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Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood Education: An Applied Pedagogical Approach to Developing Children's Emotional Competencies

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the significance of emotional competencies in early childhood education as a practical manifestation of emotional intelligence. It begins by distinguishing between the theoretical framework of emotional intelligence—which encompasses self-awareness, emotion regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills—and emotional competencies, which are understood as behaviorally expressed and teachable skills within educational settings. The study adopts an analytical approach, starting with a review of the nature and psychological functions of emotions, followed by an in-depth examination of the five core emotional intelligence skills based on Goleman's model. Special attention is given to their practical application in educational contexts, particularly in early childhood classrooms. The article also discusses strategies for fostering these competencies in children, emphasizing the educator's pivotal role in modeling and cultivating them through everyday interactions. It concludes that integrating emotional competencies into pedagogical practice is a key element of holistic education and a strategic approach to supporting children's emotional, cognitive, and social development.

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Introduction

Emotional intelligence has been one of the main themes in contemporary psychology, as it plays a crucial role in regulating human behavior and directing emotions in various life contexts. Understanding emotion and analyzing its physiological, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions is a prerequisite for achieving psychological and social balance, whether at the personal or professional level, especially in educational settings that require advanced emotional awareness.

The litterature emphasizes that emotions are not reduced to fleeting emotional moments, but are cognitive tools with a complex structure that play functional and adaptive roles, as they contribute to self-perception, decision-making, and interaction with the environment, and form an integral part of cognitive and rational processes (Damasio, 1994). In the same context, neuropsychological research, especially with the development of cognitive and affective neuroscience, has contributed to clarifying the mechanisms of interaction between external stimuli and the brain structures that generate and direct emotional responses. Joseph Ladoux pointed out that emotions are based on complex neural systems that have evolved to ensure survival, and that emotional stimuli are acquired through experience, which opens the door to understanding the dynamics of emotion, and even developing them(LeDoux, 1996)

From this perspective, this paper aims to provide an analytical treatment of the concept of emotional intelligence, by reviewing its components, functions and mechanisms for its development, while highlighting its role in professional contexts, especially in primary education, which is one of the most needed environments for this type of competencies. Emotional intelligence, as coined by Goleman, is a complementary and important dimension in addition to cognitive intelligence, as it reflects "the ability to recognize, understand and regulate one's own emotions and empathize with the emotions of others" (Goleman, D, 2014).

Emotions and their psychological functions

In the contemporary psychological literature, emotions are defined as rapid psychological and physiological responses to internal or external stimuli, characterized by their short temporal intensity and manifested in multiple cognitive, behavioral, and expressive manifestations. Emotions are central components of the human experience, serving as internal means of regulating and directing behavior, as well as contributing to adaptation to changing situations by promoting appropriate responses (Ekman, 1992; Lazarus, 1991). Studies also indicate that these emotional responses are not random, but are subject to cognitive evaluation processes that precede the emergence of the emotional feeling and determine its nature and intensity.

Emotion is not simply a reflexive response, but rather the product of a rapid and immediate cognitive evaluation of the situation faced by the individual and this evaluation occurs according to personal determinants such as values, past experiences, and beliefs. This immediate assessment activates physical, cognitive, and behavioral responses, manifested in facial expressions, nervous system changes, reactions, and emotions specific to the situation (Berthoz & Bourdier, 2017).

Emotions serve a number of pivotal functions, most notably in detecting risks and opportunities and providing quick internal cues that precede rational processes. They also serve as motivational tools for learning and remembering, especially when they are associated with traumatic experiences. Studies indicate that emotions form a fundamental basis for decision-making, and that ignoring them leads to poor insight and poor judgment (Goleman, 1997).

On the other hand, emotion has multiple components, including: The physiological dimension (such as increased heart rate), the cognitive component (mental interpretation of the situation), the expressive component (facial expressions, voice, and gestures), and the subjective feeling associated with the emotional experience. This multiplicity shows that emotion is a complex process in which body and mind intersect

This holistic view emphasizes that emotions are a vital system with an adaptive dimension that contributes to human survival and psychosocial development. Understanding this system is key to understanding emotional intelligence as the ability to employ, understand, and regulate emotions to serve personal goals and social relationships.

