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## Working with emotions in the classroom: Future teachers’ attitudes and education

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the results of a qualitative study aimed at analysing the attitudes of education students towards emotional education and the training that they receive in this area. The 122 participants were enrolled in the first year of the Teacher Training Degree in Primary Education at the University of Alicante (Spain). The study focused on their views about the relevance of emotional education in their initial teacher training, as well as their willingness to work with emotions in the future. The results suggest that pre-service teachers have favourable attitudes towards dealing with emotions in the classroom. They also recognised the importance of teachers’ training in developing pupils’ emotional competence. Additionally, they argued that their university lecturers provided them with various strategies to promote pupils’ learning about how to deal with emotions. However, they considered that this training was sparse and too theoretical. The proposals made by the participants notably included that it is essential to rely on emotional education from the earliest stages of the education system, and especially in teacher training programmes.

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### Introduction

In the post-millennium globalised and changing world, studying emotional intelligence is not merely a question of scientific interest, but also a necessity that is intrinsic to human nature. The insecurity and volatility of our liquid society (Bauman, 2007) are weakening the certainties and convictions which to date had been held to be absolutes.

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The economic and institutional fracture, the crisis of values and the dehumanisation of society, are some of the examples of the current critical situation (Cairó-i-Céspedes and Castells-Quintana, 2016). In this context, where human bonds become fragile, fleeting and temporary, it falls to education to provide those answers that allow the subject to meet the challenges posed by society. Under these assumptions, emotional education is the most appropriate way of ensuring the all-round development and training of the individual for life (Bisquerra, 2005). This is especially true considering that, in order for individuals to move towards a fully human future, they need to be responsible, committed and caring citizens.

Given the awareness of the impact that emotional competencies have, particularly in education, numerous studies have taken them as their focus (Corcoran and Tormey, 2012a; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Overcoming the dichotomy between the cognitive and the emotional has shown the potential influence of emotions on education, and specifically on the agents involved (Becker, Goetz, Morger and Ranelluci, 2014). It must be acknowledged that a close relationship exists between, on the one hand, the domain of emotional competencies, and on the other, academic performance (Billings, Downey, Lomas, Lloyd and Stough, 2014; Costa and Faria, 2015), finding creative solutions (Jahanian, 2012), problem solving (Pena, Extremera and Rey, 2011) and coping with stressful educational situations (Extremera, Durán and Rey, 2007), respectively. It is therefore understandable that emotional education has become an object of interest for educational institutions, given their concern with promoting the balanced development of the subject in all dimensions of its personal and social life. The multiple initiatives that have emerged in recent years to promote the acquisition of socio-emotional skills in the classroom are a reflection of this (Berger, Milicic, Alcalay and Torretti, 2014; Castillo, Salguero, Fernández-Berrocal and Balluerka, 2013). The positive results achieved highlight their enormous potential to ensure the pupils' psychological and emotional adjustment (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger, 2011)

For the implementation of such programmes to be successful, they undoubtedly require professionals sufficiently trained in basic socio-emotional skills, such as the perception, assimilation, expression and regulation of their own emotions (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso and Cherkasskiy, 2011). This training is required for their own well-being and their effectiveness as teachers, as well as to foster the appropriate socio-emotional development of their pupils. The high levels of stress involved in teaching (Johnson et al., 2005), and the influence that positive emotions have on teacher effectiveness (Vesely, Saklofske and Leschied, 2013) demand that emotional intelligence be considered to be a key element in initial teacher training. It needs to be taken into account that emotionally competent teachers have an impact on pupils, by encouraging their all-round and balanced growth (Durlak et al., 2011; Sutton and Wheatley, 2003), fostering a positive atmosphere in the classroom, and creating stimulating and healthy environments (Garner, 2010; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Despite this, many studies have highlighted the lack of initiatives aimed at promoting emotional capabilities in teachers during the early stages of their training (López-Goñi and Goñi, 2012; Peñalva, López and Landa, 2013). To this must be added the deficiencies inherent in emotional education processes, which are more focused on theoretical aspects than on experimentation and their own personal experience (Nelis, Quoidbach, Mikolajczak and Hansenne, 2009). This lack of authenticity in learning may explain the low levels of emotional competency often found in prospective teachers (Corcoran and Tormey, 2012b), despite acknowledging a great interest and motivation towards socio-affective work in the classroom (Cejudo, López-Delgado, Rubio and Latorre, 2015).

