

Article

Emotional Competencies in Primary Education as an Essential Factor for Learning and Well-Being

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Abstract: Numerous contributions corroborate the need to include emotional education and the development of emotional competencies at school to improve students' school learning and well-being. The present study aims to learn more about the development of emotional competencies in primary school students, taking into account gender differences across different cycles and analyzing the potential link with students' overall academic performance. Participants were 2389 primary school students (51.2% boys and 48.8% girls), aged from 6 to 12, from 21 public and semi-private schools in Spain. The study is a non-experimental quantitative study, using an ex-post-facto descriptive method. The Emotional Development Questionnaire (CDE 9-13), the Emotional Competencies Observation Scale, and the overall grade point average were applied to the sample. The results show significant differences in favor of girls in the development of most emotional competencies in all three educational cycles. Differences were also observed in academic performance by gender in the primary school cycle, with girls achieving higher grades. At the same time, positive correlations were found between academic performance and emotional competencies. The results confirm the importance of including emotional education in primary education.

Keywords: emotional competencies; academic performance; primary education



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1. Introduction

For many years, education system curricula have prioritized the learning of academic content, such as mathematics and language and literature, over other less tangible content that is harder to quantify, such as the arts or socioemotional learning. However, for more than three decades, thanks, first, to the emergence of the theory of multiple intelligences [1] and, later, to the genesis and rise of the concepts of emotional competence and education [2] and emotional intelligence [3], these systems have begun to change and take into account the importance of social and emotional components for any type of learning. Consequently, 21st-century education should promote not only “learning to know and to do” but also “learning to be and to live together” [4], using a holistic approach able to overcome the traditional dichotomies between cognitive, emotional and ethical aspects [5]. In schools, content is not learned individually and in isolation but rather requires collaboration and cooperation, from both teachers and peers in a given context. Hence, the knowledge and management of emotions, as well as the establishment of good interpersonal relationships, are considered key factors for achieving any type of academic or personal goal [6].

Various studies and meta-analyses confirm that educational programs that include emotional and social education in their teaching plans, regardless of the educational stage at which they are implemented, have a positive impact on significant factors for any type of learning, such as the social climate in the classroom, interpersonal relationships, inclusion,

motivation, the prevention of disruptive behaviors and attitudes etc. [7–11]. Hence, some research on primary school students [12–14] also correlates the acquisition and mastery of socioemotional competencies with improved academic performance. Knowing oneself and having good emotional regulation and autonomy means being able to deal with negative emotions, such as anxiety or boredom, through coping strategies or self-motivation, which, in turn, can positively impact time management and academic performance [15]. Having social skills also facilitates group work, as well as relationships with teachers, peers and family [16]. The results of all the papers cited above corroborate the importance of the acquisition and development of emotional competencies at school in order to achieve a quality education that equips students with the knowledge and strategies that will allow them to thrive in the various situations they may encounter in life.

Despite the gradual incorporation of emotional education in the classroom, many teachers have long been aware that, regardless of the type and level of their teaching, it is impossible to separate the emotional aspect from the academic aspect in a teaching–learning process [17]. Nevertheless, a review of the teacher training programs in Spain shows that the vast majority of teachers have never received specific training on emotional education [18]. Therefore, several studies advocate initial and ongoing teacher training that includes this kind of education [19,20]. Such teacher training should be accompanied by the incorporation of emotional education as a subject in the Spanish academic curriculum, since only 5% of all schools in Spain include this type of education [21].

The present research is framed within the Spanish education system, specifically, the primary education stage. Under current education law, primary education takes place between the ages of 6 and 12, is compulsory and is free. It is divided into six years and organized into three cycles: the first cycle, consisting of first and second grade (students aged 6 to 8); the second cycle, consisting of third and fourth grade (students aged 8 to 10); and, finally, the third cycle, consisting of fifth and sixth grade (students aged 10 to 12). At these ages, the starting point is a basic emotional literacy based on learning through sensory perception, until students reach an increasingly more elaborate understanding and emotional awareness as a result of their maturation and development of the ability to reason and engage in abstract thinking. All of this impacts other emotional aspects, such as the recognition and management of emotions, the acquisition of coping strategies and relationships with others [22].

