Current Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence Development in Primary Education

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Abstract: **Objectives:** This study investigates the main dimensions of emotional intelligence development in young learners, with particular emphasis on socio-emotional competencies and the balance between emotional and cognitive growth in primary school children. **Prior Work:** Building on key theories of emotional intelligence from Goleman (2004), Mayer and Salovey (2020), and Cojocaru-Borozan (2010), the research looks at how these ideas apply to emotional education in early schooling. **Approach:** Using a mix of observation, guided discussions, modeling, and analytical methods, the study identifies important socio-emotional abilities such as self-awareness, self-control, empathy, and social interaction, considering how these affect learning in primary classrooms. **Results:** Findings support the integration of curriculum-aligned emotional education initiatives aimed at fostering emotional intelligence. The study highlights the beneficial impact of emotional intelligence on both academic achievement and interpersonal relationships among students. **Implications:** The research proposes targeted educational strategies designed to nurture emotional intelligence development in primary school learners. **Value:** This study underscores the necessity for intentional design and integration of emotional education in primary curricula, demonstrating its role in promoting academic success and cultivating harmonious school environments.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; primary education; emotional development; socio-emotional learning

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1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving society, marked by social instability, accelerating technological advancement, and continuous shifts in educational paradigms, fostering emotional intelligence in young school-age children has become a priority, as it facilitates real-world adaptation and supports holistic development that integrates academic achievement with socio-emotional growth. Examining the dimensions of emotional intelligence in primary education advances scientific understanding of socio-emotional education, informs evidence-based classroom practices, and enhances the quality of interpersonal relationships within the school environment.

Recent international research (OECD, 2021; CASEL, 2023) highlights a concerning rise in emotional difficulties among primary school students, including anxious, aggressive, avoidant, and other maladaptive behaviors. These issues frequently stem from underdeveloped emotional self-regulation and empathy. In this context, emotional intelligence – defined as the ability to recognize, express, understand, and manage emotions – emerges as a central component of contemporary education, fostering students' effective adaptation to the challenges of modern life.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks of Emotional Intelligence

Interest in emotional intelligence (EQ) has increased significantly over recent decades, with numerous studies examining the construct from perspectives including developmental psychology, emotion research, and pedagogy (Cojocaru-Borozan, 2010). Educational models centered on emotional intelligence emphasize the integration of cognitive (IQ) and affective (EQ) components, promoting the deliberate and effective use of intellectual and emotional resources to facilitate students' successful adaptation to contemporary life (Cojocaru-Borozan, 2010). This approach structures knowledge, experiences, and behaviors within a coherent framework, enabling flexible responses to novel situations. Similarly, H. Gardner maintains that the purpose of education extends beyond knowledge transmission to supporting children in identifying and developing areas where their innate abilities can reach their full potential, thereby fostering personal fulfillment and authentic achievement (Cojocaru-Borozan, Șova & Țurcan-Balțat, 2016).

The term *emotional intelligence* was first introduced by W. L. Payne (1985) in his doctoral dissertation in the United States. In Payne's view, emotional intelligence is

a competence that involves "creative interaction with an emphasis on emotions: fear, pain, or desire," reflecting the ability to self-regulate and integrate these affective experiences (as cited in Floyd); in other words, the ability to manage distressing emotions constructively. Over time, the concept was adopted and further developed within scientific psychology, drawing on theoretical frameworks that emphasized the important contribution of emotional competencies to the harmonious development of the individual, both personally and socially. While cognitive processes were once considered to take precedence over affective ones, research over recent decades has increasingly underscored the role of the emotional dimension in supporting complex mental functions and sustaining an individual's internal equilibrium (Floyd, 2013).

