AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG A SAMPLE OF STUDENTS IN THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING SCIENCE DEGREE PROGRAM

UNO STUDIO ESPLORATIVO SULLA PERCEZIONE DELL'INTELLIGENZA EMOTIVA DI UN CAMPIONE DI STUDENTI DEL CORSO DI LAUREA IN SCIENZE DELL'EDUCAZIONE E DELLA FORMAZIONE

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence, known as the set of skills that determine effectiveness in processing diverse emotional information (Mayer & Cobb 2000), is essential for subjective well-being (OECD, 2021) and for supporting and performing formal and informal tasks, especially in caregiving jobs. Research shows that dedicated workshops and courses within university pathways effectively develop these skills in students, thereby preparing them for their future professions (Kuk, et al. 2021; Khurshid, M et al. 2018). This paper aims to show the first results of a survey conducted on a sample of students of the Education and Training Science degree program at Sapienza University of Rome. The purpose is to measure levels of self-perceived Emotional Intelligence along with variables related to university studies such as years of coursework and internship experiences. Perceived training needs of students to develop these skills are also explored.

L'intelligenza emotiva, intesa come quell'insieme di abilità che determinano l'efficacia nella elaborazione delle diverse informazioni emotive (Mayer & Cobb 2000), è fondamentale per il benessere soggettivo della persona (OECD, 2021) e per sostenere e svolgere compiti in contesti formali e informali, in modo particolare per chi svolge lavori di cura. Le ricerche mostrano come laboratori e corsi dedicati all'interno dei percorsi universitari siano un modo efficace per sviluppare queste abilità negli studenti preparandoli così alle loro professioni future (Kuk, et al. 2021; Khurshid, M et al. 2018). Questo contributo si propone di mostrare i primi risultati di un'indagine condotta su un campione di studenti di Scienze dell'educazione e della formazione di Sapienza Università di Roma. Lo scopo è misurare i livelli di intelligenza emotiva auto percepita lungo variabili legate agli studi universitari come gli anni di corso e l'esperienza di tirocinio; vengono approfonditi poi i bisogni formativi percepiti per sviluppare queste competenze.

¹ Athor of Introduction, §2, §3, §4, §5, §6.

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Key-words

Emotional intelligence, higher education, training needs Intelligenza emotiva, studi universitari, bisogni formativi

Introduction

Emotions are involved in all our actions, behaviors, and activities. However, it seems that they still struggle to acquire dignity in educational contexts. The emotional sphere, excluded from training due to a traditional mistrust, has failed to express its formative potential (Iori, 2010). However, studies in psychology and neuroscience have widely shown how being emotionally competent is an indispensable resource in training and work contexts and, more generally, to face the challenges of life (D'Amico, 2018). Educational work more than others is questioned about this type of competence. The relationship, particularly the caring relationship, is imbued with emotional aspects that require self-awareness and regulation. "The rehabilitation of emotional intelligence concerns training on all fronts: from skills of trainers to organization of services, from the recipients of projects to the content and methods. The absence of a reflection on the formative experience of emotional life is partly responsible for today's cultural context, for the widespread sentimental illiteracy, for the removal of experiences, for the poor and abused vocabulary used to talk about it" (author's translation - Iori, 2010, p.45).

Therefore, it is fundamental to give dignity back to emotions and formal contexts, such as the university one, to train individuals in those aspects of substantial competence of their professionalism to which they will be called. Pedagogy should not be ashamed to cultivate the exercise of feeling emotional life to become aware and effective in the contexts where we are called to act.

This study fits this framework and considers the complex construct of emotional intelligence within a pedagogical degree program. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is an evolving construct with a controversial definition. According to the model (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), it "involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions" (p. 189). Research shows that dedicated workshops and courses within university pathways effectively develop these skills in students, preparing them for their future professions (Kuk et al., 2021; Khurshid et al., 2018). Courses dedicated to emotional intelligence in university settings are instrumental by demonstrating how it can be enhanced within an academic learning environment, providing students with valuable preparation for future careers (Kasler et al., 2013).

The purpose of this study is to measure levels of self-perceived emotional intelligence along with study variables such as years in university and internship experiences.