Characteristics of emotions

Understanding the characteristics of emotions is an important entry point to know how they affect the individual, as they are not just emotional phenomena, but complex psychological and physical responses, involving biological, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional elements. This structural multiplicity makes emotion a complex phenomenon, representing a vital intersection between the nervous system, the cognitive system, and the social environment (Scherer, 2001)

Physiologically, emotions are closely linked to a person's nervous system, resulting in perceptible changes such as increased heart rate, dilated pupils, or increased body

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temperature, and these responses are part of a rapid readiness to respond to external threats or stimuli (Servan-Schreiber, 2003).

The cognitive component is the way the mind interprets the emotional situation. It is the cognitive appraisal of the stimulus that determines whether the response will be joy, fear, or anger, reflecting that emotion is not entirely spontaneous, but rather cognitively framed. In this context, Lazarus' model highlights the importance of "cognitive appraisal" in the development of emotion (Lazarus, 1991).

Added to this is the behavioral dimension, which is represented by facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, which are non-verbal communication tools that convey emotions to others. Emotions have a communicative and social dimension, which makes them important in interpersonal relationships. Studies show that emotional facial expressions are universal and innate, as Ekman pointed out in his study of the six basic emotions: Joy, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise (Ekman, 1992).

Finally, subjective feeling is one of the most important components of emotion, as it represents the emotional experience that an individual feels internally. This feeling varies between individuals based on context, personal and cultural history, giving emotion a deeply individualized character.

Thus, emotions emerge as a dynamic phenomenon in which physical, psychological, and social elements overlap, and turn into a driving force that shapes human behavior and directs decisions, which opens the way to talk about emotional intelligence as a mechanism for managing this phenomenon.

Emotional Intelligence and its five skills

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others, which contributes to directing behavior effectively and achieving positive social interaction (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The concept was popularized by (Goleman, 1995), who expanded the theoretical framework and showed that emotional intelligence is as important as intellectual intelligence (IQ) in predicting professional and personal success, and may even surpass it in some life contexts.

Emotional intelligence is an integrative framework that includes five key skills according to Goleman's (1998) model:

Self-awareness: The ability to recognize one's own emotions and understand their impact on performance and behavior. A self-aware person is able to accurately assess their emotional state, which helps them make more balanced decisions. According to Coleman, self-awareness is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence, as it enables an individual to recognize their true emotional state without denial or exaggeration. This skill refers to the ability to recognize one's own emotional state in the present moment, and to be aware of the physiological and psychological changes that accompany it. This is the first step towards regulating and consciously interacting with emotions. Research suggests that poor self-awareness is associated with difficulties in communication and decision-making (Kotsou, 2017).

Self-regulation: The ability to control unwanted emotions such as anger or frustration and channel them in a constructive and socially appropriate way. It also includes impulse control and maintaining calm in stressful situations. According to Mayer and Salovey, self-regulation contributes to sustained good performance under pressure and is a necessary skill for success in professional and social environments (Mayer, J. D., & Salovey, P, 1997). Self-regulation requires emotional awareness, which is the ability to analyze the causes of emotions and deconstruct their connections to experiences, values, and psychological needs. Studies show that most negative emotions stem from unmet needs or cognitive misinterpretations of situations. By acquiring this skill, the individual becomes capable of emotional regulation, which promotes inner balance and prevents inappropriate reactions.

This skill is at the center of emotional intelligence, enabling the individual to control emotional impulses, delay response, and choose appropriate action according to values and interests. Brain imaging shows that the prefrontal cortex plays a crucial role in regulating emotions, and its activation attenuates the amygdala response, which is associated with fear and impulsivity (Berthoz & Bourdier, 2017).

Motivation : in the context of emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to channel emotions and energy towards goals, and to maintain commitment and optimism, even in the face of challenges and frustrations. Coleman believes that people with high emotional intelligence have strong intrinsic motivation that drives them to excel and are characterized by internal tendencies that help them achieve achievements without relying solely on external stimuli.

Empathy: is the ability to understand and react to the feelings of others in a way that supports effective communication and deep human relationships. Bar-On argues that empathy is not limited to feeling the feelings

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of others, but involves understanding the emotional context in which they live, which contributes to interacting intelligently in complex social situations (Bar-On, 2006).