A fundamental contribution to the scientific conceptualization of emotional intelligence was made by J. Mayer and P. Salovey (2001). Within their theoretical framework, emotional intelligence is defined as a set of competencies that enable individuals to process emotionally relevant information effectively, thereby supporting adaptation and well-being across diverse life contexts. According to the Mayer and Salovey's model, emotional intelligence encompasses four core abilities (see Figure 1).
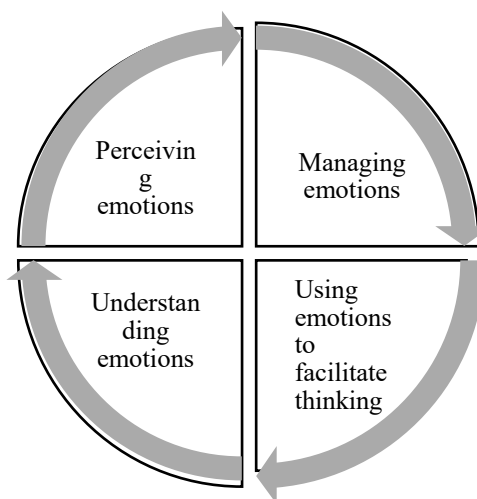
Figure 1. Core Abilities of Emotional Intelligence According to J. Mayer and P. Salovey (2001)

Perceiving emotions refers to the ability to accurately identify one's own emotions and those of others, for example, recognizing facial expressions and vocal cues. *Using emotions to facilitate thinking* involves the ability to generate or harness feelings that support cognitive activity, for instance, drawing on enthusiasm to

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stimulate creativity. *Understanding emotions* entails the capacity to comprehend the causes, development, and consequences of different emotions, as well as the relationships among them. *Managing emotions* involves the ability to regulate one's own affective states and to constructively influence the emotions of others. These competencies, often referred to as the "branches" of emotional intelligence, function in an integrated manner, ensuring balanced and effective psychological functioning.

David Caruso later collaborated with Mayer and Salovey to extend their foundational work, developing psychometric instruments to operationalize emotional intelligence as a measurable construct (as cited in Artiomov, 2019). Goleman (1995) proposed an alternative model identifying five key components that characterize individuals with well-developed emotional intelligence. These components are: *self-awareness*, which involves recognizing one's own emotions and understanding their influence on behavior; *self-regulation*, the ability to manage impulses and maintain emotional balance; *motivation*, the tendency to pursue personal goals with perseverance and a positive attitude; *empathy*, the capacity to comprehend and resonate with the emotions of others; and *social skills,* the aptitude to establish and maintain effective, harmonious interpersonal relationships through appropriate communication and cooperation. Goleman emphasizes that these competencies are not exclusively innate but can be cultivated and developed throughout life. Individuals can enhance their emotional intelligence through education, practice, and systematic exercises targeting self-awareness, emotion regulation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 2004).
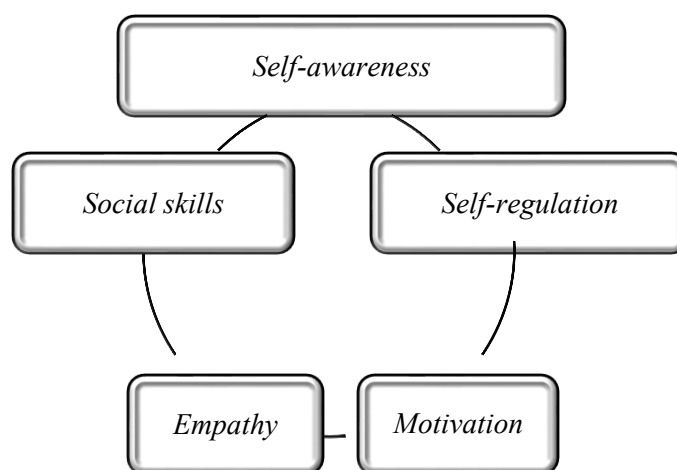
Figure 2. Components of Emotional Intelligence According to D. Goleman (2004)

