



Educational Psychology and the Development of Social-Emotional Competence for Inclusive Citizenship Among Students in Some Selected Secondary Schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis.

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of educational psychology on the development of social-emotional competence and its role in promoting inclusive citizenship among some selected secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The study was motivated by contemporary social challenges in Nigeria, including intolerance, poor emotional regulation, and declining civic values, which threaten social cohesion and inclusive participation. Guided by correlational research design, the population comprised 3,200 students from three urban local government areas. A total of 300 students were selected using stratified random sampling techniques. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled Educational Psychology and Social-Emotional Competence Scale (EPSECS). The instrument's validity was established through expert review, while reliability yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87. Data were analyzed using simple regression statistics at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that educational psychology principles significantly influence the development of students' social-emotional competence, and that social-emotional competence significantly predicts inclusive citizenship among secondary school students. The results suggest that when teachers apply psychological principles such as motivation, empathy, reinforcement, and guidance, students become more emotionally intelligent, tolerant, and civically responsible. The study concludes that educational psychology is a critical foundation for nurturing inclusive citizenship through social-emotional learning. It recommends integrating social-emotional learning into the curriculum, continuous teacher training in educational psychology, and stronger collaboration between psychologists, educators, and policymakers to promote an inclusive, emotionally intelligent society.

Keywords: Development, Educational psychology, Inclusive citizenship, Rivers State, Social-emotional competence

Introduction

Education remains one of the most powerful instruments for promoting national development, social cohesion, and democratic citizenship. In contemporary societies, educational systems are increasingly expected to prepare learners not only for academic success but also for effective participation in diverse and rapidly changing social environments. In Nigeria, however,

persistent challenges such as youth unemployment, insecurity, political intolerance, ethnic divisions, social exclusion, and declining civic responsibility continue to undermine national development efforts. These challenges have generated concerns regarding the effectiveness of educational institutions in nurturing emotionally competent, socially responsible, and civically engaged citizens capable of contributing positively to societal progress (Ogunyemi & Adediran, 2022; Obi & Igbokwe, 2023).

The Nigerian educational system has traditionally emphasized cognitive achievement and examination performance, often at the expense of learners' emotional and social development. While academic competence remains important, recent educational research suggests that cognitive knowledge alone is insufficient for addressing complex societal challenges that require empathy, cooperation, resilience, critical thinking, and responsible decision-making. Consequently, educational scholars have advocated for a more holistic approach to learning that integrates intellectual, emotional, and social development (Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2021; CASEL, 2024). Such an approach is particularly relevant in Rivers State, where socio-economic disparities, youth restiveness, political tensions, environmental challenges, and educational inequalities continue to influence the socialization and development of young people.

Rivers State occupies a strategic position within Nigeria's socio-economic landscape due to its vast petroleum resources and industrial significance. Despite its economic importance, the state continues to experience social challenges that threaten social cohesion and inclusive development. Reports of cultism, examination malpractice, school violence, civic disengagement, and antisocial behaviour among youths indicate deficiencies in the development of social and emotional competencies necessary for peaceful coexistence and responsible citizenship. These concerns underscore the need to investigate educational factors capable of fostering learners' emotional intelligence, interpersonal effectiveness, and civic responsibility within the state's educational institutions.

Educational psychology provides a scientific framework for understanding how individuals learn, develop, and interact within educational settings. It examines the cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social processes that influence learning outcomes and learner behaviour. Contemporary educational psychologists emphasize that effective teaching must address the whole learner by promoting intellectual growth alongside emotional and social competence (Ormrod, Jones, & Jones, 2023; Woolfolk, 2024). Among the numerous principles of educational psychology, cognitive development and motivation have received considerable

attention due to their significant influence on learner adjustment, social functioning, and overall development.

Cognitive development refers to the progressive growth of mental processes involved in thinking, reasoning, problem-solving, memory, and decision-making. The concept is closely associated with the work of Jean Piaget (1972), who proposed that individuals construct knowledge through active interaction with their environment. Piaget argued that cognitive development occurs through successive stages characterized by increasingly sophisticated forms of reasoning. Within educational settings, cognitive development enables learners to analyze information critically, understand multiple perspectives, evaluate consequences of actions, and make informed decisions. These cognitive abilities are essential for developing empathy, tolerance, and responsible citizenship in pluralistic societies. As learners acquire higher-order thinking skills, they become better equipped to understand social issues, appreciate diversity, and participate constructively in democratic processes (Woolfolk, 2019).

The significance of cognitive development for social-emotional competence is further supported by Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural experiences in cognitive growth. Vygotsky maintained that learning occurs through collaborative engagement with more knowledgeable others, enabling learners to internalize social values, norms, and problem-solving strategies. This perspective suggests that cognitive development extends beyond intellectual functioning to include the acquisition of social understanding and emotional awareness. Through meaningful interactions within classrooms and communities, learners develop the capacity to recognize others' viewpoints, regulate their emotions, and engage in socially responsible behaviour.