According to Pérez-González et al. [23] and Nelis et al. [24], there is no universal consensus regarding conceptualizations, models and measurement instruments for intelligence, education and emotional competence, hence the importance for any study to define the theoretical model used as a reference, as well as the use of evaluation instruments that have been tested and validated for what the study is attempting to measure. As a starting point, it is worth recalling the differences between the three aforementioned concepts. Emotional intelligence refers to a type of intelligence based on intra- and inter-personal aspects studied in psychology, while emotional education is more procedural in nature, since it is an educational process that aims to use the contributions and results of psychological research to develop emotional competencies [25].

The present research is based on the theoretical framework of the Research Group in Psychopedagogical Orientation (GROP from the original Catalan acronym) at the University of Barcelona, according to which, all people, over the course of their lives, possess, develop and consolidate certain emotional competencies understood as the set of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes needed to understand, express and appropriately regulate emotional phenomena. All of this is essential for a person's comprehensive development and serves to increase both personal and social well-being [26]. Based on this conceptualization, a classification of competencies is proposed, structured in five broad blocks of content: emotional awareness (the ability to recognize and identify one's own and others' emotions), emotional regulation (the ability to manage and control emotions and responses to them effectively), emotional autonomy (the set of characteristics and factors related to personal self-management), social competence (the ability to establish and maintain good

relationships with others), and life and well-being competencies (abilities related to the adoption of appropriate and responsible behaviors to effectively deal with the challenges of everyday life) [25]. Because these are competencies, they may be learned and improved throughout life through emotional education.

Academic performance is a multidimensional concept affected by both internal variables, such as personal skills and abilities, motivation, self-control and social skills [27], and external ones, such as the influence and education of the family [28] or participation in extracurricular activities [29]. As a reference for this performance, most research uses the results of what students have learned, i.e., their grades, which include the assessment, not only of the acquisition of content, but also other aspects, such as behavior, their relationships and ability to work with others, progress, effort etc. Despite having come under some criticism due to their possible subjectivity, grades are considered the most widely accepted empirical criterion for measuring academic performance [30].

As can be observed, academic performance in schoolchildren is a topic that has been widely addressed due to its impact on students' futures. The development of emotional competencies in childhood has been examined much less frequently, and very few studies link these emotional competencies to academic performance. Thus, it seems necessary to take a deeper look at the specific features of this relationship, paying particular attention to certain contextualizing variables, such as the educational cycle or students' genders.

Aims of the study

The general aim of this study is to learn about the development of emotional competencies in primary school students, taking into account gender differences across the different educational cycles and analyzing their possible link to students' overall academic performance.

To this end, three specific aims were defined:

- (1) To verify the existence of gender-based differences in emotional competencies in the different cycles of primary education.
- (2) To study the existence of gender-based differences in academic performance in the different primary education cycles.
- (3) To analyze the relationship between emotional competencies and academic performance.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This is a non-experimental quantitative study, as none of the variables studied is intentionally manipulated; only the phenomena present at a given time and place are observed. Specifically, an ex-post-facto descriptive method was used.

2.2. Sample

The participants in this study, selected by non-random convenience sampling, were 2389 primary school students (51.2% boys and 48.8% girls) from 21 different public and semi-private schools in different autonomous communities (self-governing regions) of Spain (Catalonia, Navarra, Galicia and the Basque Country). Significantly, these schools had not applied any type of intervention program in relation to emotional education with their students.

The sample had the following breakdown by educational cycle: 443 of the primary school students were in the first cycle (50.5% boys and 49.5% girls), 951 in the second (51.9% boys and 48.1% girls) and 995 in the third (50.8% boys and 49.2% girls).

2.3. Instruments

In addition to questions related to sociodemographic data, the following instruments were applied to the participants:

- *Academic report*: The students' overall grade point average in all academic subjects of the course (on a scale of 0 to 10) was used as a quantitative indicator of their academic performance. This information was provided by the school's management.
- *Emotional Development Questionnaire for children (CDE 9-13 from the Spanish acronym)* [31,32]: This scale measures the development of emotional competencies in children aged 9 to 13. The scale is made up of 5 subscales (emotional awareness, emotional regulation, emotional autonomy, social competence, and life and well-being competencies), as well as an overall scale. The instrument has 38 items, which are scored on an 11-point Likert scale (0 = very rarely or never; 10 = almost always). Its internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, is 0.85.
- *Emotional Competencies Observation Scale* [9]: The emotional development observation scale was applied to determine the emotional competencies of the first-cycle students based on their teacher's perception. This instrument was constructed based on the theoretical framework of the GROPE described above, taking the emotional competence observation scale for early childhood education, proposed by López-Cassá [33], as a starting point. The reliability analysis established by means of internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding values between 0.75 and 0.84, depending on the scale. The instrument consists of 83 items, which are scored using an 11-point Likert scale (0 = very rarely or never; 10 = almost always).