In Italy, the Bachelor of Education and Training Science (three-year course, first level) and the Master of Pedagogy and Science of Education (two-year course, second level) are qualifying courses for the profession. At the end of their studies, graduates can work as educators and pedagogists in different areas: education, training, school, social welfare; as well as, in the educational services, and in the socio-health and health services and facilities, limited to the socio-educational, parenting, and family aspects; cultural; judicial; environmental; sports and motor; integration and international cooperation (Law 205/17 and Law 145/18).

It is compulsory to carry out internship hours within the degree course: 300 hours for the three-year course (first level) and 150 hours for the master's course (second level). Students carry out an internship in one of the educational institutions affiliated with the university. At the end of the internship, each student writes an internship report to frame the most formative and relevant aspects of his/her experience.

The internship is the privileged place for the union of theory and practice. (Salerni, 2019).

It is essential to consider an integrated training of the person who will work in contexts of care and high emotional load because these skills are an integral part of the educational work.

1. The emotional intelligence

Research and literature on emotional intelligence have multiplied in recent decades. Many studies show that emotional intelligence predicts academic and work success, professional effectiveness, positive interpersonal relationships, resilience, resistance to stress, and personal well-being (Bar-On, 2006; Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2009).

Being a relatively recent construct, there is still no agreement from the scientific community regarding a shared definition of emotional intelligence. But we are still faced with a multiplicity of models. The same researchers who were the first to develop the first theoretical model of emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) revisited it on several occasions (Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, 2004).

The main models of emotional intelligence differ between constructs that conceive it in unitary terms as a general ability to learn and adapt to the environment (Sternberg, 1984) and constructs that consider intelligence to be internally multiple. The latter distinguish the different types of intelligence according to the kind of information they operate (Gardner, 1993). Within this last trend, great importance is given to the so-called "hot" intelligence, in which cognition has to do with the material of a social, practical, and personal nature. Emotional intelligence is formalised by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and popularised by Goleman's international bestseller (1995). Emotional intelligence's theoretical models and operational constructs are currently divided into two fairly distinct groups: ability models and mixed models (Neubauer & Freudenthaler, 2005). The first group includes, for example, the mental ability model of Salovey, Mayer and Caruso (2016), which considers as constituent components of emotional intelligence only variables of a cognitive type and mental abilities, and for which emotional intelligence is explicitly conceived as a specific problem-solving skill and and uses performance-based tools' measures of emotional skills. Mixed models, for example, the Goleman (1995) and Bar-On (1997) model, consider emotional intelligence as a set of behavioural tendencies, motivational and affective variables, and extend the domain of emotional intelligence to a plurality of dimensions which also include individual personality differences (such as self-esteem, happiness, optimism), central aspects of motivation (such as impulse control, resistance to frustration, tolerance to stress), social skills (up to and including, for example, effective communication, the ability to work in a team, leadership) and rely on self-report measures of EI.

Mixed models have been criticised as they tend to eclectically extend the definition of emotional intelligence to dimensions specific to other forms of intelligence, social and personal, thus preventing emotional intelligence from emerging as a particular skill in its own right (Matthews et al., 2002). On the other hand, as the authors of the mental ability model have explicitly acknowledged recently, the evidence available to date does not support unequivocally that emotional intelligence represents a specific domain of problems (Mayer et al., 2016).

In several researches, the levels of emotional intelligence are correlated with learning, educational success and prosociality (Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2003). Therefore, interest in emotional intelligence in education has grown in recent years.

Several models for promoting emotional intelligence have been implemented and validated, especially in educational and training contexts in the USA. In some cases, these are very structured models that provide exact objectives and very detailed activities (see the SEL, https://casel.org/).

Therefore, the importance of activities to promote the emotional intelligence of children and young people in school and education is now widely recognised. But in recent years, the idea is also spreading that it is also necessary to promote the emotional intelligence of teachers and educators.

In particular, the literature of the last two decades suggests that emotional intelligence plays a fundamental role in the effectiveness of teaching (and not only for self-efficacy but also for the perception of effectiveness) and for the educational success of pupils/students defined in terms of outcomes (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Huges et al., 2009). Furthermore, emotionally intelligent teachers are better able than others to create a secure, caring, satisfying, creative and dynamic school environment (Brackett and Katulak, 2006; Kasler et al., 2013).

Finally, the belief is spreading more and more that emotional intelligence in teachers is a fundamental aspect of psychological well-being and resilience, to resist job dissatisfaction, stress, and psychological difficulties up to burnout (Vesely et al., 2013 Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017).