R. Bar-On made a seminal contribution by advancing a framework that emphasizes the practical and applied dimensions of emotional intelligence, delineating measurable constructs that can be shaped through education. Bar-On's model (1997) identifies five core categories of socio-emotional competencies: *intrapersonal skills,* encompassing self-awareness and self-acceptance; *interpersonal skills*, including empathy and the ability to establish harmonious relationships; *adaptability*, reflecting the capacity to address personal challenges and adjust effectively to change; *stress management,* involving stress tolerance and impulse control; and *general mood*, characterized by optimism and overall well-being (apud Floyd). This framework offers a robust foundation for educational interventions designed to cultivate students' emotional competencies, addressing both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of emotional intelligence. Table 1 presents a consolidated overview of the main theoretical models of emotional intelligence described above.

Table 1. Prominent Theoretical Models of Emotional Intelligence

Model / Authors	Core Components / Characteristics of Emotional Intelligence
W. L. Payne (1985)	Creative engagement with emotions (e.g., fear, pain, desire) for self-regulation and affective integration; first formal use of the term "emotional intelligence."
J. Mayer and P. Salovey (1990/1997)	• Perceiving emotions • Using emotions to facilitate thinking • Understanding emotions • Managing emotions
D. Goleman (1995)	• Self-awareness • Self-regulation • Intrinsic motivation • Empathy • Social skills
R. Bar-On (1997)	• Intrapersonal skills • Interpersonal skills • Adaptability • Stress management • General positive mood

Collectively, these models emphasize that emotional intelligence involves the accurate perception of emotions, their adaptive application, and the sophisticated regulation of affective states. The diversity of theoretical perspectives has not only advanced our conceptual understanding of the construct but also provided researchers and practitioners with a comprehensive set of tools for assessing and promoting socio-emotional development in children.

3. Emotional Intelligence in the Child's Transition to Primary Education

The transition from kindergarten to primary school entails profound changes that shape a child's personality development. Entering the structured environment of primary education introduces new social roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Learning activities assume a central role, providing the primary context in which the child engages with the world and develops cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. During this period, family and school collaborate to nurture a well-rounded personal identity and to facilitate the child's smooth social integration.

From the perspective of U. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development, a child's entry into primary education shifts the focus of environmental influences toward the mesosystem, that is, the interactions among core microsystems such as family, school, and peer groups, which jointly shape the child's developmental trajectory (Guțul, 2022). Within this expanded relational context, emotional intelligence begins to manifest in a structured way, reflected in the child's ability to recognize, express, and regulate their own emotions, interpret the emotional responses of others, and respond empathetically while adhering to the social norms of the group. The level of emotional maturation achieved at this stage has a direct impact on academic success: many common adjustment difficulties observed in young students, such as school-related anxiety, aggression, social withdrawal, and lack of perseverance, are closely linked to cognitive development, the child's capacity for emotional regulation, and their ability to navigate social challenges within the school environment.

Primary school educational activities contribute to the development of both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of emotional intelligence. Through engagement in structured learning tasks, educational games, interactions with teachers and peers, and the emotional feedback provided by significant adults, students progressively refine their emotional skills in practical contexts. The responses of parents and teachers to a child's emotional experiences shape self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, and the child's interpretation of success and failure in learning (ibid.). Learning environments that support emotional expression and provide guidance in managing emotions foster a constructive attitude toward school and enhance academic achievement, whereas emotionally unsupportive or rigid settings can lead to disengagement, withdrawal, and diminished motivation.

The importance of integrating the emotional dimension into education is further supported by A. Cosmovici and L. Iacob, who emphasize the significant role of emotions in the development of young school-age children. Although logical

thinking and reasoning become increasingly structured at this age, emotions remain an indispensable complementary factor for educational success. The authors define *emotions as short-term affective states that reflect a child's particular way of relating to a given object or situation, and are therefore highly situational and context-dependent* (Cosmovici & Iacob, 2010, p. 205). In other words, how a student feels in a learning situation can either facilitate or hinder access to knowledge: a confident and enthusiastic child will engage willingly in challenging activities, whereas one overwhelmed by fear or discouraged by failure may avoid challenges and active learning. Emotional intelligence, through its affective components – self-awareness, self-regulation, and optimism – supports resilience in young students and enhances their ability to take full advantage of educational opportunities.

