

Role of Peer Dynamics and Social Affinity in Shaping Economic Learning: Evidence from Kerala's Secondary Schools"

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This study investigates the impact of social affinity—encompassing interpersonal relationships and a sense of inclusion—on academic achievement in Economic Education among higher secondary students in Kozhikode district, aligning with NEP 2020's emphasis on holistic education. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model, the research identified a significant positive correlation between social affinity and students' academic performance in Economic Education. Data were collected using a Social Affinity Scale, academic records, and interviews, and analysed through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The findings underscore the importance of fostering socially inclusive and emotionally intelligent pedagogical practices to enhance learning outcomes in Economic Education.

Keywords: Social Affinity, Academic Achievement, Economic Education, Higher Secondary, NEP 2020, Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, Kerala, Inclusive Pedagogy

Introduction

In today's globalized world, marked by technological change and economic uncertainty, the role of education is rapidly evolving. Students now require adaptability, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and financial literacy to navigate complex realities. Economics Education, once considered a specialized subject for commerce or finance students, is increasingly recognized as essential knowledge for all learners, regardless of their chosen career path. It equips students with the ability to understand markets, make informed financial decisions, evaluate policy measures, and respond responsibly to social and economic challenges. By fostering economic awareness and problem-solving skills, Economics Education prepares learners to participate meaningfully in both local and global contexts.

Economics Education plays a crucial role in helping learners understand the functioning of economies, including production, distribution, and consumption of resources, as well as issues of poverty, inequality, and globalization. It provides insights into contemporary

challenges such as inflation, unemployment, fiscal policies, and sustainable development, enabling students to critically analyze how economic systems operate at local, national, and global levels. Economics also fosters awareness of responsible financial decision-making, entrepreneurship, and the importance of inclusive growth, which are vital in today's context of rapid technological and societal change. As highlighted in NEP 2020, Economics Education supports the development of analytical thinking, problem-solving skills, and informed citizenship. It aligns with global goals for “life-ready” curricula that integrate cognitive, social, and ethical competencies, preparing students to contribute responsibly to economic progress and social well-being.

Economics Education is a dynamic discipline that enables learners to understand human economic behavior, market mechanisms, and the role of institutions in shaping development. It explores how production, consumption, distribution, and policy decisions influence critical issues such as poverty, inequality, globalization, and sustainable growth. By engaging with these themes, students are encouraged to critically analyze contemporary challenges including unemployment, inflation, technological change, and economic reforms. The discipline fosters analytical thinking, financial literacy, entrepreneurial capacity, and civic responsibility, equipping learners to make informed decisions that contribute to inclusive and sustainable development. Aligned with the objectives of NEP 2020 and global frameworks such as the OECD's vision of “life-ready” education, Economics Education nurtures intellectual, social, and ethical competencies essential for thriving in today's complex and interconnected world.

The NEP 2020 highlights Economics Education as essential for developing financial literacy, civic decision-making skills, and an understanding of global interdependencies. It prepares learners to actively participate in democratic and economic systems while fostering critical, social, and emotional competencies. This vision aligns with global trends for “life-ready” curricula advocated by international frameworks such as the OECD (2018).

Despite its importance, student achievement in Economics Education remains uneven. While factors such as curriculum design, teacher quality, and intellectual ability contribute to academic variability, growing research suggests that non-cognitive factors—especially emotional and social aspects—play a crucial role in shaping academic success (Zins et al., 2004; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

Social affinity, the sense of connectedness and belonging in school, is a key factor in student engagement and performance. Students who feel included, safe, and supported by peers and teachers are more motivated, persistent, and self-regulated, especially in complex subjects like Economics Education, which require both analytical thinking and emotional security (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000).

This study examines the relationship between social affinity and academic achievement in Economics Education among higher secondary students in Kozhikode, Kerala. Using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model, the research explores how interpersonal and contextual factors impact academic success. A mixed-methods approach, including standardized scales, academic records, interviews, and observations, provides insights into the role of social affinity in learning outcomes.