Several studies highlight the need for developing emotional competencies in teacher education (Palomera et al., 2008; Corcoran & Tormey, 2012; Vesely et al., 2014). Reflections on the relevance of the promotion of emotional intelligence in the educational work of social educators are still few. However, it can be argued that emotional skills training is crucial for all educational professions, even more so for social educators, who often work in difficult contexts.

Based on the theoretical framework presented, this study considers emotional intelligence a mixed model. The dimensions we felt describe aspects of the personal domain and aspects of the social domain. The construct considered is explained in the next paragraph.

2. The research

The research aims to investigate the levels of emotional intelligence self-perceived by the education and training science degree program students of Sapienza university of Rome. The sample includes students enrolled in the bachelor's and master's degree programs.

The purpose is to investigate how levels change in relation to the variables investigated, particularly those related to the university experience. Specifically, socio-demographic variables such as age and gender are considered, along with variables related to the study experience such as the years of the course and the internship experience.

The hypothesis that we intend to investigate is that the development of social-emotional skills needs dedicated training.

In order to investigate the levels of self-perceived Emotional Intelligence, we translated Mehta and Singh's (2013) EI(PcSc)scale questionnaire, and we adapted it to the context.

The authors constructed the original questionnaire to incorporate the different domains of emotional intelligence identified in the most relevant constructs (Goleman, 1998; Mayer&Salovey, 1993, 1997). The original instrument consisted of 69 items. It is for the work context, particularly the school work context. The advantage of this scale is that it focuses on both self-management competence and social competence, thus detecting two fundamental domains of the construct (Schutte et al., 1998). The original scale divided the competence into Personal and Social. Personal competencies are Self-awareness, Self-motivation, and Emotion regulation; the Social competencies are Social awareness, Social skills, and Emotional receptivity. We worked on translating the items and their readaptation to the Italian context. In order to do this, many items were split into two-part. The questionnaire was administered to students using 76 items. Following the survey, exploratory factor analysis was conducted.

The questionnaire response scale is a 5-step Likert-type agreement scale. The questionnaire was proposed digitally and sent by email in January 2022.

We conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with the principal axis factor method and Promax rotation to verify the factorial structure. The model matrix showed a 9-factor structure, explaining 68.99% of the variance. Two main domains were found in the factors: one related to Social skills and the second one related to Personal skills. The factorial structure results in 40 items, divided into the following dimensions.

The factors detected related to the Social domain are:

- Social Awareness is a scale that measures the ability to understand how others feel, what they think and the origin of their behaviors by interpreting non-verbal messages. The scale consists of 6 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.90;
- Emotional receptivity is a scale that measures a person's ability to actively listen to others, thus helping them with their emotional and other needs. The scale consists of 4 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.90;
- Teamwork is the ability to work in a group promoting a friendly and collaborative climate. The scale consists of 5 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.85;
- Social skills are the ability to relate to others beyond their background and personal characteristics. The scale consists of 4 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.77;
- Social support measures the ability to provide valuable and constructive feedback to others for their personal growth. The scale consists of 3 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.73.

The factors detected related to the Personal skills domain are:

- Emotional regulation is the ability to manage unpleasant emotions, particularly in situations of stress and tension. The scale consists of 6 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.79;
- Goal Orientation is the ability to reach a goal with determination, organizing the demands from the context. The scale consists of 4 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.81;
- Self-motivation measures the ability to find in oneself the motivation to achieve goals and make decisions. The scale consists of 4 items, and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.79;
- Perception of positive emotions measures the extent to which the person experiences pleasant emotions such as happiness and overall well-being. The scale consists of 4 items, and Cronbach's alpha is 0.74.

With the re-adaptation and administration of the questionnaire, we wanted to investigate two hypotheses:

- 1. Emotional intelligence does not increase with increasing years or other contextual variables, such as the formative credits. The underlying thesis is that there is a need for specific spaces and modes to be educated;
- 2. The internship experience has a positive and significant relationship with emotional intelligence.

