



# **Emotional Intelligence in Education**

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**Abstract** 

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged in the past twenty five years as one of the

crucial components of emotional adjustment, personal well-being, life success, and interper-

sonal relationships in different contexts of everyday life. This article provides a critical review

of the research field of EI in the school context and analyzes its present and future value for

educational policies in the Spanish educational system.

First, the authors examine the debate on educational policies in different countries

(e.g., United Kingdom, United States and Spain) for providing children the best possible start

in life and for development of EI abilities. Second, they present theoretical models of EI and

describe the Mayer and Salovey model (1997) in detail. Third, the authors summarize re-

search concerning the relevance of EI to indicators for personal and school success such as

interpersonal relationships, academic achievement, and personal and social adjustment. Fi-

nally, they conclude with some recommendations for developing EI at school and several im-

plications for future educational policies in Spain.

**Keywords**: Emotional intelligence, personal adjustment, school success, educational policies.

Received: 04/14/08

*Initial Acceptance: 05/11/08* 

Final Acceptance: 05/23/08

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Emotional intelligence in education

Resumen

La Inteligencia Emocional (IE) ha surgido en los últimos 25 años como un concepto

muy relevante del ajuste emocional, el bienestar personal, el éxito en la vida y las relaciones

interpersonales en diferentes contextos de la vida cotidiana. Este artículo ofrece una revisión

crítica de las investigaciones sobre IE en el contexto escolar y analiza su valor tanto presente

como futuro para las políticas educativas en el sistema educativo español.

En primer lugar, los autores examinan el debate surgido en diferentes países (como por

ejemplo, Reino Unido, estados Unidos y España) sobre las políticas educativas para facilitar-

les a los niños el mejor comienzo en sus vidas y el desarrollo de sus habilidades de IE. En

segundo lugar, presentan los modelos teóricos de IE y decriben con detalle el modelo de Ma-

yer y Salovey (1997). En tercer lugar, los autores resumn la investigación referente a la rele-

vancia de la IE a los indicadores del éxito personal y escolar como las relaciones interpersona-

les, el éxito académico, y el ajuste personal y social. Finalmente, concluyen con algunas re-

comendaciones sobre el desarrollo de la IE en la escuela y algunas implicaciones sobre las

futuras políticas educativas en España.

Palabras Clave: inteligencia emocional, ajuste personal, éxito académico, políticas educati-

vas.

Recibido: 14/04/08

Aceptación Provisional: 11/05/08

Aceptación Definitiva: 23/05/08

Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology. . ISSN. 1696-2095. No 15, Vol 6 (2) 2008, pp. 421-436

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#### Introduction

"I have often observed, with deep regret, that educability of the intelligence is often prevented. The idea of 'once a dunce, always a dunce' seems to go unchallenged by teachers; these teachers lose interest in students who lack intelligence – they show them neither sympathy nor respect, using such unmeasured language in front of the children that they say things like: "This boy will never be good for anything ...he has no gifting, no intelligence". Many times I have heard such careless words. They are repeated daily in primary schools and also in secondary. I remember during my Baccalaureate exam in Letters, Martha the examiner became indignant over one of my answers (I confused the name of a Greek philosophy with one of the character names from La Bruyère). She declared that I would never have the philosophic spirit. "Never!" What a daring word! Some recent philosophers seem to give moral support to such deplorable verdicts, affirming that an individual's intelligence is a fixed quantity, a quantity that cannot increase. We must protest and counteract this brutal pessimism; let us demonstrate that it has no basis whatsoever." (Alfred Binet, 1909).

A century after these thoughts from Alfred Binet (1909), we continue to be concerned about how to get pupils to improve both their intellectual ability and their academic performance. Thus it is ironic that today Binet is more famous in our university classrooms for his invention of the concept *Intelligence Quotient* (IQ) than for his almost desperate attempts to design educational programs that, as we would say today, integrate children with intellectual and learning disabilities.

However, if we analyze the Binet quote from a more psychological point of view, we find that the anecdote he recounts – his teacher Martha's behavior during his Baccalaureate exam – is a very negative emotional memory. Binet politely refers to the *daring* word, "Never!" (we prefer to call it *reckless*), which still rings in his ears when he writes *Modern Ideas about Children* at the end of his life (he died in 1911). Fortunately, young Alfred did not listen to the reckless, discouraging words of his teacher, and years later became a full professor at La Sorbonne, and an original, very influential thinker. Today, Alfred Binet is considered one of the fathers of modern psychology, with more than 115,000 entries in Google.