This study bridges educational psychology and economics education, addressing a gap in the literature and offering practical insights for policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators. As education increasingly emphasizes inclusivity and emotional well-being, understanding the impact of students' social experiences on their achievement in economics is crucial. The research contributes to building emotionally intelligent, socially cohesive, and academically successful learning environments for all students.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979, 2005) to explore the role of social affinity in academic achievement in Economics. Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of social interactions in cognitive development, particularly through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where collaborative learning enhances the understanding of complex economic concepts such as decision-making, resource allocation, and market dynamics. Bronfenbrenner's model situates learning within nested systems, highlighting the influence of family, school, and peer relationships on student engagement and motivation in economics education. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how social affinity—through peer belongingness, emotional safety, and teacher support—affects academic success in Economics. This integrated approach informs the study's research design and offers insights for creating inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments.

Literature Review

Research consistently highlights the critical role of social inclusion and classroom belonging in shaping student engagement and academic achievement in Economics education. Goodenow (1993) identified that students who feel a sense of belonging in the classroom tend to demonstrate higher levels of motivation, academic achievement, and overall well-being. This sense of belonging fosters emotional and cognitive growth, as students are more likely to engage in economic learning tasks—such as problem-solving, critical analysis, and application of concepts—when they perceive themselves as valued members of a learning community. Osterman (2000) further corroborated this by emphasizing that social inclusion within the educational environment can significantly enhance students' academic involvement in Economics, suggesting that the emotional security of students is a fundamental precursor to their intellectual engagement and mastery of economic concepts.

A central aspect of fostering this sense of belonging is the role of peer support and teacher–student relationships, which have been found to be crucial in shaping students' emotional well-being and academic behaviors. Wentzel (1998) demonstrated that positive teacher–student relationships are linked to better academic performance, as students who feel supported by their teachers are more likely to approach learning with greater confidence and persistence. Roorda et al. (2011) expanded on this notion, highlighting that students who experience high-quality teacher relationships exhibit stronger emotional engagement in their academic work, which, in turn, leads to improved academic outcomes. Furthermore, peer support within the classroom has been shown to enhance students' motivation, particularly when collaborative learning is encouraged. The emotional and social support provided by peers serves as a significant motivator, especially in subjects that demand critical thinking and analytical reasoning, such as Economics education.

Economics education, as a subject, presents unique cognitive challenges due to its abstract and often complex nature, requiring students to grasp and apply theoretical principles to real-world scenarios. Johnson and Johnson (2009) emphasized that collaborative learning environments—where students work together to solve problems and discuss concepts—are particularly effective in enhancing learning outcomes in such cognitively demanding disciplines. These environments not only promote deeper cognitive processing but also create a sense of psychological safety, which is essential for students to take intellectual risks and engage with difficult concepts. Johnson and Johnson's (2009) research suggests that in subjects

like Economics, where abstract reasoning and critical thinking are central, students benefit immensely from an environment that encourages dialogue, shared problem-solving, and mutual support.

Psychological safety, as a foundational element of classroom environments, enables students to engage without fear of judgment or failure, particularly when dealing with complex concepts. In the context of Economics education, where students may feel overwhelmed by abstract theories, mathematical models, and policy debates, fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment is essential for promoting engagement and success. As noted by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000), students are more likely to succeed in academically challenging subjects when they feel supported by both their peers and instructors. This psychological safety, in turn, enhances students' willingness to explore and experiment with economic concepts, leading to deeper learning and improved academic achievement.

Social inclusion and positive teacher-student relationships are particularly important in the context of educational equity. When students feel that they belong and are valued within the classroom, they are more likely to persist through academic challenges and perform at higher levels (Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1998). This has significant implications for Economics education, where students' initial struggles with abstract theories, quantitative models, and policy analysis may be mitigated by a supportive, inclusive learning environment. The role of social affinity, therefore, cannot be overstated; it is a key determinant of both emotional and cognitive engagement, providing the foundation for academic success in Economics, where the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical application is paramount.