An important aspect to consider is the close relationship between the emotional climate of the classroom and the effectiveness of the educational process. All cognitive content delivered by the teacher is filtered through the student's affective lens. A student is more likely to learn effectively from a teacher with whom they share a *positive and trusting relationship* than from one perceived as hostile or indifferent. Research confirms that the student–teacher relationship plays a decisive role in students' motivation to learn: children are less likely to assimilate information effectively from a teacher with whom they do not emotionally resonate, particularly when pedagogical interactions are characterized by rigidity, lack of empathy, or a climate of fear and punishment (Trofăilă, 2020). Conversely, a teacher who demonstrates emotional intelligence through empathy, understanding, patience, and self-regulation, can cultivate a supportive environment in which students feel encouraged to express curiosity, engage in constructive mistakes, and persevere in learning.

Recognizing the influential role of emotional intelligence, emotional literacy should be introduced from the earliest stages of formal schooling. Cojocaru-Borozan and Zagaevschi (2012) frame emotional education as a contemporary dimension of the educational process, focused on cultivating emotional intelligence, measured conceptually by the EQ coefficient. This approach emphasizes conscious awareness and management of one's own emotions, expressed through effective, value-guided communication. The authors note that these competencies not only enhance academic performance but also support emotional stability and social integration, positioning emotional education as a central element in students' personal and professional formation (Zagaevschi & Cojocaru-Borozan, 2014, p. 11). Systematically embedding emotional development activities within the curriculum

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generates a synergistic effect, promoting psychological well-being, improving school achievement, and preparing students for future professional adaptation.

Emotional education focuses on fostering emotional balance by promoting healthy levels of emotional stability. Achieving this balance, often referred to as *affective equilibrium*, involves maintaining a moderate degree of emotional arousal, appropriate psychological responsiveness, and a sense of harmony between contrasting emotional states, such as energizing versus exhausting feelings or positive versus negative emotions. In contrast, *emotional imbalance* can lead to dysfunctional states, including general malaise, persistent sadness, symptoms of depression, increased irritability, anger, or even aggressive behavior. These issues can negatively impact a child's personality development and their ability to adapt socially. Emotional imbalance may arise from biological factors, such as a temperament that tends toward heightened emotional reactivity, or from environmental influences, including life experiences and early social interactions (Cojocaru-Borozan, 2012, p. 51). Therefore, ED seeks to both prevent and address emotional imbalance by gradually building emotional resilience in young learners.

4. Objectives and Functions of Emotional Intelligence

The objectives of emotional education can be structured across two complementary levels: *theoretical and practical,* as outlined by Cojocaru-Borozan and Zagaevschi (2014). *At the theoretical level*, emotional education aims to build students' understanding of key concepts related to emotional intelligence. This includes developing emotional vocabulary, learning to recognize and label emotions, and understanding the role of empathy in social interactions. It also involves fostering transferable social-emotional skills that support the formation of positive relationships in a variety of contexts. *At the practical level,* the focus shifts to developing students' emotional competencies through direct experience. This includes strengthening intrapersonal skills such as self-awareness and reflection, enhancing interpersonal abilities like effective communication and collaboration, developing adaptability to changing circumstances, and acquiring strategies for stress management and emotional self-regulation. By integrating both theoretical and practical dimensions, emotional education supports a holistic approach to social-emotional development, aiming to cultivate a balanced and functional emotional profile in students. A summary of the main objectives at both levels is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Objectives of Emotional Education at Theoretical and Practical Levels (adapted from Cojocaru-Borozan & Zagaevschi, 2014)

Theoretical Objectives	Practical Objectives
• Introduce students to foundational concepts of emotional intelligence; •Develop transferable social-emotional competencies that facilitate the development of positive, functional relationships across diverse contexts.	• Enhance intrapersonal skills through self-reflection and increased self-awareness; • Foster interpersonal skills by strengthening communication and collaboration; • Develop adaptability to changing circumstances; • Equip students with effective strategies for stress management and emotional self-regulation.