Motivation constitutes another critical principle of educational psychology with significant implications for social-emotional competence and inclusive citizenship. Motivation refers to the internal and external forces that initiate, direct, and sustain behaviour toward achieving specific goals (Slavin, 2020). It influences the degree of effort, persistence, and engagement that learners invest in educational activities. Educational psychologists have consistently demonstrated that motivated learners exhibit greater commitment to learning, stronger interpersonal relationships, and higher levels of self-regulation than their less motivated counterparts (Santrock, 2018). Motivation not only enhances academic performance but also contributes to the development of personal responsibility, resilience, cooperation, and self-confidence.

Several motivational theories provide useful explanations for learner behaviour. Maslow's (1970) Hierarchy of Needs Theory suggests that individuals must satisfy basic physiological, safety, belongingness, and esteem needs before achieving self-actualization. Within educational settings, learners who feel safe, valued, and supported are more likely to develop positive social behaviours and emotional competence. Similarly, Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. When learners perceive themselves as competent and experience meaningful connections with others, they are more likely to exhibit empathy, cooperation, and civic responsibility. These attributes are fundamental components of social-emotional competence and inclusive citizenship.

Social-emotional competence refers to the capacity to understand and manage emotions, establish positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, make responsible decisions, and navigate social situations effectively (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023). The concept encompasses five core domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are increasingly recognized as essential outcomes of education because they contribute significantly to academic success, psychological well-being, and social adjustment (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2012). Individuals who possess strong social-emotional competencies are better able to resolve conflicts peacefully, collaborate with others, respect diversity, and contribute meaningfully to community development.

The concept of inclusive citizenship extends beyond legal membership in a nation-state to encompass active participation, social responsibility, respect for diversity, and commitment to the common good. Inclusive citizenship promotes equal opportunities for all individuals regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, or cultural background (Obi & Igbokwe, 2022). In diverse societies such as Nigeria, inclusive citizenship is essential for fostering national unity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. However, the development of inclusive citizenship requires more than civic knowledge; it necessitates emotional intelligence, empathy, critical thinking, and interpersonal competence. These attributes are closely linked to educational psychology principles, particularly cognitive development and motivation.

The theoretical basis for examining the relationship between educational psychology principles and social-emotional competence is supported by several psychological theories. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory posits that individuals acquire behaviours, attitudes, and

emotional responses through observation and imitation of role models. Within educational environments, teachers serve as influential models whose behaviours shape learners' social and emotional development. Through positive reinforcement, emotional support, and effective classroom interactions, teachers can foster behaviours associated with inclusive citizenship. Likewise, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes that learner development occurs within interconnected environmental systems, including family, school, community, and society. These systems collectively influence cognitive growth, motivation, emotional competence, and citizenship outcomes.

Empirical evidence supports the relationship between educational psychology principles and social-emotional competence. Denham et al. (2012) found that cognitively stimulating and emotionally supportive learning environments significantly enhance learners' social competence and emotional regulation. Similarly, Brackett and Rivers (2014) reported that students exposed to social-emotional learning interventions demonstrated improved interpersonal relationships, reduced behavioural problems, and increased civic engagement. Within the African context, Mabogo (2020) and Wambua (2019) found that educational programmes emphasizing learner motivation, collaborative learning, and emotional development contributed significantly to social cohesion and responsible citizenship among secondary school students.

Despite growing international interest in social-emotional learning and citizenship education, there remains limited empirical research examining how specific educational psychology principles, particularly cognitive development and motivation, contribute to social-emotional competence among learners in Rivers State. Existing Nigerian studies have largely focused on academic achievement, classroom management, and examination performance, with insufficient attention to learners' emotional and social development (Nwachukwu & Uzo, 2020). Consequently, there is a need for context-specific research that investigates how educational psychology can be leveraged to promote social-emotional competence and inclusive citizenship within the unique socio-cultural realities of Rivers State.

The present study therefore seeks to examine the influence of cognitive development and motivation on the development of social-emotional competence for inclusive citizenship in Rivers State. By focusing on these core principles of educational psychology, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on learner development and provide evidence-based recommendations for teacher education, curriculum implementation, educational policy, and citizenship development programmes. Ultimately, the study aspires to support the

development of emotionally intelligent, socially responsible, and inclusive citizens capable of contributing meaningfully to national development and social harmony.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the role of educational psychology in the development of social-emotional competence among learners as a pathway to fostering inclusive citizenship in Rivers State. Specifically, the objectives tend to:

1. Investigate the extent cognitive development predicts the development of social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State.
2. To determine the extent to which motivation predicts the development of social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of cognitive development on the development of social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does motivation among students predict the development of social-emotional competence in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant effect of cognitive development on the development of social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State.
2. Motivation among students does not significantly predict the development of social-emotional competence in Rivers State.