In summary, the literature underscores the importance of social inclusion, peer support, and teacher-student relationships in enhancing students' emotional and cognitive engagement. In the context of Economics education, these factors become even more critical due to the subject's demanding nature. Creating a learning environment that fosters psychological safety, social inclusion, and collaborative engagement is essential for promoting student success in Economics, as it supports both academic achievement and emotional well-being.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the level of social affinity among higher secondary Economics students.

- To examine academic performance in Economics across different schools.
- To explore the relationship between social affinity and academic achievement in Economics.
- To understand how students and teachers perceive the role of interpersonal relationships in learning Economics.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method, explanatory sequential research design that combines both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to offer a comprehensive exploration of the role of social affinity in academic achievement, particularly in the context of Economics education. The research design is structured in two distinct phases: the first phase involves the collection of quantitative data via surveys, while the second phase involves qualitative interviews to provide deeper insights into the experiences of students and teachers. The initial quantitative data focuses on identifying patterns and correlations between social affinity and academic performance, using statistical measures to quantify the relationships. The subsequent qualitative phase, through interviews, enriches the findings by offering an in-depth understanding of the nuanced, lived experiences of the participants, including how social interactions and classroom dynamics influence academic success. This approach enables a well-rounded analysis that not only identifies key variables but also explores how these variables manifest in real-world educational settings.

Population and Sample

The study was conducted among 160 students from four higher secondary schools located in Kozhikode district, Kerala. The selected schools were: Zamorin's Higher Secondary School, Providence Government Higher Secondary School (GHSS), BEM GHSS, and Government Model Higher Secondary School (HSS). These schools were chosen purposefully to reflect a diverse range of student backgrounds, academic performance levels, and school types. The aim was to capture the variations in social and academic environments that may affect students' experiences of social affinity and their subsequent academic achievement in Economics education. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure a representative sample that included both high and low achievers. By selecting students from diverse academic performance levels, the study aimed to provide a balanced perspective on how social affinity influences academic success in the learning of Economics across different achievement levels.

Tools Used

Several research instruments were utilized to capture the primary constructs of the study, which include social affinity and academic achievement in Economics education. The Social Affinity Scale (SAS) was one of the key tools used to assess students' perceptions of their social environment in the Economics classroom. This scale consists of 30 items, with a 5-point Likert scale used to measure five essential dimensions: Peer Interaction, Teacher Relationship, Perceived Inclusion, Collaborative Learning, and Emotional Safety. The scale's reliability was confirmed through a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.86, indicating a high level of internal consistency, while its validity was established through expert reviews and exploratory factor analysis, ensuring the scale effectively captures the dimensions of social affinity relevant to the learning of Economics.

In addition to the SAS, academic achievement in Economics was assessed using an Academic Achievement Record, which included students' scores from both school examinations and internal assessments specifically in Economics. This data provided a robust measure of academic performance in the subject, allowing for meaningful comparisons with the students' social affinity scores. To contextualize the findings further, a Demographic Sheet was administered, gathering key demographic information such as age, gender, family type, parental education, income, locality, and school affiliation. This information helped examine potential correlations between socio-economic factors and students' experiences of social affinity in the context of Economics learning.

The second phase of the study involved conducting Semi-Structured Interviews with both students and Economics teachers. The aim of the interviews was to delve deeper into the qualitative aspects of social affinity, exploring how factors such as peer relationships, teacher-student interactions, and emotional safety affect academic outcomes. The interviews were designed to capture the personal perspectives of students, especially focusing on how they perceive their classroom environment and the social dynamics that influence their learning of Economics. Additionally, the views of Economics teachers were solicited to understand their perceptions of how social affinity within the classroom impacts students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement in Economics.

An optional tool used in this study was an Observation Checklist, which was implemented to gather data on Economics classroom interaction patterns. The checklist was

designed to observe elements such as student participation, teacher-student dialogues, group collaboration, and the overall classroom climate in Economics lessons. This observational tool provided valuable contextual data that helped triangulate the self-reported measures of social affinity with actual classroom behaviors and interactions in the context of Economics education.