The functions of emotional education mirror the essential roles that emotional intelligence plays in both personal and social contexts. These functions represent interconnected educational objectives that address the *intrapersonal and interpersonal* dimensions of student development. The following table outlines the primary functions of emotional education, categorized according to these two dimensions.

Table 3. Primary Functions of Emotional Education Across Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Dimensions (adapted from Cojocaru-Borozan & Zagaevschi, 2014)

Intrapersonal	Interpersonal
• Cultivating a balanced and reflective emotional life; • Managing internal emotional tension and stress to enhance well-being; • Building self-confidence and fostering intrinsic motivation; • Developing adaptability and flexibility to changing circumstances.	• Supporting a positive socio-emotional classroom climate; • Enhancing the quality of peer interactions and relationships; • Encouraging effective and empathetic communication; • Enhancing the student–teacher relationship.

At the intrapersonal level, emotional education fosters a balanced emotional life by promoting emotional awareness and self-regulation. Students acquire the ability to recognize, understand, and appropriately express their emotions, thereby expanding their emotional vocabulary and enabling constructive responses to challenges. This foundation enhances well-being, alleviates emotional tension and everyday stress, and positively influences attention, motivation, and academic achievement. Emotional education also fosters self-confidence and intrinsic motivation,

encouraging students to navigate challenging emotions and approach new situations with initiative and creativity. Over time, this process cultivates adaptability, flexibility, and personal agency, enabling students to manage change and transitions with resilience and competence.

At the interpersonal level, emotional education supports the development of positive social relationships and fosters a constructive emotional climate within the classroom. Activities that emphasize empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect strengthen teamwork, reduce exclusion and conflict, and promote effective and empathetic communication. Students become more attuned to the emotional needs of their peers and learn to express themselves assertively while maintaining respect. This approach encourages tolerance of diversity and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Additionally, the student–teacher relationship is reinforced through trust, creating a secure emotional environment that promotes active engagement in learning. Consequently, emotional education contributes to the development of a comprehensive socio-emotional profile, enabling students to regulate their emotions effectively and engage constructively with others.

To achieve its objectives effectively, the practical implementation of emotional education must be both systematic and collaborative. A central premise is that every action and interaction within the school environment contributes to shaping its emotional climate. Therefore, interventions should aim to *increase awareness of the importance of emotional life* among all stakeholders (students, teachers, and parents). Teachers play an important role by modeling emotionally balanced behavior, such as managing classroom frustrations calmly, showing empathy toward students' difficulties, and fostering an atmosphere of acceptance and psychological safety. Rather than resorting to impulsive reactions or punitive responses, educators are encouraged to promote *emotional self-regulation* by helping students identify negative emotions and express or redirect them in constructive ways through open dialogue, brief relaxation exercises, or breathing techniques during moments of heightened emotional tension.

5. Strategies for Developing Emotional Intelligence in Primary Education

Fostering students' emotional development in primary education can be effectively achieved through a range of structured activities and games intentionally designed to support affective development. Such activities create a safe, supportive

environment in which children can openly express themselves and release emotional tension in socially appropriate, constructive ways. Examples include role-playing scenarios that require children to portray different emotions, guided group discussions about personal experiences (e.g., events that made them feel happy or sad during the week), and creative activities such as illustrating emotions through drawing, music, or movement. One particularly effective approach is the use of an "emotion jar," a container where students anonymously deposit notes about experiences that have either pleased or upset them, which then serve as prompts for teacher-facilitated discussions that support the shared processing of emotions. Such practices reduce the risk of emotional suppression, support healthy emotional regulation, and contribute to a balanced and emotionally cohesive classroom climate (Sanda, 2023).

