

PEER VICTIMIZATION, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

Adie, Rose Unwanung

Department of Educational Psychology,
Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies,
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
Email: unwanungrose@gmail.com | Phone: 08028436043

Egaga, Musa Moses

Department of Special Education,
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
Phone: 08061133158 | Email: egagam@yahoo.com
ORCID: 0009-0000-2365-5032

Adie, Paul Ingiona

Department of Educational Technology,
Faculty of Vocational and Entrepreneurial Education,
University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria
pauladie@unical.edu.ng
ORCID: 0000-0002-1587-2747

Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between peer victimization, emotional intelligence, and academic performance among students with disabilities in special schools in Cross River State, Nigeria. Anchored on Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory, a correlational survey design was adopted. A stratified random sample of 248 students with disabilities was drawn from six accredited special schools. Three instruments were employed: an adapted Peer Victimization Scale (PVS), the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory-Youth Version (EQ-i:YV), and cumulative grade-point average (CGPA). Data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. Results showed that peer victimization had a significant negative relationship with academic performance ($r = -0.51, p < .05$), while emotional intelligence had a significant positive relationship with academic performance ($r = 0.63, p < .05$). The study recommends structured socio-emotional learning programmes and enforceable anti-victimization policies in Nigerian special schools.

Keywords: peer victimization, emotional intelligence, academic performance, students with disabilities, special schools, Nigeria

Introduction

Students with disabilities in Nigerian special schools face a learning environment shaped by impairment-related challenges, social exclusion, and persistent peer victimization. Peer victimization, defined as the deliberate and repeated infliction of harm by more powerful peers, is one of the most psychologically and academically damaging phenomena documented in school settings (Menken, Isaiah, Liang, Rodriguez Rivera, Cloak, Reeves, Lever, and Chang, 2022). Students with disabilities experience bullying at disproportionately higher rates than their non-disabled peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and the consequences extend beyond psychological harm into direct academic deterioration. Equally critical is the role of emotional intelligence (EI), broadly understood as the capacity

to perceive, regulate, and apply emotional information in adaptive ways. A meta-analysis confirmed that EI significantly predicted academic performance, with emotional regulation and interpersonal competencies as particularly strong contributors (MacCann, Jiang, Brown, Double, Bucich, and Minbashian, 2020). In Nigeria, students with disabilities who demonstrated higher emotional competencies showed better academic adjustment (Adebayo and Ngwoke, 2018). No empirical study in Cross River State had jointly examined these two variables as co-predictors of academic performance in students with disabilities, and the present study was conducted to address that gap.

Statement of the Problem

The policy protections under the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (DAPD Act, 2018) and the National Policy on Special Needs Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2015), students with disabilities in Nigerian special schools recorded significantly lower academic outcomes than national benchmarks (Olabiyi, 2021). Explanatory studies largely concentrated on pedagogical variables, leaving the psychosocial determinants of academic performance unexamined. Evidence from Southern Nigeria showed that peer victimization generated anxiety, social withdrawal, and diminished academic engagement (Gabriel-Job and Azubogu, 2022), while children with learning disabilities exhibited lower emotional intelligence than their peers, increasing their academic vulnerability (Iroko-Famawode, 2023). Melvina, Ekpang, Okeke, Emmanuel, Achi, and Fredrick (2023) further established that anxiety and low self-concept significantly undermined the academic functioning of students with disabilities in Cross River State. The combined influence of peer victimization and emotional intelligence on academic performance in this population had not been empirically examined, and that gap constituted the specific problem this study addressed.

Objectives Of The Study

The general objective of this study was to examine the relationship between peer victimization, emotional intelligence, and academic performance of students with disabilities in special schools in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

1. Determined the relationship between peer victimization and academic performance of students with disabilities in special schools in Cross River State.
2. Ascertained the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance of students with disabilities in special schools in Cross River State.