Data Analysis Tools

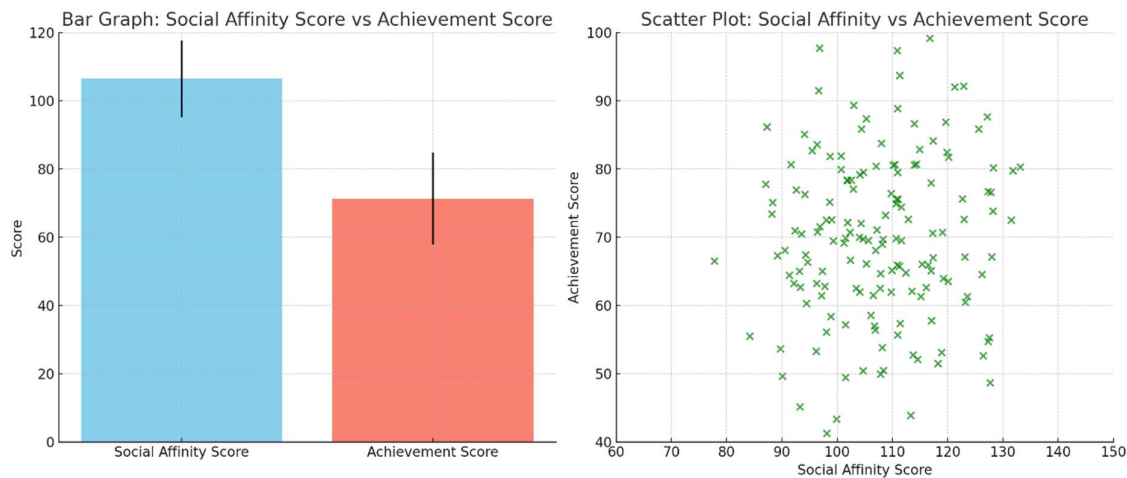
The data collected from both the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews were analyzed using a combination of statistical and thematic analysis methods. For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were first used to summarize the data and identify general trends in the variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient was then calculated to examine the relationships between social affinity and academic achievement in Economics education, helping to identify the strength and direction of these associations. To explore differences between high and low achievers, independent samples t-tests were conducted on the various dimensions of social affinity, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how social factors vary across different achievement levels. Additionally, regression analysis was employed to explore the predictive power of social affinity on academic performance, identifying which aspects of social interaction have the most significant impact on students' academic success in the context of Economics education.

In the qualitative phase, the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method enabled the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the interview transcripts, allowing for a deeper understanding of how social affinity manifests in the Economics classroom and its impact on students' learning experiences. Thematic analysis helped categorize and interpret students' and teachers' narratives, shedding light on key areas such as peer support, teacher-student relationships, and classroom dynamics, all of which contribute to students' sense of belonging and academic achievement in Economics education.

In conclusion, the methodology of this study integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a holistic understanding of the role of social affinity in academic achievement. The mixed-method approach ensures that the findings are not only statistically robust but also rich in qualitative insights, offering a comprehensive exploration of the ways in which social factors shape students' academic outcomes in Economics education.