An essential aspect of developing emotional intelligence in children is the *intentional expansion of their emotional vocabulary.* As J. Segal (1997) emphasizes, students benefit from progressing beyond basic affective categories such as h*appiness, sadness, anger, fear, and surprise* to encompass more differentiated and nuanced emotional states. Feelings such as *tenderness, compassion, desire, euphoria, attraction, satisfaction, impatience, sorrow, envy, bitterness, insecurity, or unease* are often challenging for children to recognize and articulate without targeted guidance. Implementing instructional strategies such as matching emotions to specific situational contexts, engaging with narratives that highlight emotional experiences, or discussing the feelings of characters in literature or media can foster greater *emotional granularity.* This enhanced capacity enables students to express their internal experiences with precision and to select more adaptive responses across diverse situations. For example, distinguishing between "*I feel ashamed*" and "*I feel regret*" is meaningful: shame may lead to withdrawal and avoidance, whereas regret suggests a sense of responsibility and a willingness to make amends. Incorporating opportunities for emotional reflection into daily classroom routines, such as ending the day with each student naming an emotion they experienced and describing the circumstances, further reinforces these skills. Over time, such practices contribute to improved emotional self-regulation and support students' overall social and academic adjustment (Trofăilă, 2020).

Without systematic educational interventions designed to cultivate emotional competencies, schools may experience a range of problematic outcomes. Research indicates that neglecting emotional intelligence within both the curriculum and everyday pedagogical practice can lead to several adverse consequences (Elias, Tobias & Fridlender, 2000).

● *Increased bullying and school violence.* Students who struggle to recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions are more likely to respond to frustration or interpersonal conflict with aggression.

● *Underachievement despite cognitive potential.* Even intellectually capable students may perform below expectations when anxiety, low motivation, or diminished self-confidence interfere with sustained effort.

● *Reduced self-esteem and self-efficacy.* In the absence of adequate emotional support, academic struggles can undermine students' self-image, leading to feelings of inadequacy.

● *Persistent negative emotional states.* Accumulated frustration and dissatisfaction may foster cynicism, prejudice toward peers, or resentment toward school as an institution.

Overall, these forms of emotional dysfunction contribute to a relational and emotional climate that is detrimental to both the quality of teaching and learning and to students' personal growth. Addressing these issues requires intervention strategies that integrate both *preventive measures*, implemented through ongoing emotional education, and *targeted remedial interventions,* such as counseling, conflict mediation, and psychoeducational support for students experiencing difficulties.

The contribution of the family and wider community to the development of children's emotional intelligence is essential. Schools alone cannot maximize their impact if their approaches are not reinforced at home. Parents' active participation in programs or workshops on emotional education can enhance their understanding of the importance of validating their children's emotions, maintaining open and supportive communication, and applying positive, consistent discipline. A coordinated school-family approach ensures alignment in fostering emotional competencies, allowing children to experience consistent guidance, encouragement, and healthy boundaries across both settings. Sustained, authentic communication and collaborative partnerships among teachers, parents, and students provide a strong foundation for cultivating emotionally resilient, well-adjusted children (Cojocaru-Borozan & Zagaevschi, 2012).

6. Conclusions

Rapid social and technological changes, coupled with increasingly prominent emotional challenges during the early school years, necessitate a reevaluation of traditional approaches to emotional education. Integrating affective dimensions alongside cognitive development is no longer optional; it is imperative for providing high-quality education and preparing students for balanced, healthy lives. In the context of contemporary primary education, the development of emotional intelligence supports the holistic development of children throughout their educational journey. Research indicates that emotional intelligence is a competence that can be cultivated through well-designed educational interventions tailored to classroom practice. By systematically promoting skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and effective communication, primary schools lay a strong foundation for children's emotional self-management, the development of harmonious relationships, and long-term academic and personal success. Ultimately, investing in emotional education at an early age is an investment in a future generation that is more resilient, empathetic, and capable of navigating the complex affective demands of the modern world.

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