5. Social Skills : Social skills encompass a variety of communicative, interactive, and relational abilities that help an individual build effective relationships, resolve conflicts, and influence others in a positive way. These skills rely on the integrated use of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy. These skills are a strong predictor of success in careers that require teamwork and constant communication (Mayer, J. D., & Salovey, P, 1997)

IV. Developing emotional skills in early childhood education

Developing children's emotional skills in the early childhood education is a top educational priority, given the importance of this stage in forming a sound psychological and social structure. Neuropsychological studies indicate that the first six years of life represent the "golden window" for the formation of emotional and cognitive skills, thanks to the brain's high plasticity and neural reorganization (Goleman, 1997; Servan-Schreiber, 2003).

A child's emotional skills are based on five core abilities that can be developed early on: Recognizing, expressing, regulating, organizing, and employing basic emotions in interactions with the environment.

However, achieving this goal requires the development of an educational environment that allows the development of these skills in children by their educators through various educational settings and situations in the preschool classroom. Working on these skills requires the integration of both the role of the family and the institution.

Promoting Emotional Awareness in Children

The first step is to help the child recognize and accurately name their feelings or emotions. Many children suffer from "emotional language poverty", which makes them unable to describe what they are feeling, which can later lead to aggressive or withdrawal behaviors. Teachers can use activities such as:

Emotional face cards.

Short stories with an open-ended ending to discuss the feeling.

A simple daily question such as: "How do you feel right now, and why?".

These practices, if done repeatedly and safely, reinforce the connection between the emotional state and verbal expression, which establishes the child's self-awareness of their emotions, helping them later on to make balanced decisions

Developing emotional regulation in early childhood education

Upon entering school, young children are expected to be able to self-regulate in many ways such as "understanding and following rules, listening to and responding accordingly to directions, sharing toys and waiting their turn, while facing a myriad of new stimuli and competitors in the preschool classroom context" (Smith-Donald et al., 2007).

In reality, however, children in toddlerhood do not have sufficient ability to regulate their emotions, especially when they are overwhelmed by strong emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness. Self-calming skills (such as deep breathing, counting backwards, or using a "calm corner") are effective tools for building this skill.Several studies point to the effectiveness of these interventions; one study found that children who are trained to recognize and name their emotions show improvements in social interaction and reduced aggressive behaviors (Denham, S. A. et al., 2012). Another study on emotion regulation showed that emotion regulation strategies are acquired early and influence later academic and social performance (Gross & Thompson, 2007)

Developing empathy and awareness of others

Children learn empathy through observation and positive interaction. It is important for the child to see a teacher or parent modeling kindness and understanding of others' feelings. Cooperative games, role-playing, and group discussions about the feelings of storybook characters are effective tools to reinforce this skill. The ability to understand and respond to another person's feelings is a cornerstone of healthy relationships and an early indicator of later social success.

Integrating Emotional Skills into the Curriculum

Rather than treating emotional intelligence as a separate subject, recent research recommends integrating emotional skills into the daily context of learning. For example:

A language lesson could be linked to a discussion about the emotions of literary characters.

Use a physical education class to discuss how to deal with frustration or defeat.

or use formative assessment to help a child express their emotional experience in a particular learning situation.

This integrative approach makes education a holistic emotional experience that promotes a child's holistic development.

V. Training teachers and educators on emotional competencies

Any educational project that aims to develop children's emotional intelligence cannot reach its goal without a real and deep qualification of the educational actor. The educator not only performs a technical educational role, but also performs an emotional and formative interactive function that makes him the first role model for the child in expressing emotions, regulating them, and understanding the feelings of others. Hence, an educator's possession of emotional skills is a prerequisite and even a necessity to transfer them to the child in concrete daily contexts (Goleman, 1997).

Modern educational literature emphasizes the importance of the educational relationship between the child and the educator in the primary education stage, as this relationship is an essential element in building psychological balance and emotional and social development of the child. From the perspective of attachment theory, studies confirm that positive bonds between educator and child - characterized by empathy, support, and sensitive responses to the child's needs - are among the most important indicators of the quality of the child's personal and social development, such as self-perceptions, trust, participation, and self-regulation, beyond the impact of traditional educational curricula or abstract cognitive interventions (Spilt et al, 2025) Therefore, the training of early childhood educators should pay special attention to the affective and relational dimensions of educational practice, in order to enhance the educator's ability to build a safe and supportive relationship with each child.