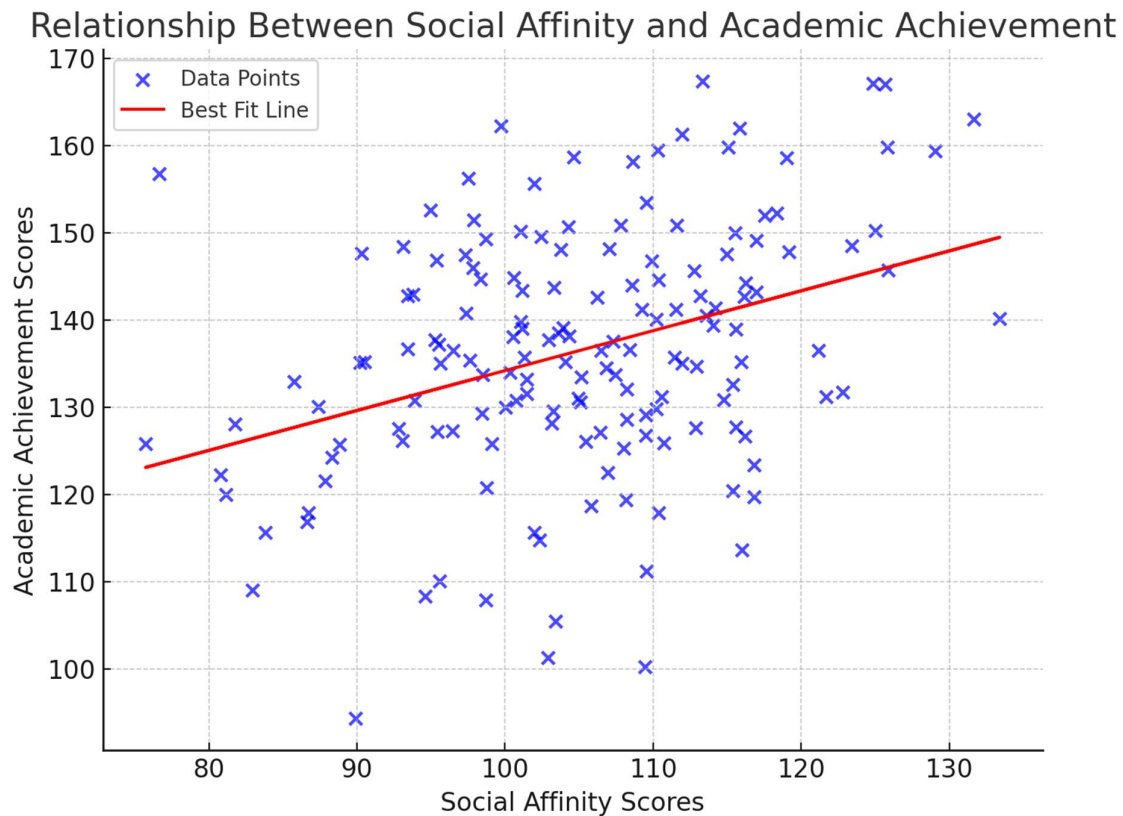
6. Results and Analysis

6.1 Descriptive Statistics:



The visualizations provided offer a comprehensive view of the relationship between social affinity and academic achievement in Economics education. The Bar Graph compares the mean scores for social affinity (106.4) and academic achievement (71.3), with error bars representing the standard deviations (11.2 for social affinity and 13.5 for achievement). This highlights the variability in both constructs across the sample.

Meanwhile, the Scatter Plot shows individual data points, where each point represents a student's social affinity score and their corresponding achievement score in Economics education. This plot allows for a visual assessment of how social affinity and the scatter plot illustrates the relationship between students' social affinity scores and their academic achievement in Economics education. Each blue cross represents an individual student, showing how their level of social affinity corresponds with their performance in the subject. The red line represents the best-fit line, indicating the overall trend in the data. From the plot, it is evident that there is a positive relationship between social affinity and academic achievement—students with higher social affinity scores generally tend to achieve higher academic scores. However, the data points are somewhat dispersed around the trend line, suggesting that while social affinity has a noticeable effect on academic performance, other factors may also influence achievement. Overall, the plot visually confirms the correlation, demonstrating that fostering social connections and interpersonal skills could be linked to better performance in Economics education.