It is good to specify the characteristics of the university internship experience for the second hypothesis. In Italy, internships are regulated by art. 18 of Law n.196 of June 24, 1997, on

"training and orientation internships". The internship within the university course is a crucial moment for the student's training and to orient him/her to professional and work choices. The experience is characterized by being practical and located in a natural work context. The field experience allows one to know the world of professions, enrich theoretical training, and create a link with practical knowledge (Salerni, 2019). There are some crucial figures and steps for realizing the internship experience. First of all, the figure of the university tutor and the business tutor. These figures are called to identify the path's objectives and support the student in the realization of a targeted training project. The training project is fundamental for students who must have precise tasks and goals. The study's internship regulations within the study courses we have considered require that the student has acquired at least 60 CFU (training credits). Students have a teacher and tutors to guide them in their choice of course based on interests and skills. The internship path can be summarized in three phases: a start step in which the student's data are collected about motivations, educational and professional path to guide them in the choice; an intermediate step in which the university collects information on the internship from the student and the company tutor monitoring; a final step in which the student reports to the university their experience for the recognition of training credits and writes a final report. Therefore, the path in its complexity and richness characterizes in a particular way the study

3. Sample description and administration procedure

experience within the degree programs considered in this study.

The sample size is 214 students of the degree courses in Education and Training Sciences at the Sapienza University of Rome, with an average age of 23 years. 93.5% (N.200) are women while men are 6.5% (N.14). 81.8% are in the bachelor's degree (No.175, 45% of the total enrolled); 18.2% are enrolled in the master's degree (No.39, which corresponds to about 40% of the total enrolled).

The questionnaire was placed on google forms and circulated by email to all enrolled students of the two-degree programs in January 2022.

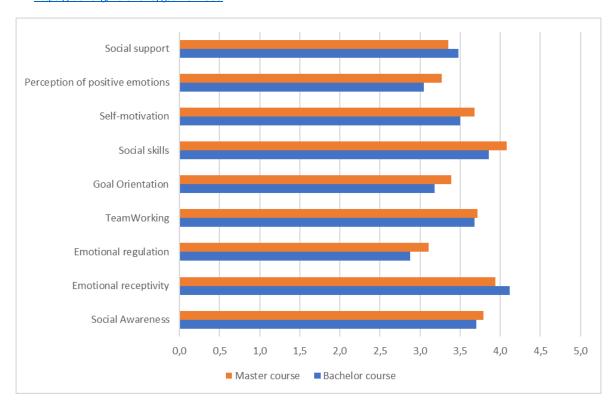
4. The results

4.1 Average scale scores

In order to test the first hypothesis, we conducted preliminary analyses on the mean scores. The analyses made it possible to observe the most deficient dimensions in the perception of emotional intelligence and compare them for some of the variables considered. We conducted an analysis of variance ANOVA one way on the groups to observe statistically significant differences.

Specifically, we considered being enrolled in a bachelor's or master's degree to observe whether levels of perceived emotional intelligence increased as studies increased. Over 90% of the students enrolled in the master's degree come from the three-year course in education and training sciences (bachelor dregree) belonging to the same university.

This section shows the average scale scores divided between bachelor and master students. Graph 1 shows that Emotional Regulation is the scale that obtains the lowest average score with a mean of 2.9 for three-year students and 3.1 for master's students, a significant difference in the Anova One Way analysis of variance (F=4.63; Sign=0.03). Students enrolled in the master's degree show higher scores for almost all scales except Emotional Receptivity and Social Support. These differences are only significant for the Social Skills dimension (F=3.64; Sign=0.05).



Graph 1. (average scale scores)

Emotional regulation is the most sensitive dimension of the contextual variables related to the university experience. As we have seen, the average score increases with the university degree level, but the average also increases concerning the internship experience. Students who have done an internship show a significantly higher mean score (F=6.23; Sign= 0.01) than their peers who have not yet undertaken a field course.

Variabels	Groups	N.	Mean	F.	Sig.
Goal Orientation	Who has done an internship	96	3.4	4.3	0.04
	Who has not done an internship	115	3.1		
Self-motivation	Who has done an internship	96	3.7	5.3	0.02
	Who has not done an internship	115	3.4		

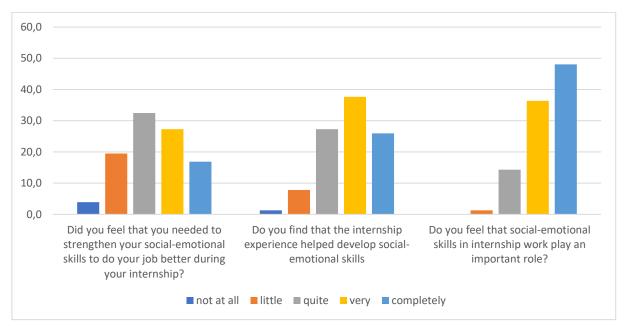
Table 1 (variance analysis internship)

Having completed an internship also appears to affect other dimensions related to the Personal skills domain (Table 1). Data showed that those who have completed an internship are also more goal-oriented and self-motivated: both dimensions related to the ability to direct strength and determination toward pursuing a goal.