Unfortunately, not all children who hear such "daring" affirmations, for example, about their intellectual or physical abilities, whether at school or at home, are able to emo-

tionally rise above their effects. The necessary emotional and social competencies for coping adequately with negative, destructive emotions generated in such a competitive context as school have not been explicitly taught in our culture. Why not? Because in our society, and specifically at school, up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intellectual and academic aspects of students have been given priority, under the conviction that their emotional and social aspects belong to the private sphere, where each individual is responsible for his or her own personal development (Evans, 2002; Fernández-Berrocal & Ramos, 2002).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought a new view of the more diverse reality of human functioning, and we are slowing but surely becoming aware of the need for families to address the education of emotional and social aspects, and for schools and society to explicitly do so as well. Gilles Lipovetsky points out that postmodern societies in the first world want not only to be wealthy, opulent and among the top 25 countries in GDP (Gross Domestic Project), but, since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they are desirous of something more. Ultramodern, 21<sup>st</sup> century societies, as Lipovetsky calls them, not only desire material consumption, but they also are looking for a new values hierarchy and a new way to relate to objects and time, to ourselves and to other persons, in order to find individual happiness (Lipovetsky, 2006). Ultramodern societies seek for their citizens' satisfaction in life, because it is a very painful paradox for the individual to live in an opulent society which covers one's physical and material needs, but does not make one happy.

We can find this new view expressed at important official organizations and institutions, such as the United Nations:

"The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born." (p. 6).

This quote is taken from the beginning of the Unicef Innocenti Report "Childhood Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countires", with regard to 21 *ultramodern* societies. This study evaluates and compares children's quality of life along six dimensions: material well-being, health and security, education, family and peer relations, behaviors and risks, and the children's own subjective perception. These dimensions are measured by 40 independent indicators, significant to the lives of children, according to the

concept of childhood well-being as drawn up at the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In this report, the Netherlands holds first place in the welfare of minor children, followed by Switzerland, Denmark and Finland. However, countries like the U.K. and United States hold the lowest places, after poorer countries like Poland and the Czech Republic. This datapoint is very significant because it shows us that there is no linear association between children's welfare in a country, and its GDP: the wealth of societies does not guarantee its citizens' satisfaction and happiness, at least, not for the youngest ones.

Spain holds a good position in this welfare ranking. Spanish children and adolescents have a very high subjective assessment of their own welfare, in terms of their perception of their own health and degree of satisfaction with their lives. These variables and others place Spain in position number five in the general classification of childhood well-being in 21 countries.

Nonetheless, this positive view of our country is in contrast to other recent data that show that Spanish young people also have serious problems. First, the total number of unwanted pregnancies in Spain in adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 during 2005 was 25,965 (INE, 2007), of which approximately 49.6 % were ended in abortion. Second, there is the consumption of legal drugs in adolescents, for example, 44% had gotten drunk at some time during the last month (Ministry of Health & Consumption, 2007).

In the U.K., the dreadful Unicef results regarding well-being of their minor children have generated a great debate about the inability of a rich, ultramodern society to make its youth happy. One of the first reactions has been the creation of a State Secretariat for "Children, Schools and Families" (<a href="http://www.dfes.gov.uk/">http://www.dfes.gov.uk/</a>) in June 2007, for the purpose of assuring satisfaction and happiness in children and youth.

One of the strategies of this new department has taken shape in the active support of a national movement called "Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning" (SEAL; <a href="http://www.bandapilot.org.uk/">http://www.bandapilot.org.uk/</a>) for Primary and Secondary education.

The SEAL movement is directly inspired from proposals originally labeled in the U.S. as "Social and Emotional Learning" (SEL; www.CASEL.org). The principles of SEL are put forward as an integrating framework in order to coordinate all the specific programs which are being applied at school, under the basic assumption that the problems affecting youth are caused by the same emotional and social risk factors. Thus, the best way to prevent these specific problems would be through practical development of children's social and emotional skills in a positive, stimulating atmosphere (Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). The SEL programs are based on the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) developed by Peter Salovey and John Mayer in 1990 (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and propagated with great commercial success by Daniel Goleman in 1995 (Goleman, 1995). Under the label of SEL programs, we find those which offer training in basic skills directly related to EI, such as emotional perception, emotional understanding, emotional regulation, as well as broader, higher level aspects linked to personality, such as self-esteem, perseverance, assertiveness and optimism (for a review, see Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

In Spain, in order to introduce education of the emotions at school, an educational movement has arisen under names like "Emotional Education" or "Socio-Emotional Education". This movement reflects educators' interest in changing a school system which is perceived to be in crisis and unable to face the many challenges of our society. Thus, including emotional and social aspects in students' curriculum is considered one possible solution to some of the urgent problems of the educational system. The main drawback facing educators is that they do not know how to translate this concept into practice. In this admirable desire for change, teachers have addressed the problem from the perspective of Goleman's popular works, and anxious to take action, they have overlooked the academic debates on the real effects and proven effectiveness of EI intervention programs.

