

Dimensioning of the educational context under the influence of the emotional level

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Abstract

In the process of formation of the human individual, starting from school age and ending with the higher educational cycle, through all its components, condition in absolute intellectual performance. Relating to the nonverbal behavioral nucleus – emotional intelligence – we start from the premise that *the nature* of the teacher-student relationship must be regarded not only from the perspective of the input process, respectively that of knowledge acquisition, but mostly from its *educational, training* dimension, considering that school is, in terms of importance, the second factor (after the family) that must participate to the education of the child/ teenager.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, nonverbal behavior, educational environment, emotions.

Emotional Intelligence. Concept Evolution Elements

Defined as a person’s ability to perceive, evaluate, and direct their own emotions, those of the people around and of groups, emotional intelligence (EI) is a concept that evolved during several decades, being crystallized in the reference work of the American psychologist Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, which drew attention through the presentation of concrete methods for improving this component.

The phrase *emotional intelligence* reunites contributions which, in a concise listing, include: C. Darwin (1965, *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*), E.L. Thorndike

(“Intelligence and its uses”, *Harper's Magazine*, no. 140), P. Salovey, & J.D. Mayer (1990, “Emotional intelligence”, *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, no. 9.3), D. Goleman (1995, *Emotional intelligence*), R. Bar-On (1997, *The Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-I): Technical manual*), etc. Although we can speak of an evolution that started at around 1837, the concept obtained its nowadays name with the contribution of the authors P. Salovey and Jack Mayer, “What is emotional intelligence?” (1997). The two psychologists suggested, for the first time, that individuals differ in what concerns their ability to perceive, understand, and use emotion as a source of information. They labeled this ability through the phrase *emotional intelligence* (EI: “emotional intelligence”), and defined it formally as: (1) the ability to perceive, evaluate, and express emotion with accuracy; (2) the ability to access and generate feelings when they facilitate cognition; (c) the ability to understand information with an affective charge and use emotional knowledge; and (d) the ability to regulate emotions in order to promote intellectual development and well being (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

The key terms on which the discussed concept is based and which can be found in varying proportions from one author to another are: (i) self understanding and expression; (ii) understanding the people around and, from here, effective interrelations; (iii) emotional control; (iv) positive mind set and self-motivating skills; (v) self-monitoring, modification through adaptation, and solving the problems of personal and interpersonal nature.

The interest for the study of emotional intelligence within *groups* was included in the scope of the concerns of the specialists supporting the idea that emotions determine the performance and dynamics of the group (Bales, 1950, 1953; Barsade & Gibson, 1998; Homans 1950; Janis, 1982). Wolff Druksat and his collaborators are interested in the group level processes and norms. They consider that groups are larger than the sum of their parts (for

example, more than a simple sum of individuals) and therefore, that a group of members with a high EI score does not guarantee that the group or its members operate implicitly in an emotionally intelligent manner. These authors consider that groups with emotional intelligence develop and operate under a set of norms that encourage conscience and emotion management at multiple levels within the group (Druskat & Wolff, 2001).

The concerns in the direction of recognizing emotion lead the specialists in psychology Nalini Ambady and Hillary Anger Elfenbein to conceptualize and study emotional intelligence in groups, in terms of how well the members understand each other's emotional expressions (verbal and nonverbal). Emotional intelligence, as an impact of emotional conscience on the interactions between the group members and performance is an issue studied and conceptualized by the authors Jordan and Ashkanasy (Jordan, Ashkanasy, Härtel & Hooper, 2002). Finally, A. A. Michel and K.A. Jehn (2003) speak of “direct involvement” in the situation, a less known form of emotional intelligence.

The presentation – even partial – of the contributions to the development of the concept of emotional intelligence can provide an idea on the interest from which this level of an individual's existence can benefit, in all its dimensions, and, as we will show, in any stage of their life.

The influence of the emotional factor in the process of knowledge acquisition

Behavior is inevitably influenced by the presence of emotion, whatever may be the form and degree of intensity in which it occurs. This is a truth proven by the results of research performed by authors in various academic disciplines: psychology (Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000), sociology (Ollilainen, 2000), anthropology (Levy, 1984) organizational behavior

(Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998), and neuroscience (Damasio, 1994).

