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Editorial for the special section on personality and academic achievement

Academic achievement is a core topic in the discipline of educational psychology and an outcome of vital importance to national governments and policy makers. It has been a popular dependent variable in scientific studies for well over a 100 years and the target of enormous financial investment all over the world. Little doubt remains that general intelligence is the single best predictor of academic achievement, although in an effort to improve prediction precision further, research has gradually turned to the other pillar of differential psychology – personality. The aim of this special section is to contribute to our understanding of the level of impact of non-cognitive psychological differences on academic achievement and of the processes by which this impact is effected.

Ackerman, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham (2011, pp. 27–40) open the special section with a broad review of the role of personality in educational contexts from the perspective of trait complexes, which represent combinations of personality, ability, and interest variables into coherent themes (Ackerman, 2003). Particularly significant in this review is, in my opinion, the emphasis on the re-conceptualisation of the criterion construct space with a meaningful enlargement of what constitutes academic achievement beyond grades and final level of educational attainment.

Following up on his very well received meta-analysis of the relationships between academic performance and the Big Five (Poropat, 2009), Poropat (2011, pp. 41–58) turns the spotlight on the Giant Three model of personality (Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Personality). Drawing on data from many thousands of individuals, he concludes that the Eysenckian dimensions (especially, Psychoticism) are not as strong predictors of performance as the Big Five. Of course, as Hans Eysenck would swiftly point out, prediction cannot be the sole objective of science; nevertheless, these findings are undoubtedly important from an applied perspective.

Marsh and Martin (2011, pp. 59–77) contribute a characteristically thoughtful and thorough review that makes a solid case for the Reciprocal Effects Model (Marsh, 1990), in which academic achievement and self-concept are linked via a feedback loop. Their review has far-reaching consequences, extending well beyond the confines of educational psychology into the fields of health and sports psychology, and sets up the special section for the next two contributions that look into related areas of personality (self-efficacy and self-beliefs).

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Approaching the subject from a combined trait and self-efficacy approach, Caprara, Vecchione, Alessandri, Gerbino, and Barbaranelli (2011, pp. 78–96) demonstrate, in a powerful Structural Equation Model with longitudinal data, that both traditions are able independently to account for variance in high-school grades. Especially interesting is the fact that personality variables, in one form or another, predict academic performance incrementally and continually throughout the period of the study.

This combined approach is also evident in my paper with Norah Frederickson (2011, pp. 97–111), where we apply the principles of belief-importance theory (Petrides, 2010) to understand some of the processes through which personality traits exert their influence on academic achievement. It is the first investigation of belief-importance theory with reference to performance data and complements several other studies conducted with self-report criteria from various domains.

It is puzzling, and a matter of some concern, that the research world has been slow to respond to the immense interest that has built up in educational settings around the ideas of emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, and emotional well-being. I am especially grateful to Mavroveli and Sánchez-Ruiz (2011, pp. 112–134) for their extensive review of the relevant literature and robust empirical contribution that illustrates the implications of trait emotional intelligence for academic achievement and behaviour at school.

I am indebted to my distinguished colleagues for their stellar contributions to this special section. I have no doubt that they will serve to highlight the vital role of the field of personality across all levels of educational attainment and provide the platform for cutting-edge research in the future. I also hope that they will prove directly relevant and, more importantly, helpful to educationists from all fields and professions.

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