The instruments were the same for the entire sample, regardless of the autonomous community to which they belong. The official language in common of all Spanish communities is Castilian.

2.4. Procedure

The questionnaires were administered by staff at each school, under the supervision of the research team. Data collection followed the Helsinki guidelines for confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence and minimal intervention. As the participants were minors, the students' families or legal guardians were informed by the school management of the aim of the research and the respective procedures. They were asked to provide written informed consent to the school's directors. The research group signed a research agreement with each school guaranteeing the confidentiality of the results.

2.5. Data Analysis

The analyses for the study were performed with the SPSS v. 25 statistical package, using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Following a descriptive analysis of all the variables, with regulatory compliance to the assumptions of normality (Kolmogorov–Smirnov test), Student's *t*-test was used to study possible differences and Levene's test as a criterion for the assumption of homogeneity of variance. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to observe the relationships between the studied variables.

3. Results

3.1. Emotional Competencies and Academic Performance by Gender

3.1.1. Differences in the First Cycle

The results of the *t*-test for independent samples analyzing the differences in emotional competencies by gender are shown in Table 1. The data show significantly higher scores for girls for four of the five analyzed subscales: emotional awareness, emotional regulation, social competence, and life and well-being competencies. There are likewise significant differences between the two groups, in favor of girls, in the overall score for the CDE questionnaire.

As for academic performance, the results of the *t*-test for independent samples analyzing the differences in performance by gender indicate that, in the first cycle, girls perform significantly better ($M = 7.398$; $SD = 1.233$) than boys ($M = 7.023$; $SD = 1.232$; $t_{427} = -3.143$; $p < 0.05$).

Table 1. Differences in emotional competencies, by gender, in the first cycle.

Competencies	Gender	M	SD	t	d.f.	P
Emotional Awareness	Boys	32.73	9.736	−3.096	428	0.002 **
	Girls	35.59	9.407			
Emotional Regulation	Boys	14.71	5.308	−2.230	428	0.026 *
	Girls	15.80	4.794			
Emotional Autonomy	Boys	17.56	4.982	−1.350	428	0.178
	Girls	18.19	4.689			
Social Competence	Boys	18.08	5.722	−2.778	428	0.006 **
	Girls	19.60	5.575			
Life and Well-Being Competencies	Boys	9.95	3.144	−2.210	428	0.028 *
	Girls	10.59	2.828			
Overall CDE	Boys	93.04	23.901	−2.954	428	0.003 **
	Girls	99.77	23.313			

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; t = Student's *t*-test value; d.f. = degrees of freedom. **. Significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). *. Significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

3.1.2. Differences in the Second Cycle

The *t*-test for independent samples in the second cycle (Table 2) detected the existence of statistically significant differences in favor of girls in four of the five analyzed subscales: emotional awareness, emotional regulation, social competence, and life and well-being competencies. Significant differences in favor of girls were likewise found in the overall questionnaire score.

Table 2. Differences in emotional competencies, by gender, in the second cycle.

Competencies	Gender	M	SD	t	d.f.	P
Emotional Awareness	Boys	6.97	1.609	−4.326	849	0.000 **
	Girls	7.44	1.553			
Emotional Regulation	Boys	6.14	1.524	−4.518	849	0.000 **
	Girls	6.61	1.516			
Emotional Autonomy	Boys	7.75	1.669	−1.475	849	0.141
	Girls	7.92	1.612			
Social Competence	Boys	6.81	1.595	−4.771	849	0.000 **
	Girls	7.31	1.492			
Life and Well-Being Competencies	Boys	7.64	1.544	−2.959	849	0.003 **
	Girls	7.94	1.479			
Overall CDE	Boys	6.89	1.256	−4.990	849	0.000 **
	Girls	7.31	1.216			

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; t = Student's *t*-test value; d.f. = degrees of freedom. **. Significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

With regard to academic performance, no statistically significant differences were found in the second cycle between boys' and girls' performance.