However, emotions affect not only attention, but also the process of acquisition. It has been noticed that human beings tend to code more information if the tone of the material matches their emotional state (Mayer & Salovey, 1988). For instance, if the current emotion of the learner is happiness, they will code more information if the material has been emotionally positive, than if it has had a depressive note or if it has been emotionally negative.

Emotions also affect the process of retention, as human beings have a marked tendency to retain part of the memorized information if it is coherent with their current emotional state (Blaney, 1986). Similar discoveries have also been made in what concerns the connection between depression and the retention ability: Stephanie Rude and Paula Hertel have discovered that depression is connected with a deficit in retention strategies (Hertel & Rude, 1991). The learning process becomes easy if the person finds pleasure in what they attempt, and this level is reached only when the efforts are successful. There is a logical circuit of approaches, with a positive, stimulating end. This reasoning matches the idea that educational success is directly influenced, in equal proportions, by intellectual and affective aspects. We may state that, although the learning process complies with a set of tasks of a technical nature based on “know-how”, the affective characteristics are no less important, as they make the set of knowledge acquired to sensitize the child, activating at the same time their cognitive mechanisms, so that the acquisition process becomes pleasant, easy and meaningful from a temporal perspective.

Therefore, whether a pleasant or a less pleasant material is preserved in the memory depends on the emotional state of the learner: if they are happy, they will remember the material

much easier; on the contrary, a state of discontent, dissatisfaction, or depression will affect this process.

The research direction referring to the reciprocal influence between the cognitive and the affective processes mostly relies on the central idea of the activity of the Russian psychologist Lev Vîgotski, included in the concept of the ZPD – the “Zone of Proximal Development”: the difference between what the child may learn *with* and respectively *without* the help of the adult. The author considered that the role of education is to provide children with experiences that *exist* in the zone of proximal development, thus encouraging individual learning (Vîgotski, 1978).

In the context of the teacher-student relationship, ZPD means that certain relationships between people are associated with the development of superior functions, determining the goodwill of the teacher to provide essential support and help.

In order to set into movement the mechanisms that activate emotions, on the one hand, and learning, on the other, the human brain must feel stimulated, challenged to a certain degree. The state of well-being and the ability to assimilate knowledge are optimized by ensuring a pleasant physical environment, which *may* become so if the conditions necessary for reducing the stress level are met, since effective teaching does not depend solely on the scientific quality of the implemented didactic procedures, but it is strongly related to affection.

Invariably, speaking of the emotional level implies *affection*, a polysemantic term, which, according to dictionaries, can be translated through attributes such as: tenderness, a reciprocal relationship of help, care and openness towards the other, empathy, friendship, compassion, emotional warmth, aspects related to feelings (subjective well-being) and emotions (joy, satisfaction, confidence, care for the feelings of the other), etc.

G. Espinosa (2003) mentions five major components according to which affection may be analyzed: motivation, confidence in the other, attitudes and emotions, causal attribution. These components have “an extremely important role in learning and teaching”. The analogy between these characteristics of affectivity and the ones specific to emotional intelligence is obvious.

One of the research directions that have drawn the attention of specialists is connected to the field of interpersonal relations between the students, more precisely to the friendships that are established, to the frame that favors socialization represented by the school environment, at any one of its levels. Neither learning nor epistemic curiosity seem to lie at the basis of the pleasure to go to school, but the attraction towards the company of friends, the wish to make connections, to know new people. These are natural wishes based on the same need for affection, for interrelation based on affects, essential constitutive elements for success in any field. We can state that, indirectly, friendship networks contribute to building the system of attitudes, knowledge, values, becoming an integrant part of the educational process.

Friendships and companionships build among the students, as well as repercussions in achieving educational objectives have proven essential in educating the child’s pleasure to go to school and to obtain success (Berndt & Keefe, 1992). A good group climate is an essential condition for high performance and for the personal satisfaction of all the children, a fact known since the work of Kurt Lewin.

If for John Dewey the major problem of education comes from discontinuity between rationale and body, between person and society, person and nature, for Maria Montessori (1946/1963) the problem of traditional education is represented by the distance which is

maintained between child and adult person, the latter using all his resources for dominating the other one.

Taking into account the specificity of the teacher-student interaction and considering that the teacher is the one who establishes the terms and conditions in which the educational process takes place, a question comes natural: “what are the affective conditions in which the teacher-student relationship occurs?” The answer: emotional intelligence, which can be developed in any person, without restrictions, limitations imposed by age, social status, or other circumstances.