Based, therefore, on the conviction that initial teacher-training is a privileged environment for improving educational quality, and considering that the emotional training of future teachers has become an essential requirement for their well-being and professional effectiveness (Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal and Brackett, 2008), this study aims to discover the attitudes and perceptions of student teachers towards emotional education, and the role it should play in their future professional practice.

## **Method**

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study, as achieving the required objectives depended on an in-depth analysis of the participants' contributions. Our objectives were:

- Understanding, assessing and identifying the attitudes held by student teachers about the fostering of emotional intelligence in schools.

- Interpreting their opinions about the methodologies and types of emotions that they should be worked on with their pupils.
- Acknowledging their opinions about the emotional education that they are receiving in initial teacher training.
- Assessing their proposals to promote work with emotions in schools.

### *2.1 Context and participants*

The selected participants were 122 students out of the 143 students enrolled in three of the nine groups of one of the basic subjects in the first year of the Degree in Primary Education Teaching at the Faculty of Education, University of Alicante. Of the sample, 76.23% were women and 23.77% were men, consistent with the gender spread of students in education degrees, where men have traditionally been in the minority. As to age, 91.81% of the participating students were between 18 and 20 years old. It was, therefore, a group of young students, who could provide valuable information on the attitudes and perceptions of future teachers regarding working with emotions in the classroom.

### *2.2 Data collection*

The semi-structured interview was used to collect data. This consisted of 10 open questions which were related to the study's four objectives (Appendix A). The instrument was developed ad hoc and validated by three experts from the department of School Didactics and Organisation.

One of the researchers involved in the study teaches one of the subjects of the basic training in the first year of the Primary Education Degree, and administered the questionnaires to the students. Prior to the administration of the instrument, students were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that the confidentiality and anonymity of their data was assured. At no point was a time limit established to answer the questions, and any queries the participants had about them were answered, so as to avoid any misinterpretation of the questionnaire. The average time for completing the interview questions was 30 minutes.

### *2.3 Data analysis*

The data analysis was performed with the aid of AQUAD 7 computer software (Huber and Gürtler, 2013). This programme facilitates the processes of selection and classification of information based on units of meaning. After reading the responses of the participants and prior to encoding the data, the two authors devised an initial framework of categories and codes, which was used as a reference in the encoding process. The recursive nature inherent in qualitative analysis meant that some of the proposed aspects of the initial framework were later modified. The final proposal (Appendix B) was validated by the same three experts who had previously validated the data collection instrument.

## **Results**

All of the information provided by the participants was organised into six categories. The first two emerging categories (1. Benefits of emotional education; 2. Teachers and emotional education) corresponded to the first of the objectives, which aimed to find out the attitudes of student teachers towards emotional education. The third and fourth categories (3. Nature of emotions and 4. Methodologies to work with them) related to exploring what student teachers thought about the kind of emotions that should be worked on, and the methodologies necessary for their development. Finally, the fifth category was concerned with training and finding out what the student teachers interviewed thought about it, and the sixth dealt with the proposals made to improve the work with emotions in the classroom.

What follows are the results of the study, according to the relationships established between the study's objectives and the emerging categories.

### *3.1 Attitudes of student teachers towards emotional intelligence*

Table 1 shows the results of the absolute frequencies (defined as the number of times participants referred to a unit of meaning) for the codes in the first two categories of the study. The analysis of both categories and the participants' narratives identified the attitudes that student teachers have towards emotional education and what they considered the teacher's role should be in their development.

Table 1. Absolute frequencies of codes for categories 1 and 2

| Categories                          | Codes                                     | AF  | AF(%) |
|-------------------------------------|---|-----|-------|
| 1. Benefits of emotional education  | 1.1 Pupils' integration                   | 20  | 5.71  |
|                                     | 1.2 Pupils' all-round development         | 62  | 17.71 |
|                                     | 1.3 Motivation                            | 13  | 3.71  |
|                                     | 1.4 Personalised teaching process         | 14  | 4     |
| 2. Teachers and emotional education | 1.5 Academic performance                  | 35  | 10    |
|                                     | 2.1 Teachers' attitudes                   | 125 | 35.71 |
|                                     | 2.2 Disposition for working with emotions | 81  | 23.14 |
| Totals                              |   | 350 | 100   |