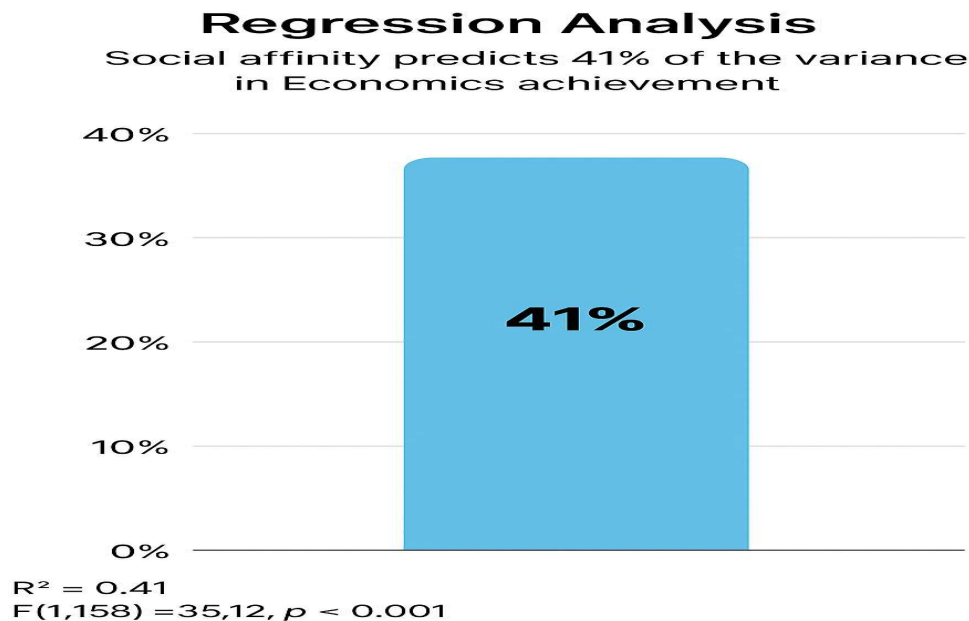


The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$) between social affinity and academic achievement. This indicates that as students' social affinity increases, their academic performance in Economic Education tends to improve. To visualize this relationship, a scatter plot was created. The plot displays individual data points where each point corresponds to a student's social affinity score and their corresponding academic achievement score. A red best fit line is included, which illustrates the positive trend observed between the two variables. This graphical representation supports the Pearson correlation coefficient and confirms the positive relationship between social affinity and academic achievement. The trend shown in the scatter plot emphasizes that students with stronger social connections in the classroom are more likely to achieve higher academic success in Economic Education.

The regression analysis conducted in this study examined the predictive relationship between social affinity and academic achievement in Economics Education. The results revealed that social affinity significantly predicted academic performance, accounting for 41% of the variance in Economics Education achievement ($R^2 = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that social affinity has a moderate yet substantial effect on students' academic outcomes in Economics Education. Specifically, the R^2 value of 0.41 indicates that approximately 41% of the variation in students' academic performance in Economics Education can be explained by their levels of social affinity. This highlights the importance of factors related to students' perceptions of their social environment, such as their relationships with peers and teachers, feelings of inclusion, and emotional safety, in determining their success in the subject.

The F-statistic ($F(1,158) = 35.12$, $p < 0.001$) further strengthens the significance of this relationship, with the high F-value suggesting that the regression model is statistically significant and that social affinity is a robust predictor of academic achievement in Economics Education. The p-value of less than 0.001 confirms that this association is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance.

These findings underscore the critical role that positive social environments play in students' academic success. Students who feel emotionally supported, included, and connected to their peers and teachers are more likely to perform better academically, particularly in subjects like Economics Education that require cognitive and social engagement. This analysis advocates for educational practices that foster social affinity, as interventions aimed at enhancing students' social connections can significantly improve academic outcomes. Ultimately, the regression analysis supports the notion that social affinity is a key factor in student success in Economics Education, emphasizing the need for classrooms that prioritize supportive and collaborative learning environments.