4.2 Internship experience

We developed three questions to delve into the internship aspect and the development of socialemotional skills (Graph 2). An open-ended question then asked for a rationale for the answers given.

Concerning the scores obtained in the answers, the graph (Graph 2) shows the percentage distribution in the different steps of the Likert scale. It can be seen that students have an evident awareness that the internship experience has helped them develop these skills; above all, students are aware of how these skills play a crucial role in the internship work. 48% say they agree completely that social-emotional skills play an essential role in internship work, and 26% agree that the internship experience helped develop social-emotional skills. This distribution is more evenly distributed than the first question, which investigated feelings of needing to strengthen these skills to do the job better.



Graph 2. (percentage of responses social-emotional skills and internship)

We conducted a categorical analysis of the open-ended question asking for reasons for the three answers. we have obtained a total of 46 open answers. The categorization (Tab. 3) confirms the factorial structure that emerged from the questionnaire, showing two domains of competence: personal and social.

As mentioned above, categorical analysis has also shown two domains: personal and social. In the personal domain are; Emotional regulation; Self-awareness; self-knowledge, i.e., Awareness of one's limits and resources; Technical and practical skills, i.e., ability to observe and act in a situation; the Application of theoretical principles, i.e., the Transposition of theoretical knowledge into practical skills.

In the social domain are: Empathy; Team working; Context management, i.e., understanding relational dynamics and communication skills; Overcoming obstacles, i.e., ability to cope with difficulties.

The distribution of occurrences shows that the most populated category is Context management (N.22), followed by emotional regulation (N.18), empathy and Self-awareness, and self-knowledge (N.16).

Categories	Sub-categories	Description	N.O.
	Emotional regulation	Regulation of one's emotions	18

Skills	Self-awareness and self-	awareness and self- Awareness of one's limits and		
Development:	knowledge	resources		
Personal Domain				
	Technical and practical skills	Ability to observe and act	13	
	Application of theoretical	Transposition of theoretical	8	
	principles	knowledge into practical skills		
Skills	Empathy	It understands each other's	16	
Development:		thoughts, emotions, and behaviors		
social Domain				
	Team working	Relation with colleagues and	9	
		teamwork		
	Context management	Understanding of relational	22	
		dynamics; communication skills		
	Overcoming obstacles	Ability to cope with difficulties.	9	

Table 3 (categorizing responses to the open-ended question: what skills do you feel you developed during the internship?)

4.3 Correlations between the social and personal domain

We conducted a two-tailed correlation to observe the relationship between the Personal domain and the Social domain. The correlations between the two domains were all significant at the 0.01 level.

The personal domain dimensions most related to university context variables are emotional regulation for the undergraduate years, and goal-orientation and self-motivation for the internship. These dimensions all show high and significant correlations with the social domain of emotional intelligence (Table 3). In general terms, the highest correlations (around 0.40) refer to social skills correlated with emotional regulation, self-motivation, and perception of positive emotions. This last dimension also correlates, with a value of 0.40, empathy and team working.

		Social Awareness	Emotional receptivity	TeamWorking	Social Skills	Social Support
Emotional Regulation	Pearson's Correlation	,344**	,316**	,301**	,389**	,317**
Goal Orientation	Pearson's Correlation	,311**	,222**	,341**	,325**	,330**
Self-Motivation	Pearson's Correlation	,327**	,291**	,323**	,416**	,388**
Perception of positive Emotions	Pearson's Correlation	,400**	,245**	,399**	,416 ^{**}	,362**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3 (correlations social and personal domain)

5. **Discussion**

This study aimed to measure the levels of self-perceived emotional intelligence of university students enrolled in pedagogical degree courses.