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

- H₀₁. There is no significant relationship between peer victimization and academic performance of students with disabilities in special schools in Cross River State, Nigeria.
- H₀₂. There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance of students with disabilities in special schools in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory. Goleman conceptualised EI as a set of learnable emotional competencies organised into five domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The central

proposition of this theory is that these competencies determine how effectively an individual navigates demanding interpersonal and achievement contexts, often more powerfully than cognitive ability alone. In school environments, Goleman argued that high EI reduces exposure to and impact of negative peer interactions, including bullying, while simultaneously sustaining academic motivation and engagement. The theory provides a coherent rationale for expecting students with higher emotional competencies to manage the academic consequences of peer victimization more effectively than those with lower EI. MacCann et al. (2020) confirmed the theory's predictive power empirically, while Adebayo and Ngwoke (2018) and Iroko-Famawode (2023) provided localised evidence of its applicability to students with disabilities in the Nigerian context.

Review of Related Literature

Peer Victimization and Academic Performance

Peer victimization is a pervasive threat to the academic well-being of students with disabilities. Menken et al. (2022) established through the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study that peer victimization negatively affected mental health, behavioural regulation, cognition, and academic performance in preadolescent children. Rose and Gage (2016) demonstrated that students with disabilities experienced higher rates of bullying victimization over time compared to peers without disabilities, with compounding academic consequences. Within Nigeria, Gabriel-Job and Azubogu (2022) found widespread bullying victimization in secondary schools in Rivers State, documenting significant psychological and behavioural harm to victims. Akintunde, Isangha, Ssewanyana, Adewusi, Olurin, Akongnwi, Akintunde, Tang, and Liu (2025) further confirmed that school-based victimization significantly mediated the relationship between antisocial media exposure and diminished well-being among Nigerian adolescents, underscoring its pervasive academic and psychosocial costs.

Emotional Intelligence and Academic Performance

Emotional intelligence has been consistently established as a significant predictor of academic performance across educational levels and contexts. MacCann et al. (2020) meta-analytically confirmed that EI predicted academic performance, with emotional regulation identified as the strongest subscale predictor. Evidence from *Frontiers in Education* (2025) further showed that academic engagement mediated the relationship between EI and achievement, while Elshaer, Sobaih, Alyahya, Azazz, and Khan (2025) found that EI dimensions directly improved quality of life and academic success in university students with disabilities. In Nigeria specifically, evidence from Edo State secondary schools confirmed that EI significantly predicted academic performance (*Journal of Advanced Guidance and Counseling*, 2025), while Iroko-Famawode (2023) documented that children with learning disabilities exhibited lower EI than their peers, rendering them academically vulnerable. Despite this converging evidence, no study in Cross River State examined both peer victimization and emotional intelligence as co-predictors of academic performance in students with disabilities, which the present study addressed.

Research Methodology

A correlational survey design was adopted for this study. The target population comprised all registered students with disabilities in government-accredited special schools in Cross River State, Nigeria, totalling 812 students across six schools during the 2023/2024 academic year. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure proportional representation of disability categories, namely visual impairment, hearing impairment, and learning disabilities, as well as school locations. Using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% margin of

error, 270 questionnaires were administered and 248 valid responses were retained for analysis, representing a 91.9% retrieval rate. Three instruments were used for data collection. The Peer Victimization Scale (PVS), adapted from the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996) and contextualised for Nigerian special schools, comprised 20 items on a 4-point Likert format with a Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.82. The Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory-Youth Version (EQ-i:YV; Bar-On and Parker, 2000), a 30-item scale measuring intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability, and general mood, assessed emotional intelligence with a reliability of 0.81. Academic performance was operationalised as the cumulative grade-point average (CGPA) across four consecutive terms, extracted from school records with informed consent. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Calabar Faculty of Educational Foundation Studies Ethics Committee and the Cross River State Ministry of Education. Trained assistants read items aloud for students with visual impairment, while sign language interpreters facilitated administration for students with hearing impairment. Data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation via SPSS version 26.

Results And Analyses

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 248)

Variable	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Peer Victimization (PVS)	248	51.34	9.67	22	76
Emotional Intelligence (EQ-i:YV)	248	84.21	12.53	48	112
Academic Performance (CGPA)	248	2.74	0.61	1.10	4.00

Note. PVS = Peer Victimization Scale; EQ-i:YV = Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory-Youth Version; CGPA = Cumulative Grade-Point Average.