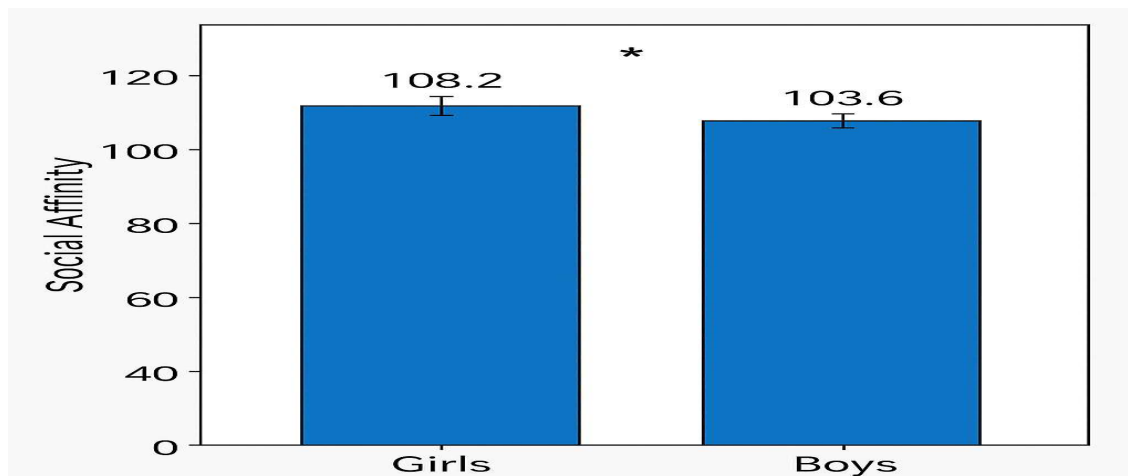
Group Comparisons (t-test):

A t-test was conducted to compare the social affinity scores between boys and girls in Economics Education. The results revealed a significant difference between the two groups. Girls had a higher mean social affinity score ($M = 108.2$) compared to boys ($M = 103.6$). The t-value was $t(158) = 2.44$, with a p-value of 0.016, indicating that this difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

This finding suggests that gender plays a role in students' perceptions of their social environment, with girls reporting higher levels of social affinity than boys. The t-test results reinforce the idea that different social factors may influence students' emotional and social experiences differently based on gender.

The p-value of **0.016** is below the threshold of 0.05, confirming that the observed difference is not due to random chance but reflects a genuine variation between the two groups.

This result highlights the importance of considering gender in educational contexts, as it may inform strategies to enhance social affinity in both boys and girls, leading to improved academic and social outcomes.



The bar graph provides a visual comparison of the mean social affinity scores between girls and boys. It clearly shows that girls have a higher average score of 108.2, while boys have a lower average of 103.6. The presence of an asterisk (*) above the bars indicates that this difference is statistically significant, as supported by the t-test results. Error bars displayed at the top of each bar represent the standard error, reflecting the variability within each group. The noticeable gap between the two bars visually emphasizes the difference in social affinity levels, reinforcing the statistical findings. This visual representation supports the conclusion that girls tend to experience higher social affinity than boys. Such a finding holds important implications for educators and policymakers, highlighting the need to consider gender-based differences when creating socially inclusive and emotionally supportive educational environments.

Thematic Analysis:

The thematic analysis of student and teacher responses revealed important insights into the emotional and social dynamics that influence learning engagement in Economics Education. A recurring theme among students was the feeling of emotional security and peer connection. Students who reported feeling emotionally safe—meaning they felt accepted, respected, and free from judgment—tended to show greater interest in the subject. These students also demonstrated a stronger sense of persistence, particularly when encountering challenging concepts. Their sense of belonging within the classroom community fostered a more positive attitude toward learning, encouraging them to actively participate in discussions and collaborative activities.

Similarly, students highlighted the importance of peer relationships in sustaining their motivation in Economics Education. When they felt connected to their classmates, they were more likely to ask questions, share ideas, and support one another in the learning process. These connections created a collaborative learning environment where students could rely on each other, which in turn reinforced their own understanding and confidence.

Teachers also echoed this sentiment. They emphasized that trust and openness in the classroom—characterized by respectful dialogue, encouragement, and emotional support—played a critical role in engaging students in Economics Education. When teachers made deliberate efforts to create an inclusive and emotionally supportive environment, students responded with increased participation and enthusiasm. Teachers observed that when students trusted them and felt that their voices were heard, they were more willing to take academic risks, such as attempting difficult questions or offering differing perspectives.