The teacher-student relationship from the perspective of message transmission

Approaching the concept of emotional intelligence implies, besides affectivity, the role of communication, in both its components: *verbal behavior*, represented by verbal stimulants, support, feedback, and reward, and, to a lesser degree, by *nonverbal behavior*, respectively the tone of voice, the rhythm of speech, intonation, pauses (that is, paralanguage elements), mimics, gestures, proxemics (distance/proximity towards the students), facial expressiveness (which plays the most important role in the set of nonverbal manifestations) and listening (which has to be active, meant to encourage the interlocutor to express themselves without inhibitions).

Starting from the role of emotional signals (represented by verbal and nonverbal elements), Bernard Rimé speaks of two types of effects that occur as a result of the emotional flow present in the interactions: (i) *emotional contagiousness*, which “refers to emotional behaviors that develop automatically in symbiosis with those of the peers”, and which “may overtake the individual without the latter to be immediately aware of the causes of their state”, children being more receptive to contagiousness than adults; and (ii) *empathy*, described as “a

process through which we assume someone else's emotion." A mention is made that these "result from the mental images generated by the adoption of the perspective of the other".

Empathy and emotional contagiousness are the main elements responsible for the quality of the situations of social communication of emotion. (Rimé, 2007).

We deduct the idea of the need for the existence of an affective *circuit*, which, once triggered, has positive effects on the entire climate of the classroom. Daniel Goleman (2008) also analyzes the issue of emotional contagiousness, underlying that we unconsciously adopt the elements of a facial expression from our interlocutor. Of course, not in an identical way, but some of such elements can be seen in the mimics of the listener. The author includes here also the tone of voice and any other nonverbal characteristics of emotion, explaining that based on their intuition, human beings have the capacity of reconstructing in their selves the mood of the person around. Considering this approach as relevant for the teacher-student relationship, he points out that the nature of relation is undoubtedly projected in the students' performance itself: the relation between teacher and students is based on a much deeper emotional level, the two parts becoming more closed, empathic, excited to spend time one each other, motivated in studying and the interpersonal side of their relation gets a significant dimension. As a whole, a consistent synchronization between two parts (obviously, including teacher-student) is a proof that the people like each other. (Goleman, 2008).

We are speaking of behaviors whose role in the teaching process means: stimulating the students to accomplish tasks, through positive attitudes towards the own potential; support and collaboration in understanding the discussed contents; encouraging an objective and correct evaluation, through reference to the "evident" potential of the students; active involvement in the process, by creating the necessary conditions for reflection and for learning from their own

mistakes; the student's participation in making decisions and choices during the classes, both in what concerns the structure of the activities imposed by the school curriculum and the structure of the social relations of the class; establishing clear rules concerning the attitudes of stigmatization, marginalization, or even exclusion, and if necessary providing individual support whenever possible.

The emotional structure of the individual is expressed through nonverbal behavior, mainly through facial expressiveness. The intrinsic connection between these two components, respectively the ways of externalization of this emotional “baggage”, has drawn the attention of the American professor Paul Ekman, who has set the bases of a science of nonverbal facial behavior. The study of emotional intelligence implies studying facial expressiveness and vice-versa, in Ekman's opinion. These are two inseparable components, in terms of factual analysis. The appropriate relation between the management of communication (verbal and nonverbal), the employed methodology and the taught content *per se* can be ensured through an attitude of the teacher that is structured on the following attributes: courtesy, calm, tolerance, patience, understanding, impartiality. To all these we may add humor, which, integrated into learning and used in a balanced way contributes to improving the efficiency of the process by releasing the tension of the climate, stimulating interest, making tasks more enjoyable, all so that the student would perceive time as passing faster, even wishing to spend more time in such an environment. We should also mention the role of positive feedback of the teacher's initiative, as a source of satisfaction and for increasing the self-esteem of the student. All these characteristics as well as the values and attitudes of the teacher interfere with the students' learning and with their positive feelings.

Pointing that “displeasure destroys learning” Goleman (2008a) refers to the necessity of distancing the child’s mind from the unpleasant thoughts and feelings (e.g. “impulsiveness and displeasure”) in order that the child will have the capacity of focusing on the process of learning.