The purpose of this article is to describe Mayer and Salovey's EI model and the concrete benefits of EI which are found in the scientific literature on schooling, with the intent to promote EI education at school.

The implications and importance of the educators' own EI, a matter of utmost importance, will not be addressed in this article, having been explicitly approached elsewhere in this monograph (see Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal & Brackett, 2008).

#### Salovey and Mayer's model of emotional intelligence

In the specialized literature, we find a distinction between those EI models which focus on mental skills that help us use information provided by our emotions in order to improve cognitive processing (called "skill models"), and those which combine mental skills with personality traits such as persistence, enthusiasm, optimism, etc. (called "mixed models"). Research work supports the existence of an EI that is considered a mental skill distinct from that of standard, analytic intelligence (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2000). The view of mixed models is more general and somewhat fuzzier, since these models focus on stable behavioral traits and on personality variables (empathy, assertiveness, impulsiveness, etc.). The latter has been the most widespread theoretical model in our country, as a result of Goleman's bestseller.

From Salovey and Mayer's theoretical model, EI is conceived as an authentic intelligence, based on the adaptive use of emotions such that the individual can solve problems and effectively adjust to to his or her surroundings. Mayer and Salovey's skill model considers that EI is conceptualized through four basic skills:

"the skill of accurate perception, appraisal and expression of emotions, the skill of taking on and/or generating feelings which facilitate thinking; the skill of understanding emotions and emotional knowledge and the skill of regulating emotions, thus promoting emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

We can observe how there is another distinction between the second branch (emotional assimilation) and the other three. Perception, evaluation and expression of emotions (the first branch) as well as emotional understanding (third branch) and regulation (fourth branch) all refer to the process of reasoning about emotions, while the second branch (emotional assimilation) includes the use of emotions to facilitate thinking.

## **Benefits of improving EI**

More recent literature has shown that gaps in emotional intelligence skills affect students both inside and outside the school context (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner & Salovey, 2006; Ciarrochi, Chan & Bajgar, 2001; Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2003;

Mestre & Fernández-Berrocal, 2007; Sánchez-Núñez, Fernández-Berrocal, Montañés & Latorre, 2008; Trinidad & Johnson, 2002). There are four basic areas where a lack of EI provokes or facilitates the appearance of behavior problems in students:

- Emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships,
- Emotional intelligence and psychological well-being,
- Emotional intelligence and academic performance, and
- Emotional intelligence and the appearance of disruptive behaviors.

# Emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships

Once of the most important objectives for any person is to maintain the best possible relations with the people around him or her. Strong EI helps us to be able to offer those around us adequate information about our psychological state. In order to manage the emotional state of others, it is first necessary to manage well one's own emotional states. Emotionally intelligent persons are not only skillful in perceiving, understanding and managing their own emotions, they also are able to extrapolate these skills to the emotions of others. In this sense, EI plays a basic role in establishing, maintaining and having quality interpersonal relationships. Some studies have found empirical data that support the relationship between EI and adequate interpersonal relationships (Brackett et al., 2006; Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2004; Lopes, Salovey, Cote, Beers, 2005).

# Emotional intelligence and psychological well-being

In the last decade, a group of studies have focused on analyzing the role of EI in students' psychological well-being. The Mayer and Salovey model provides us with a suitable framework for understanding basic emotional processes which underlie the development of adequate psychological balance, and helps us better understand the mediating role of certain emotional variables in students and their influence on psychological adjustment and personal well-being. Studies carried out in the United States show that university students with higher EI report fewer physical symptions, less social anxiety and depression, greater use of active coping strategies for problem solving, and less rumination. Furthermore, when these students are exposed to stressful laboratory tasks, they perceive stressors as less threatening, and their levels of cortisol and blood pressure are lower (Salovey, Stroud, Woolery & Epel, 2002), and they even recover better from experimentally-induced mind states (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey & Palfai, 1995). Research carried out with Spanish adolescents shows that when they

are divided into groups according to their level of depressive symptomatology, students with a normal state differ from those classified as depressive by greater clarity about their feelings and greater ability to regulate their emotions (Fernández-Berrocal, Alcaide, Extremera & Pizarro, 2006; for a more extensive review see Fernández-Berrocal & Extremera, 2007).