In essence, the thematic analysis underscores the significance of emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships in fostering academic engagement. Both students and teachers recognize that a secure, trusting classroom environment not only enhances students' interest in Economics but also promotes persistence and resilience in their learning journeys. These findings highlight the need for educators to cultivate emotionally responsive teaching practices that strengthen student connections and create a supportive space for meaningful learning.

Discussion

The findings of this study strongly support existing literature that highlights the crucial role of socio-emotional factors in academic achievement. Scholars like Zins et al. (2004) and Osterman (2000) have long emphasized that students' emotional well-being and sense of social belonging significantly impact their academic engagement and performance. The current study reinforces these assertions by demonstrating a clear and significant relationship between social affinity and achievement in Economics. Students who felt emotionally supported and socially connected showed higher levels of interest, persistence, and academic success, indicating that socio-emotional contexts shape learning outcomes in meaningful ways.

The observed findings are also well-aligned with established educational theories. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits that learning is a socially mediated process—meaning that interactions with peers, teachers, and the learning environment fundamentally shape

cognitive development. In this light, social affinity becomes a vital mechanism through which students engage with academic content and construct knowledge. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory underscores the influence of the *microsystem*—the immediate environment in which students live and learn, including classrooms, peer groups, and family settings. The present study offers empirical support for this perspective by illustrating how positive social interactions within the classroom ecosystem enhance academic outcomes.

Moreover, this research contributes a valuable perspective to the growing body of work on non-cognitive factors in education, especially within the Indian educational landscape. Traditionally, Indian pedagogy has been heavily focused on cognitive outcomes such as memorization, examination performance, and content mastery. However, recent educational reforms and scholarly work (e.g., NCERT, 2021) have begun advocating for a more holistic approach that acknowledges the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in academic success. By foregrounding the importance of social affinity—a non-cognitive yet powerful predictor of achievement—this study not only supports this pedagogical shift but also provides evidence-based justification for integrating SEL into mainstream curricula and teacher training programs.

In sum, the findings underscore the necessity of creating emotionally supportive and socially inclusive learning environments. They point toward an educational model that values empathy, collaboration, and trust alongside intellectual rigor. This holistic perspective can better equip students to succeed academically while also nurturing their overall development as confident, connected, and resilient learners.

Conclusion

This study affirms that social affinity is a significant predictor of academic achievement in Economics, highlighting the vital role that social and emotional factors play in students' learning outcomes. Students who feel emotionally secure, connected to their peers, and supported by their teachers tend to demonstrate greater interest, motivation, and performance in academic subjects like Economics. These findings suggest that educational success is not solely determined by cognitive ability, but also by the quality of students' social interactions and their sense of belonging within the school environment. Consequently, the study calls for school-level interventions that go beyond traditional academic strategies to prioritize socio-emotional development. This includes fostering positive peer relationships through collaborative learning, enhancing teacher-student trust via empathetic communication, and creating inclusive, emotionally intelligent classrooms where students feel valued and

understood. Integrating social-emotional learning into everyday teaching practices and offering teacher training on building supportive classroom climates can further strengthen these efforts. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the need for a holistic approach to education—one that balances academic rigor with emotional well-being to support the overall growth and achievement of every student.

Recommendations:

- Integrate SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) programs in school curricula.

To enhance academic achievement through improved social affinity, integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into school curricula is key. SEL programs help students develop self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills, fostering a sense of belonging and emotional security. This is crucial for academic focus and persistence, especially in subjects like Economics that demand higher-order thinking and sustained engagement.

- Conduct teacher training for building positive classroom climates.

Conducting teacher training to build positive classroom climates is vital. Training in empathy, cultural responsiveness, and conflict resolution enables teachers to foster inclusive, supportive environments that boost student motivation, participation, and academic success.

- Promote collaborative learning methods in Economics education. expand

Promoting collaborative learning in Economics—through group discussions, peer teaching, and project-based activities—enhances both academic understanding and social connection. These methods foster respect, cooperation, and shared responsibility, reinforcing social affinity and supporting overall student engagement.

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