Methodology

This study adopted the correlational research design because it seeks to establish the nature and degree of the relationship between two or more variables, educational psychology principles (independent variable) and social-emotional competence (dependent variable) without manipulating the variables under investigation. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), correlational design is appropriate when the goal is to determine whether, and to what extent, a relationship exists among naturally occurring variables in a given population. In this context, the design allows the researcher to examine the extent educational psychology principles in classroom instruction predicts or relates to students' social-emotional competence and their disposition toward inclusive citizenship. The design is therefore non-experimental but predictive in nature, making it suitable for educational settings where manipulation of variables is ethically or practically unfeasible (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2019).

The population of the study comprised all senior secondary school students in three urban Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Rivers State, Nigeria—namely Port Harcourt City, Obio/Akpor, and Eleme LGAs. These LGAs were purposively selected because they represent diverse urban educational contexts characterized by cultural pluralism, exposure to different teaching methods, and varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The focus on urban areas is justified by the relatively higher concentration of secondary schools and students, as well as the presence of teachers who are more likely to have undergone professional training in educational psychology. Within these LGAs, there are approximately 45 public secondary schools with an estimated student population of about 28,000 (Source: Rivers State Ministry of Education, 2025). From this population, three secondary schools were selected—one from each of the identified LGAs. The selection of the three schools was based on stratified random sampling to ensure that the sample adequately represents the population across gender, school size, and location within the urban context. Stratified random sampling is appropriate in this study because it reduces sampling error and ensures that key subgroups within the population are proportionately represented (Kumar, 2019).

The sample size for the study consisted of 360 students, with 120 students drawn from each of the three selected schools. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, which provides a statistically acceptable sample for a population exceeding 10,000. The decision to focus on senior secondary students (SS I–SS III) was guided by their cognitive maturity and ability to provide reliable self-reports about their emotional and social experiences. Within each school, participants were selected using simple random sampling to give every student an equal chance of being included in the study.

Two instruments were used for data collection, the first is named Educational Psychology and Development Questionnaire (EPDQ) and the second is called Social-Emotional Competence Scale (SECS). The instrument consisted of three main sections. Section A gathered demographic information such as gender, age, class level, and school. Section B measured the extent of exposure to educational psychology principles as perceived by students, including items on motivation and cognitive development. Section C measured social-emotional competence and indicators of inclusive citizenship. The items in this section were adapted from established frameworks of social-emotional learning by CASEL (2023) and Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Model. Responses were measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Very High Extent (4) to Low Extent (1), which allowed for quantitative analysis of attitudes and perceptions.

To ensure validity of the research instrument, the draft questionnaire was subjected to both content and face validation. The researcher submitted the instrument to three experts: one in educational psychology, one in measurement and evaluation, and one in guidance and counselling at the University of Port Harcourt. These experts examined the items for clarity, relevance, coverage of constructs, and alignment with the study's objectives. Their feedback was used to revise ambiguous items, eliminate redundancies, and ensure that each item accurately reflected the intended variable.

The reliability of the research instrument was determined using the internal consistency method. A pilot study was conducted with 30 students from a secondary school in Oyigbo LGA (which was not part of the main study sample) to test the consistency of the instrument. Data from the pilot test were analyzed using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. The overall reliability coefficient obtained was 0.89, indicating high internal consistency. The subscales also yielded acceptable coefficients: 0.86 for educational psychology practices and 0.88 for social-emotional competence.

The method for data collection followed ethical and systematic procedures. First, the researcher obtained an official letter of introduction from the Department of Educational Psychology, which was used to secure permission from the Rivers State Ministry of Education and the principals of the selected schools. Thereafter, the researcher visited each school personally to explain the purpose of the study to teachers and students, emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality of responses. The questionnaires were administered directly to the students during school hours with the assistance of trained research assistants to ensure proper guidance and retrieval. Respondents were given approximately 30 minutes to complete the instrument, after which the researcher collected all copies for analysis. Out of 360 questionnaires distributed, 342 were returned duly completed, representing a 95% response rate suitable for statistical analysis.

For the method of data analysis, the collected data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to predict the effect of educational psychology principles on social-emotional competence. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

Results

Research Question 1:

What is the effect of cognitive development on social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State?

Table 1: The effect of cognitive development on social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.712	0.507	0.505	4.392

The results in Table 1 show a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.712, indicating a strong positive relationship between cognitive development and students' social-emotional competence. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.507$) implies that approximately 50.7% of the variance in social-emotional competence can be explained by the degree to which cognitive development are applied in teaching and learning processes.

Hypothesis 1 (H_{01}):

There is no significant effect of cognitive development on social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State.