In another study, Dolan highlighted how daily interactions between child and educator - as proximal processes - form the cornerstone of a child's psychosocial development, especially when they are driven by relationships based on emotional security and sensitive responsiveness to the child's needs, as emphasized by attachment theory. These parenting interactions not only contribute to regulating the child's immediate behavior, but also lead to an internalization of social values and norms, which helps build conscience and develop self-regulation. It emphasizes that teachers who engage in warm, reliable, and consistent relationships with children actively contribute to establishing positive patterns of interaction and relationships in the long run (Dolan, S., 2024).

In this context, a study indicated the importance of focusing on "the importance of emotional regulation for educators, and the importance of identifying their formative needs in terms of social and emotional skills, as it showed the importance of developing these skills in pre-service training in relation to the five domains identified by the Collaborative Association for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in a number of studies: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making" (Pelletier, 2022).

Stress Management and Self-Awareness

Educators, especially in the early years of education, experience stressful situations that may trigger acute emotional responses, such as anger, frustration, or helplessness. Therefore, training them in stress management and self-awareness techniques is a necessary entry point to building psychological balance. This includes relaxation exercises, breath control, and the ability to recognize negative emotions in the moment and interpret them in context.

Studies in affective neuroscience show that developing emotional self-awareness contributes to brain plasticity and strengthens the frontal lobe, which is responsible for emotional regulation (Berthoz & Bourdier, 2017). This means that training an educator to listen to their own feelings and emotions enables them to contain, rather than be part of, difficult situations in the classroom.

Active Listening and Pedagogical Empathy

Active listening is a pivotal skill in building a trusting human relationship between educator and child. Active listening involves using open body language, supportive facial expressions, and paying full attention to the child without judgment or interruption. Such listening not only gives the child a sense of security, but also develops the ability to explore and express their feelings freely.

Empathy - the ability to understand a child's feelings without identifying or judging - is a top skill in an educator's emotional intelligence. An empathetic educator does not justify every behavior, but seeks to understand its motivations and use them to redirect, not punish. This type of interaction contributes to creating a classroom environment that is characterized by warmth and safety, and stimulates healthy psychological and social development.

Adopting Nonviolent Communication

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Nonviolent communication, as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, is one of the most important models in modern emotional parenting. The model is based on four components: Observing reality without evaluation, expressing a feeling, identifying the associated need, and then making a clear and non-prescriptive request (Rosenberg, M, 2006). This style of discourse contributes to reducing tension in the classroom and helps children internalize healthy models of expression, replacing yelling, aggression, or withdrawal. Adopting this style requires systematic practical training for educators, including studying real classroom situations, analyzing interaction styles, and developing alternative responses that take into account context, emotion, and need.

Ongoing pedagogical support

The training of educators in emotional intelligence should not be seen as a separate or situational training phase, but rather as an ongoing professional practice that requires framing, feedback, and formative evaluation within the educational institution. Just as children need a supportive environment to develop their emotional skills, educators need a safe space in which to express their emotions and address their emotional and professional difficulties.

International experience points to the effectiveness of Teacher Emotional Circles (TECs). TECs are teacher-facilitated activities that build support and well-being and promote creative responses. They support more positive responses to the effects of secondary trauma and challenging situations. The circles are organized periodically to enable them to share emotional experiences, release stress, and develop shared strategies for dealing with everyday situations in the classroom.(Teachers Circle - Supporting Systems, 2018)

Conclusion

In conclusion, emotional skills represent a fundamental pillar in the psychological and social construction of the individual, especially in sensitive educational environments such as primary education. Emotional skills are not limited to controlling emotions, but extend to self-awareness, empathy, and effective interaction with others, which are crucial skills in forming a balanced and successful personality.

The development of emotional competencies in children requires a coordinated effort between the family and the educational institution, as well as the need for specialized training for educators in emotional and social skills. An educator who possesses emotional intelligence becomes a positive role model who influences the child's development, not only at the cognitive level, but also in building an emotional culture based on awareness, respect, and understanding.

Therefore, integrating emotional education into educational policies and curricula is no longer a secondary option, but a strategic necessity based on the data of neuropsychology and education, and contributes to building more balanced and prepared generations to face the challenges of contemporary life.

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