Hypothesis 1 stated that there is no significant relationship between peer victimization and academic performance of students with disabilities. Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation results.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Between Peer Victimization and Academic Performance (N = 248)

Variables	r	p	Decision
Peer Victimization vs. Academic Performance	-0.51	.000**	H ₀₁ Rejected

Note. **p < .05.

Table 2 shows that peer victimization had a statistically significant negative relationship with academic performance ($r = -0.51$, $p < .05$). The null hypothesis H₀₁ was rejected. Higher levels of peer victimization were associated with lower academic performance among students with disabilities.

Hypothesis 2 stated that there is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance of students with disabilities. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3*Pearson Correlation Between Emotional Intelligence and Academic Performance (N = 248)*

Variables	r	p	Decision
Emotional Intelligence vs. Academic Performance	0.63	.000**	H ₀₂ Rejected

Note. **p < .05.

Table 3 shows a statistically significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance ($r = 0.63$, $p < .05$). The null hypothesis H₀₂ was rejected. Students with higher emotional intelligence recorded higher academic performance.

Discussion of Findings

Peer Victimization and Academic Performance

The finding that peer victimization had a significant negative relationship with academic performance ($r = -0.51$, $p < .05$) confirmed that the harmful effects of peer victimization extended beyond psychological distress into direct academic impairment among students with disabilities in Cross River State special schools. This result is consistent with Menken et al. (2022), who demonstrated through the ABCD Study that peer victimization degraded cognitive functioning and academic performance in preadolescent children by disrupting attention processing and behavioural regulation. Within the Nigerian context, Gabriel-Job and Azubogu (2022) documented severe psychological disruption in victimised students in Rivers State secondary schools, while Akintunde et al. (2025) confirmed that school-based victimization significantly reduced the well-being of Nigerian adolescents. The moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.51$) established that victimization operates as a genuine and measurable academic hazard, not merely a welfare concern, a finding that carries direct implications for how Nigerian special schools prioritise and respond to peer aggression targeting students with disabilities.

Emotional Intelligence and Academic Performance

The significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance ($r = 0.63$, $p < .05$) was the strongest finding of this study and confirmed the explanatory centrality of Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory in the special school context. Students with higher EI competencies, particularly in self-regulation, motivation, and social skill, sustained academic engagement under interpersonal adversity and managed the psychological impact of peer victimization without commensurate academic deterioration. This finding corroborated MacCann et al. (2020), whose meta-analysis established EI as a consistent and significant predictor of academic performance across educational contexts. The result further aligned with Elshaer et al. (2025), who found that EI dimensions significantly improved academic outcomes in university students with disabilities, and with recent evidence from Edo State, Nigeria, where EI significantly predicted secondary school academic performance (Journal of Advanced Guidance and Counseling, 2025). Critically, the stronger relationship of EI with academic performance ($r = 0.63$) relative to peer victimization ($r = -0.51$) indicated that cultivating emotional competencies constituted a more powerful academic lever than threat reduction alone, though both pathways remain independently necessary.

Conclusion

This study provided empirical evidence that peer victimization exerted a significant negative influence on the academic performance of students with disabilities in special schools in

Cross River State, Nigeria, while emotional intelligence exerted a significant positive influence on the same outcome. The findings affirmed the explanatory adequacy of Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory in this population and context, confirming that emotional competencies are measurable determinants of academic attainment, particularly in environments where students face persistent peer adversity. Nigerian special education policy and practice must urgently incorporate psychosocial intervention as a co-equal academic strategy alongside pedagogical improvement. Building emotional intelligence in students with disabilities is a direct academic investment with consequences that are both theoretically grounded and empirically demonstrated.