## Emotional intelligence and academic performance

The ability to pay attention to their emotions, experience feelings with clarity and be able to recover from negative states of mind will be a decisive influence on students' mental health, and this psychological balance in turn is related to and ultimately affects academic performance. Persons with limited emotional skills are more likely to experience stress and emotional difficulties during their studies, and consequently will benefit more from the use of adaptive emotional skills that allow them to cope with these difficulties. EI may act as a moderator of the effects of cognitive skills on academic performance (Fernández-Berrocal, Extremera & Ramos, 2003; Gil-Olarte, Palomera & Brackett, 2006; Pérez & Castejón, 2007; Petrides, Frederickson & Furnham, 2004).

# Emotional intelligence and the appearance of disruptive behaviors

EI skills are a key factor in the appearance of disruptive behaviors based on an emotional deficit. It is logical to expect that students with low levels of EI show greater levels of impulsiveness and poorer interpersonal and social skills, all of which encourage the development of various antisocial behaviors (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2002; 2004; Mestre, Guil, Lopes, Salovey & Gil-Olarte, 2006; Petrides et al., 2004). Some researchers suggest that people with lower emotional intelligence are more involved in self-destructive behaviors such as tobacco consumption (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Mayer & Warner, 2004; Canto, Fernández-Berrocal, Guerrero & Extremera, 2005; Trinidad & Johnson, 2002; Trinidad, Unger, Chou & Johnson, 2004a; Trinidad, Unger, Chou & Johnson, 2004b; Trinidad, Unger, Chou & Johnson, 2005). Adolescents with a greater ability to manage their emotions are more able to cope with them in their daily life, facilitating better psychological adjustment, and so they present less risk for substance abuse. Specifically, adolescents with a wider repertoire of affective competencies based on the understanding, management and regulation of their own emotions do not require other types of external regulators (e.g., tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs) in order to recover from negative states of mind provoked by the wide range of stressful life events which they are exposed to at this age (Ruiz-Aranda, Fernández-Berrocal, Cabello & Extremera, 2006).

# Is it possible to teach EI?

After a brief view of the benefits of EI in different areas of the school context, the reader is likely to think: "It's all very nice to have these skills at school. Indeed, the world would be perfect if my students had these emotional and social skills. But, what if they don't?" And the next question that inevitably arises is: Can I develop EI in my students?

Teaching emotional intelligence has become a necessary task in the educational arena and most parents and teachers consider mastery of these skills a priority in the socioemotional and personal development of their children and pupils. However, there are many ways to pursue this, and from our point of view, it is important to teach children and adolescents using EI programs which explicitly include and highlight emotional skills based on the ability to perceive, understand and regulate emotions, as outlined in the Mayer and Salovey model (Grewal & Salovey, 2005; Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Teaching these skills depends on giving priority to practice, training and improvement, and not so much on verbal instruction. The main thing is to exercise and practice emotional skills, enabling them to become just one more adaptive response within a person's natural repertoire.

Are these types of EI exercises effective? Yes, studies do exist, albeit not many, which support the effectiveness of specific training programs in the emotional skills that make up EI (Lopes & Salovey, 2004; Maurer & Brackett, 2004; see also Fernández-Berrocal & Ramos, 2004). Specifically, among educational programs carried out in the U.S. under the label of SEL, very promising results were seen (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004; see also, in this monograph, Ruiz-Aranda, Fernández-Berrocal, Cabello & Salguero, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Young Alfred Binet would have been grateful if his teacher Martha would have had enough EI to point out his error without the load of destructive emotions that she recklessly passed on. The European society where Binet was born and lived has changed radically and is nearly unrecognizable from our 21<sup>st</sup> century mentality. However, some of the less evolved

aspects of the schools where Binet was brought up still remain in our present-day educational system.

Notable countries belonging to the G8 ("the richest countries club"), such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have begun to understand that being one of the eight most industrialized, richest and most influential countries on the planet does not guarantee that citizens are satisfied with their lives or are happy. In Spain the situation is not yet as critical as in these countries, but beyond statistics and measures of well-being, any attentive observer of daily reality at school and in society can see that we getting dangerously close to their levels of dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

The United States and the United Kingdom are reacting appropriately to this challenge, from both public and private institutions. In order to do so, they are contributing heavily to research funds for the study, application and evaluation of different socioemotional education programs at school. Along these lines, Spain finds itself at an excellent moment to make educational policies and investments similar to those made in these countries. However, we should not do so in a rushed, uncoordinated fashion as is often imposed by the pace of our nation, but rather from a serious, rigorous perspective that allows for extensive development of socioemotional education in the mid and long term.

Perhaps the contradictions and paradoxes of ultramodern societies cannot be resolved through educating the emotions at school, and other radical changes in our environment and in our lives are necessary, but there is no doubt that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a friendlier, more stimulating era for those future citizens who have greater EI.

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