3.1.3. Differences in the Third Cycle

The results of the *t*-test for independent samples analyzing the differences in emotional competencies by gender in the third cycle are shown in Table 3. The data show significantly higher scores for girls in three of the five analyzed subscales: emotional regulation, social competence, and life and well-being competencies. Statistically significant differences in favor of girls were again found to exist in the overall score for the questionnaire.

With regard to academic performance in the third cycle, the results of the *t*-test for independent samples analyzing the differences in this variable by gender indicate that, in this cycle, girls performed significantly better ($M = 7.2297$; $SD = 1.4231$) than boys ($M = 6.8997$; $SD = 1.5323$; $t_{744} = -3.045$; $p < 0.05$).

Table 3. Differences in emotional competencies, by gender, in the third cycle.

Competencies	Gender	M	SD	t	d.f.	P
Emotional Awareness	Boys	7.20	1.404	−1.591	786	0.112
	Girls	7.36	1.377			
Emotional Regulation	Boys	5.74	1.519	−2.899	786	0.004 **
	Girls	6.07	1.613			
Emotional Autonomy	Boys	7.61	1.672	−.226	786	0.821
	Girls	7.63	1.694			
Social Competence	Boys	6.81	1.401	−2.088	786	0.037 *
	Girls	7.02	1.503			
Life and Well-Being Competencies	Boys	7.42	1.489	−2.230	786	0.026 *
	Girls	7.66	1.461			
Overall CDE	Boys	6.80	1.162	−2.482	786	0.013 *
	Girls	7.02	1.233			

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; t = Student's *t*-test value; d.f. = degrees of freedom. **. Significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). *. Significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

3.2. Correlations between Variables

3.2.1. Relationship between Academic Performance and Emotional Competencies

The third aim of this study was to analyze the relationship between emotional competencies and academic performance in schoolchildren. The results of the Pearson correlations indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between academic performance and all the subscales, as well as between academic performance and the overall scale, although it is not very strong. Furthermore, the correlation is not stable, but rather decreases with age, with the correlations being strongest in the first cycle and weakest in the third (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlations between academic performance and emotional competencies.

Cycle	Emotional Awareness	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Autonomy	SC	L&WC	Overall CDE
First Cycle	0.252 **	0.221 **	0.373 **	0.351 **	0.392 **	0.359 **
Second Cycle	0.138 **	0.123 **	0.169 **	0.133 **	0.144 **	0.171 **
Third Cycle	0.141 **	0.109 **	0.140 **	0.100 **	0.107 **	0.148 **

Note: SC = social competence; L&WC = life and well-being competencies. **. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

3.2.2. Relationship between Academic Performance and Emotional Competencies by Gender

With regard to the gender variable, weak but significant positive correlations were found for most of the analyzed subscales and, in all cases, for the overall scale. More significant correlations were observed, and with higher values, for boys than for girls (Table 5).

Table 5. Correlations between academic performance and emotional competencies by gender.

Cycle	Gender	Emotional Awareness	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Autonomy	SC	L&WC	Overall CDE
First Cycle	Boys	0.285 **	0.326 **	0.463 **	0.495 **	0.522 **	0.472 **
	Girls	0.183 **	0.075	0.266 **	0.174*	0.226 **	0.211 **
Second Cycle	Boys	0.144 **	0.138 **	0.238 **	0.153 **	0.215 **	0.207 **
	Girls	0.136 **	0.105 *	0.110 *	0.111 *	0.073	0.139 **
Third Cycle	Boys	0.150 **	0.159 **	0.224 **	0.087	0.171 **	0.192 **
	Girls	0.160 **	0.070	0.090	0.128 *	0.050	0.128 *

Note: SC = social competence; L&WC = life and well-being competencies. **. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). *. The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

4. Discussion

The first aim of this study was to verify the existence of gender-based differences in the development of emotional competencies in primary education cycles. The results obtained with the Student's *t*-test indicate that significant differences do exist in favor of girls for the majority of emotional competencies in all three of the analyzed educational cycles. This result is consistent with the vast majority of studies on emotional intelligence in childhood, which attribute it to the fact that girls have a different social and empathic orientation than that of boys of the same age [18,34,35]. Emotional education can be a good resource for strengthening certain emotional and social competencies in this regard [36].