Recommendations

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

1. Given the significant negative relationship between peer victimization and academic performance, special schools in Cross River State and across Nigeria should formulate and enforce explicit anti-victimization policies with clear reporting, investigation, and consequence procedures, as well as anonymous reporting channels, to protect students with disabilities from the academic harm that peer aggression demonstrably causes.
2. Given the significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance, school counsellors and administrators in special schools should implement structured Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes targeting the five EI competencies identified by Goleman (1995), namely self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, as a direct strategy for improving the academic outcomes of students with disabilities.

References

- Adebayo, A. M., and Ngwoke, D. U. (2018). Emotional intelligence and academic adjustment of students with disabilities in Nigerian universities. *Journal of Educational Psychology and Counselling*, 12(2), 45-56.
- Akintunde, T. Y., Isangha, S. O., Ssewanyana, D., Adewusi, O. O., Olurin, T. K., Akongnwi, S. N., Akintunde, O. D., Tang, L., and Liu, Z. (2025). Modeling the pathways from antisocial media exposure to subjective well-being through school-based victimization in Nigeria. *Global Mental Health*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2025.10116>
- Bar-On, R., and Parker, J. D. A. (2000). *The Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version (EQ-i:YV)*. Multi-Health Systems.
- Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act. (2018). Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette. Federal Government of Nigeria.
- Elshaer, I. A., Sobaih, A. E., Alyahya, M., Azazz, A. M. S., and Khan, M. A. (2025). Unlocking potential: The impact of emotional intelligence on quality of life and academic success of students with disabilities. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1659221. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1659221>
- Federal Ministry of Education. (2015). National policy on special needs education. Federal Government of Nigeria.
- Frontiers in Education. (2025). Emotional intelligence and academic achievement: The mediating role of academic engagement. *Frontiers in Education*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1563471>
- Gabriel-Job, N., and Azubogu, U. (2022). Bullying behaviour: Experience in secondary schools in Obio Akpor Local Government Area in Rivers State, Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Medicine and Health*, 20(7), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajmah/2022/v20i730470>

- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.
- Iroko-Famawode, A. S. (2023). Emotional intelligence among children with learning disabilities in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. *Journal of the Nigerian Council for Exceptional Children*, 14(1), 33-47.
- Journal of Advanced Guidance and Counseling. (2025). Emotional intelligence and academic performance: A predictive analysis of secondary school students in Edo State, Nigeria. *Journal of Advanced Guidance and Counseling*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.21580/jagc.2025.6.1.19768>
- MacCann, C., Jiang, Y., Brown, L. E. R., Double, K. S., Bucich, M., and Minbashian, A. (2020). Emotional intelligence predicts academic performance: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(2), 150-186. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000219>
- Melvina, A., Ekpang, P. U., Okeke, S. U., Emmanuel, U. I., Achi, N. B., and Fredrick, E. (2023). Prediction of self-concept and anxiety on the tendency of postgraduate students with learning disabilities to acquire research skills in Cross River State, Nigeria. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Diagnosis and Treatment*, 11(1), 20-31.
- Menken, M. S., Isaiah, A., Liang, H., Rodriguez Rivera, P., Cloak, C. C., Reeves, G., Lever, N. A., and Chang, L. (2022). Peer victimization (bullying) on mental health, behavioral problems, cognition, and academic performance in preadolescent children in the ABCD Study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 925727. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.925727>
- Mustapha, M. L. A., Muhammed, S. A., Tihamiyu, K. A., and Okesina, F. A. (2023). Parental factors as predictors of in-school adolescents' bullying behaviours in Kwara State, Nigeria. *Humanities Horizon*, 2(1), 45-58.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2022*. U.S. Department of Education.
- Nunnally, J. C. (1978). *Psychometric theory* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Olabiyi, O. (2021). Impact of bullying on psychosocial adjustment of school-aged children in Nigeria. *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, 2, 229-241.
- Olweus, D. (1996). *The revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire*. University of Bergen.
- Rose, C. A., and Gage, N. A. (2016). Exploring the involvement of bullying among students with disabilities over time. *Exceptional Children*, 83(3), 298-314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402916654873>
- Yamane, T. (1967). *Statistics: An introductory analysis* (2nd ed.). Harper and Row.