Table 2: Model Summary of Simple Regression Analysis on cognitive development and Social-Emotional Competence

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	4185.74	1	4185.74	217.09	0.000
Residual	4071.26	340	11.97		
Total	8257.00	341			

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
Constant	12.857	1.231	—	10.44	0.000
Cognitive development	0.783	0.053	0.712	14.74	0.000

The ANOVA table shows that the regression model is statistically significant, $F(1, 340) = 217.09$, $p < .001$. This means that the model significantly predicts the dependent variable. The regression coefficient ($B = 0.783$, $t = 14.74$, $p < .001$) further reveals that cognitive development positively and significantly predict students' social-emotional competence. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected, indicating that the application of cognitive development has a significant positive influence on the development of social-emotional competence among students in Rivers State.

Research Question 2:

To what extent does motivation among students predict the development of social-emotional competence in Rivers State?

Table 3: The extent to which motivation predicts the development of social-emotional competence in Rivers State

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.654	0.428	0.426	3.985

The results in Table 3 indicate a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.654, suggesting a moderately strong positive relationship between students' motivation and social-emotional competence. The R² value of 0.428 shows that about 42.8% of the variance in social-emotional competence can be explained by motivation.

Hypothesis 2 (H₀₂):

Motivation among students does not significantly predict the development of social-emotional competence in Rivers State.

Table 4: Model Summary of Simple Regression Analysis on Motivation and Social-Emotional Competence

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	2972.18	1	2972.18	187.00	0.000
Residual	5402.82	340	15.89		
Total	8375.00	341			

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
Constant	9.324	1.487	—	6.27	0.000
Motivation	0.692	0.051	0.654	13.67	0.000

The ANOVA results show that the model is statistically significant, $F(1, 340) = 187.00$, $p < .001$, confirming that motivation significantly predicts social-emotional competence. The regression coefficient for motivation ($B = 0.692$, $t = 13.67$, $p < .001$) indicates that a unit increase in students' motivation leads to an average increase of 0.692 units in social-emotional competence. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H₀₂) is rejected, indicating that students 'motivation significantly contributes to social-emotional competence in Rivers State.

Discussion of Results

Educational psychology principles (cognitive development and motivation) not only improves students' academic achievement but also nurtures empathy, tolerance, and civic responsibility,

which are crucial in Nigeria's multi-ethnic and socio-politically diverse environment. These results align with empirical findings by Adeyemo (2020), Ekechukwu and Okwukwe (2021), and Yusuf and Onifade (2023), who found that social-emotional learning and teacher psychological competence significantly influence students' interpersonal harmony and inclusive attitudes in Nigerian schools. These findings suggest that when teachers employ educational psychology strategies—such as motivational reinforcement and cognitive development. This supports the position of Bandura (1977) and Vygotsky (1978) that learning is a social process influenced by modeling, feedback, and guided interaction. This finding implies that students who demonstrate higher levels of empathy, responsible decision-making, and emotional self-regulation are more likely to value diversity, demonstrate fairness, and engage in socially responsible behaviors—key dimensions of inclusive citizenship. This aligns with Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory and CASEL's (2023) SEL Framework, which posit that emotionally competent individuals are more capable of sustaining cooperative and inclusive communities. The study therefore supports the conclusion that strengthening educational psychology principles (cognitive development and motivation) in schools can help mitigate social intolerance and emotional maladjustment among youths in Rivers State, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and socially cohesive society.

Conclusion

Findings revealed that the effective application of educational psychology principles such as motivation, and cognitive development significantly enhances students' social emotional competence. These skills, in turn, strongly predict students' ability to demonstrate inclusiveness, cooperation, respect for diversity, and civic-mindedness in their social interactions. The implication is that when teachers employ psychologically sound instructional strategies, students develop not only cognitive proficiency but also the social and emotional capacities required for responsible citizenship in a pluralistic society such as Rivers State. The study thus concludes that educational psychology is a critical foundation for developing holistic learners who are socially competent, emotionally balanced, and civically responsible. Educational psychology provides the scientific understanding of human behavior, learning, and motivation that enables teachers to create environments conducive to emotional growth and inclusive engagement. Moreover, the development of social-emotional competence serves as a vital link between classroom learning and the broader social goal of inclusive citizenship. Students who possess emotional intelligence are more likely to appreciate diversity, embrace equity, and participate constructively in democratic life.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Capacity Building for Teachers in Educational Psychology:**

Teachers should undergo regular professional development workshops in educational psychology and social-emotional learning. Training programs should emphasize the practical application of psychological principles such as motivation, reinforcement, scaffolding, and emotional intelligence in classroom management and instruction.

2. **Strengthening School Guidance and Counselling Services:**

Schools should strengthen their guidance and counselling units to support students' emotional and social development. Qualified counsellors should work collaboratively with teachers to identify and address emotional, behavioral, and social challenges that may hinder inclusive behavior among students.

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