In Italy, these courses are considered qualifying for the profession of educator. Therefore, it is essential to understand how the university course trains the social-emotional skills necessary for the profession.

The analysis of mean scores showed that the dimensions that received lower scores were those of the Personal domain—specifically, Emotional regulation, Goal orientation, and Perception of positive emotions.

On the other hand, the dimensions of the social domain, such as Social skills and Emotional receptivity, have the highest scores.

However, we know how these two dimensions are related, a fact also shown by the correlation analysis that shows that they are all significant.

From the analysis of variance, it seems that emotional intelligence does not increase with increasing years of university attendance, except for self-regulation. Gaining more experience in the college environment likely leads to gradual learning about dealing with stressful and pressured situations. On the other hand, the internship experience has a more significant influence on the personal skills domain dimensions that help the person orient and motivate him/herself toward achieving goals. Student perceptions also show that several personal and social dimensions are involved.

The importance of internship and its role in developing skills also emerged from the analysis of the open-ended questions. Thematic analysis showed and confirmed the presence of both personal and social domains. From the count of occurrences, both domains are perceived homogeneously.

The data confirm both hypotheses considered in the study. Concerning the first hypothesis, the results show no significant growth in the dimensions as the number of years in the course increases. This reinforces the thesis that there is a need for pathways dedicated to developing these skills. The structuring of paths could follow different models. However, from the literature it is clear the importance of specialized figures and support, and the implementation of paths that are not only theoretical but also practical, involving resources and experiences of the person.

The second hypothesis, instead, considered a focus on practical training. The internship is a prevalent feature of the pedagogical degree courses considered in this study because students are required to perform a minimum of 300 hours in educational services during the bachelor's degree and a minimum of 150 during the master's degree.

Indeed, field experience appears to be a preferential channel for the development of socialemotional skills, a finding confirmed by both the analysis of variance and the analysis of openended responses. However, more specific support could be intervened within this pathway, involving reflective work with a support person dedicated to the care and support of these aspects.

We considered other socio-demographic variables, such as gender and age, which are influential on the development of emotional intelligence in the literature in the preliminary analyses of the study. We did not consider it appropriate to specify the results because no differences were significant in the analysis of variance. Limitations of the study include the

fact that it was impossible to isolate and consider the impact of the content and quality aspects of the internship field experience. In addition, it was not possible to consider other contextual variables that may influence subjects' perceptions of social-emotional competence, such as family and life context, work experience, or other experiences in formal or non-formal educational settings. These aspects will be worth exploring in future studies through qualitative tools that can go deeper into studying processes.

In summary, given the central role of Emotional Intelligence for the educational professions, it is critical in university programs to combine internships with training courses or workshops dedicated to developing these skills to equip students with skills crucial to their future career development.

6. Conclusion

The notion that college pathways should assist students in educating themselves in interpersonal and academic skills has become an accepted, but perhaps not fully integrated, part of the college curriculum. The debate over these skills is increasing at all levels, including the political level. Consider, for example, the recent decree No. 2372, "Provisions for the prevention of early school leaving through the experimental introduction of non-cognitive competencies in the teaching method" which introduces non-cognitive competencies, such as amicability, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and open-mindedness, into the teaching method in the context of one or more courses in secondary schools.

However, the introduction of specific training at all levels of education is as essential as it is delicate, as it should not stop at theoretical transmissions only but aim for the implementation of the skill itself (Flowers et al. 2014).

Numerous studies found that Emotional intelligence is a protective factor for academic and work-related stressful situations when implemented through dedicated courses (Chapin, 2015). The challenge that remains then is to dedicate time within the academic curriculum to develop these skills by giving them the proper importance on par with other disciplines.

Indeed, educators are called upon to act in contexts in which social-emotional skills are part of the job. Therefore, it is impossible not to provide students with the tools they need to manage their limitations and personal resources to be effective in work contexts and to protect themselves from risk factors.

In addition, the internship experience that has been shown to be effective in developing specific aspects of emotional intelligence is certainly the preferred channel for immersing the student in the situation. For this reason, incorporating Social Emotional Learning strategies into the internship experience that focuses on the perception, use, understanding, and management of emotions can help students manage difficult situations and grow professionally (Almerico, 2018). Preparing educators through specific emotional training support encourages reflection and discussion about emotions, thus aiding their recognition and management.

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