While participants identified several benefits in working on emotional education, they especially emphasised its contribution to the all-round development of pupils and its departure from traditional teaching models, where the priority is conceptual learning [*I have a positive attitude to working with emotions in the classroom, because in this way classes are not only more dynamic and not entirely based on textbooks, but they also educate pupils as real people, Stu\_043*]. They believed that this type of education is a transferable life skill, which encourages the proper integration of pupils into social frameworks [*The school should be a socialising means to teach us how to act in real life, and help us to know how to face everyday problems, Stu\_053*]. Similarly, quite often they insisted on the fact that emotional education is a key element in pupils' achievement. They also believed that emotional well-being is the basis of academic learning [*Personally, I attach great value to emotions in the classroom. This is due to the importance they have for pupils, as the mood that they are in means that they work in one way or another, Stu\_023*]. They also stressed that this type of education favours the integration of pupils, ensuring their well-being and a good classroom atmosphere [*Personally, I think working with emotions in the classroom is important to understand and integrate pupils into a good atmosphere. The emotional factor is very important, Stu\_001*].

With less frequency they also underlined the fact that emotional education promotes the rapport between teachers and pupils, as it allows teachers to adjust their methods to their pupils' characteristics [*I think dealing with emotions in the classroom is important, as it allows us to get to know the pupils better and empathise with them to a greater extent, Stu\_025*]. They also tended to link dealing with emotions in the classroom with increased pupils' motivation for learning [*I consider that working with emotions in the classroom plays an important role, since pupils learn more and are more motivated in class, Stu\_056*].

With regard to the second category, both the frequencies and the analysis of the narratives showed that the participants considered that teachers' attitudes towards emotions is one of the keys to their work in the classroom. They claimed that the teacher becomes an example for pupils and the teacher's emotional state conditions both the emotional state of the pupils and the classroom atmosphere [*Teachers today spend as much or more time with children than their parents do. So I think there is a great influence. Depending on the attitude of the teacher, the child may have one mood or another, Stu\_025*]. Apart from this learning by osmosis, they stressed that the attitude of teachers towards emotional education completely determines the type of emotional education the pupils receive [*I think that the attitudes of teachers greatly influence the work with emotions in schools, Stu\_056*]. They also specifically noted the importance of student teachers developing attitudes that promote emotional education in schools. They held that the new generations of teachers have a responsibility to promote change and innovation in schools [*Student teachers are the ones who have to refresh schools and 'show the door' to traditional ideals. We must innovate, especially when working with emotions, Stu\_028*].

Consistent with the above statements, high percentages of absolute frequency were recorded on their disposition to foster emotional education in their future roles as teachers [*I am in favour of working with emotions in the classroom because pupil learning is not based solely on theoretical content. That is why as a future teacher I would work with*

emotions, Stu\_044].

### 3.2. Types of emotions and methodology for working with them in the classroom

Table 2 shows the absolute frequencies and percentage of absolute frequency for the codes relating to the third and fourth emerging categories. The information regarding these codes revealed the opinions held by the student teachers interviewed on the type of emotions that they consider they should work on in classrooms, as well as the most suitable methodology for doing so.

This shows that the majority stated that they should work on the wide variety of existing emotions. That is, they do not plan to work more on either positive or negative emotions [*Self-control of emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness, etc., and promoting the externalisation of emotions such as gratitude, joy and affection, Stu\_002*]. It should be noted, however, that while the greatest absolute frequency corresponded to the treatment of the full range of emotions, there is a fairly high percentage of frequency indicating that a good part of the participants would focus on highlighting the work with positive emotions and not so much with negative ones [*positive emotions, because in this way children will link school with these positive emotions and will be more interested and enjoy school more, Stu\_092*].

Table 2. Absolute frequency of the codes for categories 3 and 4

| Categories                                     | Codes  | AF  | AF (%) |
|--|--|-----|--------|
| 3. Type of emotions that should be worked with | 3.1 Positive emotions                              | 47  | 15.99  |
|  | 3.2 Negative emotions                              | 14  | 4.76   |
|  | 3.3 Full range of emotions                         | 56  | 19.05  |
| 4. Methodology for working on emotions         | 4.1 Unspecified activities                         | 23  | 7.82   |
|  | 4.2 Group activities                               | 31  | 10.54  |
|  | 4.3 Ethical dilemmas, conflict raising, reflection | 29  | 9.86   |
|  | 4.4 Time to express emotions                       | 42  | 14.29  |
|  | 4.5 Focus on play                                  | 11  | 3.74   |
|  | 4.6 Reading, music and watching films              | 21  | 7.14   |
|  | 4.7 Project work                                   | 14  | 4.76   |
|  | 4.8 New technologies                               | 3   | 1.02   |
|  | 4.9 Classroom organisation                         | 3   | 1.02   |
| Totals   |  | 294 | 100    |

