development of worthwhile competence.

In the context of secondary school students, who are still developing in terms of emotion and sociality, the mediating role of emotional intelligence is meaningful. Secondary school students in CBL platforms tend to have more academic workload, peer interactions, and expectations on their performance. The implications of the present study are that emotionally intelligent students have an advantage in overcoming such difficulties by controlling their emotional feelings, maintaining motivation, and having constructive communications with their peers and instructors. Consequently, emotional intelligence enhances the indirect effect of resilience on learning through resilient behaviors, while it does not substitute the direct effect of resilience behaviors.

The study affirms that competency-based learning in secondary schools operates within an affective-cognitive space where emotional processes matter alongside academic effort. Emotional intelligence emerges as a key interpretive lens for understanding learner engagement and competence development in such systems. By mediating the relationship between resilience and learning outcomes, emotional intelligence helps explain variations in how students respond to similar academic demands, thereby deepening theoretical understanding of learner functioning within contemporary secondary education environments.

### 5.1 Recommendations

Secondary school administrators are advised to weave structured measures for EI development (e.g. reflective sessions, peer interaction activities, emotion-regulation practices) into the fabric of their daily routine, to prepare students to turn academic resilience into 'real-world' engagement with competency learning tasks.

Regular teachers ought to intentionally incorporate emotional intelligence skills like emotional awareness, self-regulation, and empathy into their delivery of lessons and assessment feedback so that students may handle exasperation, continue through challenges of mastery, and reply positively to iterative feedback while working within the CBL framework.

The counseling and guidance services in secondary schools need to adapt their intervention programs to align with emotional intelligence abilities, emphasizing the understanding and regulation of students' academic emotions, so that emotional routes through which resilience contributes to ongoing learning and the development of competence are consolidated.

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Heads of departments and subject coordinators are encouraged to promote similar overarching learning behaviours emotionally intelligent behaviours (such as respectful communication, the provision of peer support, help-seeking adaptively) which equip the learners to turn perseverance into the meaningful attainment of competence.

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