A different case would be that of "emotional autonomy", one of the competencies evaluated in this study for which no significant gender-based differences were found in any of the three educational cycles. Nevertheless, the results were favorable to girls, indicating that they could be more effective at building self-esteem and a positive attitude toward life in childhood, although the data are not conclusive and even differ to those of other studies [37].

Secondly, this study aimed to verify the existence of gender-based differences in academic performance in the primary education cycles. In this regard, the data obtained point to significant differences between the first cycle and third cycle. In both cases, the differences were in favor of girls, who earned higher grades. This bias in favor of girls is consistent with the data obtained by Serrano et al. [38] in their study of primary school students. At these ages, girls are better, more consistent and more attentive students, generally outperforming and earning better grades than boys. This may be because they have greater self-confidence (due to greater emotional competencies), which increases their chances of attaining academic success [39]. The prevalence of learning difficulties due to lack of attention or disruptive behaviors is much higher in boys than in girls at these ages [40]. One explanation for this phenomenon is probably their greater capacity for emotional regulation in the face of challenges, which allows them to not give up when faced with difficulties at school, to persevere and to improve their performance and, as a result, their self-esteem.

Finally, this study aimed to analyze the relationship between emotional competencies and academic performance by primary education cycle and gender. To this end, Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied to the data obtained. The results indicate positive correlations between academic performance and emotional competencies, albeit of low intensity. This finding shows that students who obtain higher grades at school are also those who show greater self-control—a skill that is indispensable at different moments in academic life—as well as good autonomy and life competencies. Social competencies are also related to performance, given that much of school education is carried out in groups, and as vicarious learning and group work are among the most frequently used methodologies, according to government educational regulations [41]. Emotional awareness also helps students better understand their own moods and those of their peers, allowing them to take maximum advantage of the most appropriate times to study. At the same time, this self-awareness, which generates well-being with oneself, also facilitates the resolution of personal and affective problems [42]. Thus, this study shows that positive correlations are found between emotional competencies and students' academic performance, supporting the contributions offered by Durlak et al. [8].

Another interesting finding is that this correlation between performance and emotional competencies is much greater in boys than in girls. This may seem contradictory, as boys generally scored lower than girls. However, the data obtained indicate that this relationship is more accentuated in boys, since good male students—while they are fewer in number—would be less influenced by other variables, while, in girls, the intervening variables for building self-esteem are more numerous and interrelated [43].

The results obtained thus offer a panoramic view of the emotional reality of primary school classrooms in which girls, for the most part, present better emotional competencies, which are interrelated with their academic achievement. In this vein, some studies highlight

the importance of soft skills as a predictor of success in life [44]. As a future perspective, it would be interesting to determine whether the inclusion of emotional education programs in primary school classrooms, together with coeducation, could be a resource to encourage the existing correlation between emotional literacy and academic performance in both boys and girls.

5. Conclusions

As we have seen, this study points to gender-based differences and interrelationships between emotional competencies and academic performance in different education cycles. The results obtained confirm the need to consider incorporating emotional education at primary schools as basic and essential training to ensure not only school success but also comprehensive training and, thus, the well-being of future citizens of society, boys and girls. As Goleman noted more than three decades ago, a person's success is not attributable to intelligence as is usually thought but to a more complex set of interrelationships and capabilities, which has come to be called "emotional intelligence" and which, unfortunately, remains an outstanding issue in most formal education systems in the Western world. We would like to think that introducing emotional education programs in primary school classrooms could also be a factor for improving today's society to make it healthier, happier and more sustainable.

This study has some limitations related to the sample, which, while large, comes from only one country (Spain) at a single time (2019). It should thus be expanded to other cultural contexts in order to provide even more generalizable data. Additionally, these data are from before the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be interesting to compare them to data from after the lockdown. For future research, it could be interesting to study the relations between a child's emotional development and their progress in various academic subjects. Moreover, it could be desirable to study the needs of children in order to improve their emotional competences. It would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study taking the same measures of this sample of students after an emotional education program had been applied to them to see what differences it might make. Additionally, if the sample were large enough, the use of an experimental group and a control group could be considered in order to attribute any changes perceived in this regard to that program. We hope to be able to do so in the not-too-distant future.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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