A diversity of proposals was clearly seen regarding which methodology should be used to foster emotional education. Still, the highest percentages of absolute frequency were found for ‘time to express emotions’ and ‘raising ethical dilemmas’. Regarding ‘expressing emotions’, the participants alluded to assemblies, free speaking time and drama exercises [*I would use assemblies in which children talk about their experiences and, from there, I would draw out the feelings involved in each situation, Stu\_052*]. As regards the raising of ethical dilemmas, they stated that it is important to propose real-life or hypothetical situations that would allow their pupils to reflect and experience different emotions [*Perhaps with practical cases, that is, talking about situations where they must make use of emotions and identify them and discuss it in class to know everyone's opinion, Stu\_062*]. Less often, they resorted to other more play-based and social strategies, such as music, games and group work, as they realised that these favoured constructivist and dialogical learning.

### 3.3. Opinions on the training in emotional education received in the early stages of teacher training

Table 3 shows the absolute frequency and percentage of absolute frequency of the emerging codes in relation to the opinion of participants on the training received in their Degree, until the time of the interview. While there was a high

number of frequencies, which shows that the participants had been trained in emotional education in their first year of their teaching degree, an even higher percentage was identified which showed that they had had insufficient training, usually due to the lack of practical application [*I don't think we are working much on this in our training. Certain subjects deal with its importance and how it affects performance, but it is always focused on conceptual education, Stu\_044*].

Table 3. Absolute frequency for the codes in category 5

| Category    | Codes                            | AF  | AF (%) |
|-------------|----------------------------------|-----|--------|
| 5. Training | 5.1 Training received            | 73  | 19.16  |
|             | 5.2 Incomplete training          | 100 | 26.25  |
|             | 5.3 No training                  | 24  | 6.30   |
|             | 5.4 Application of training      | 79  | 20.73  |
|             | 5.5 Disposition for training     | 101 | 26.51  |
|             | 5.6 Lack of interest in training | 4   | 1,05   |
| Totals      |                                  | 381 | 100    |

Although they felt that the preparation they received was incomplete, they greatly appreciated the fact that teachers received training on this subject because they believed that this enabled them to work on emotions in their future career [*If I worked on the topic of emotions during my training, I will be better equipped to teach it to my pupils in the future, because I'll already be familiar with it, Stu\_047*].

This led them to say, with a high percentage of absolute frequency that they would be willing to receive more training in addition to their Degree studies [*Personally, the area of emotions is of major interest to me in my training as a teacher, so yes, I will take these kinds of courses Stu\_063*].

### 3.4. Proposal to improve the work on emotions in the classroom

The last of the categories collects all of the information concerning the proposals of the participants to improve the work on emotions in schools.

As shown in Table 4, they especially called for practical training, which will enable them to adapt their teaching practice to the requirements of the different situations that they will have to face [*My training has included emotional education from a theoretical point of view, but I think they should also focus on promoting this issue in a more practical way, Stu\_118*].

Table 4. Absolute frequency of the codes in category 6

| Category     | Codes  | AF  | AF%   |
|--------------|--|-----|-------|
| 6. Proposals | 6.1 Expansion of the Degree content              | 28  | 16    |
|              | 6.2 Practical training                           | 47  | 26.86 |
|              | 6.3 Training courses                             | 22  | 12.57 |
|              | 6.4 Development of attitudes                     | 18  | 10.29 |
|              | 6.5 Commitment to emotional education in schools | 60  | 34.29 |
| Totals       |  | 175 | 100   |

Beyond practical training, they highlighted the importance of expanding emotional education in the Primary Teaching Education Degree [*I would propose having a whole subject dealing with emotions and emotional intelligence, Stu\_068*]. They also stressed the relevance of continuous in-service training in emotional education, and the development of attitudes to promote this type of education [*Teachers should do training on how to work with their pupils on emotions, Stu\_047*] [*They should question everything, and try to study their pupils to get to know more about them in order to be able to help them, Stu\_095*].



To conclude, the code which was mentioned the most in this category was: Commitment to emotional education in schools. The participants stressed the importance of both novice and veteran teachers being in favour of this type of education, and they considered it to be crucial to the all-round development of pupils [*The main proposal is that greater importance should be given to emotions in schools, placing them on the same level as conventional subjects such as maths or language, Stu\_082*].

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The fast pace of the changes currently experienced in new social frameworks demands critical individuals, who are able to adapt to unstable situations and to ensure their emotional well-being in environments that can be intrinsically stressful and chaotic. In this scenario, schools face the inescapable challenge to socially, culturally and emotionally educate their pupils and teachers cannot relinquish their responsibility.

This study started from the premise that advocating a paradigm that departs from encyclopaedic teaching models, based on the mere transfer of knowledge, involves an educational revolution with some theoretical ground work but little practical application. Given our conviction that teachers' attitudes and training are essential in promoting this model of a socio-emotional school, the study hinges on the four objectives initially raised and discussed in this section.

In general, participants showed positive attitudes towards working with emotions in the classroom, as they understood that these ensure the all-round development of pupils, which is concomitant with the studies by Durlak et al. (2011), Garner (2010) and Sutton and Wheatley (2003). The meta-analysis conducted by the former shows the positive effect that emotional education has on all dimensions of the individual, and its significant role in improving socio-emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and learning outcomes. In the same vein, the participants emphasised the impact that pupils' social and emotional well-being has on their academic performance (Billings et al., 2014; Costa and Faria, 2015), and noted that dealing with emotions promotes the individualisation of education and creates more proactive and motivating classroom environments (Garner, 2010; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). While the participants stressed that the training they receive is essential to deal with emotions, given its practical application, the fact remains that they repeatedly mentioned (with the highest absolute frequency number of the entire study) that working with emotions in the classroom is mainly a question to do with the teacher's attitude (Becker et al., 2014; Corcoran and Tormey, 2012a). Pupils learn, both directly and indirectly, about emotions from their teachers. However many restrictions a teacher has to work with emotions in the classroom, the way they interact and approach teaching situations and assessment indirectly conditions the learning process of their pupils, who see their teacher as an example. The importance accorded to teachers' attitudes towards working with emotions leads them to adopt a broader, more practical training, but which is also more focused on teachers' attitudes and work with their own emotions (Cejudo et al., 2015). As indicated by Nelis et al. (2009), most interventions aimed at promoting teachers' emotional competence are strongly impractical and constructed on dubious theoretical grounds. Therefore, better planned actions, with a greater impact on emotional management would be required. The evaluation of emotional programmes in teacher training is also an important need, because the attitudes and beliefs held by the teacher about the impact emotional education can have on their pupils, will determine the emphasis they place on it. The study reveals the interest of most of the participants in considering emotions in their curriculum design, and their willingness to do so. It also shows their inclination to put them into practice using constructivist methodologies, which are committed to situated and dialogic learning (Nelis et al., 2009).

It is interesting to see that student teachers believe that teachers should work with their pupils on the full range of existing emotions. Specifically, in their narratives, they particularly emphasised the need to have activities that promote the development of emotions through expression, and the use of real or hypothetical situations that make them experience different emotions, or appreciate how other people deal with various emotional circumstances (Berger et al., 2014; Castillo et al., 2013). The focus on play, the use of group work and the organisation of teaching by projects showed that the participants intend to work with emotions from a practical viewpoint, using experiential teaching for didactic purposes.

While the student teachers interviewed confirmed that they had been taught theoretical concepts about this issue, it is true that they were not very satisfied with it (Cejudo et al., 2015). The unsatisfactory nature of their initial teacher training at the University led them to show interest in continuing their training outside of their formal Degree studies. The weight they attached to the initial preparation for their proper performance as teachers is such, that most of their proposals for the promotion of emotional education in schools revolved around improving educational processes (Palomera et al., 2008). They repeatedly stated that the work on emotions does not yet have the same status and recognition as other aspects

of the teaching curriculum of a more conceptual and procedural nature. It seems, therefore, that despite the value of emotional competencies and the training demands of future teachers, they still lack the recognition they deserve in student teacher programmes.

The data collected from the student teachers showed that emotional education is increasingly gaining recognition among the group as a whole. However, they insisted that a greater commitment to these educational aspects is needed, and that they need to be dealt with in a more explicit, practical way. They essentially said that the curriculum of the teaching degrees should be restructured to include content that deals with emotional education and how to best treat it in the classroom. These findings encourage us to continue to explore this area in the future, by comparing the information provided by the participants with the contents of the curriculum and other sources of information, such as the opinions of their lecturers. This purpose stems from the conviction that the quality that initial teacher training has a significant impact on how they later carry out their role as teachers.

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