Therefore, ensuring the affective comfort necessary for an efficient assimilation of informational contents leads to a *complete* education, which includes values and attitudes, emotions, and knowledge.

Education is not what the teacher offers; it is a natural process, completed by the human individual and achieved not by listening to words but by experiencing with the environment (Montessori, 1946/1963). Moreover, if education is to be of help for civilization, it cannot be accomplished by emptying the schools of knowledge and character, of discipline, of social harmony, and, above all, of freedom (Lillard, 1972).

Although important information has been accumulated with respect to the thoughts of the teachers, in various fields of their professional activity, some authors (Fullen & Hargreaves, 1988) consider that the subject still need a lot of research, in terms of motivational emotions and desires, which moderate them in teaching activity.

Manners of applying emotional intelligence into practice

On the list of fields that relate to the awareness of the importance of emotional intelligence for the qualitative functioning of interpersonal relations, the teacher-student relationship has a central place. The need for the teachers to understand the role of the concept under discussion resides in the impact of this form of intelligence on the development of the didactic activity, on the relationships with the students, and, last but not least, on the quality of the educational results. In the United States of America, first and foremost, followed by other

Western countries, the programs of implementation of the methods and techniques specific to the development of emotional intelligence have become, after 1995 (the year when Daniel Goleman's volume was published) ever more popular due to their proven efficiency.

In the context of the need for assimilating and placing emotional intelligence in the center of the teachers' concerns, we can speak of the error of giving too much importance to the intelligence quotient (IQ) obtained from the verification of mathematical, logical, and verbal skills; even if they are not labeled as unimportant, these are not considered predictive nor relevant for the ability of a person to socialize appropriately, to act conscientiously in circumstances that require a certain balance, to have a degree of self control that regulates the series of different frustrations and dissatisfactions. In other words, individuals from the most varied social contexts, with a high or very high IQ, have had modest professional and personal achievements because of some form of maladjustment, based on a low level of EI. The reverse has proven true. As a result, it has become desirable for teachers, when they structure and design their curriculum, to introduce tasks that encourage the development of EI, with the purpose to improve educational performance together with social performance. In essence, we speak of encouraging the students to *be aware* of their emotions when the difficulty of a task is beyond the possible solutions that the student has at a certain moment.

Far from being an objective simple to achieve, enabling the student to manage their emotions may imply the following steps, where the role of the teacher is decisive: (1) encouraging them to speak of their emotions/feelings related to a certain situation; (2) stimulating positive behaviors through certain rewards (verbal qualifications, discussing the elements that lead to the behavior of the appreciated student, inducing the idea that anyone can have his/her result, clearly stressing the aspects that made him/her noticed, etc.); (3) maintaining

a friendly, pleasant tone of voice, even when it includes less agreeable aspects; (4) reconciling conflicts by involving the class in the identification of possible solutions; (5) requesting feedback on the taught notions, and when a certain dissonance is noticed, mentioning the aspects that generate it, etc. These are aspects whose presence determines the need to learn a constructive management of emotions, in the view of reaching the various objectives that the person aims at in a specific moment.

Some examples of methods of implementation of EI: (a) role play, (b) the students may draw schemas (maps) where to note, periodically, feelings, experiences that they consider relevant; (c) a class diary, where everyone may note what they appreciate or not within the group; (d) the students may grade, on a scale from one to ten, how they feel about the teacher, etc. The methods of implementation of EI are “permissive”, including from the perspective of creativity, and the introduction of emotional intelligence in the curriculum can make the difference.

The specific content of education must be centered not on forming logical and rational thinking, but on the quality of emotions and interpersonal relations.

Recognizing the feelings related to a situation/ person and labeling them, awareness of the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and actions represent personal acquisitions of a major importance for the evolution of the individual, with an accent placed on the period when the crystallization of the personality starts. Formed based on perceptive skills, *convictions* have deep effects on the manner in which a person acts, therefore the identification of the ways of confrontation with negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness, anxiety) is essential. The development of the ability to *understand* what happens when emotions come into play, how it

can be achieved – at an inner level – the time required for their evaluation, resulting in the appropriate reply or action under the pressure of the moment, are all very important assets for a balanced development of the individual.

Empathy is another component on which emotional intelligence is structured: understanding the feelings of the others and the ability to listen to them, without involving *a priori* judgments or personal feelings, which occur under momentary negative emotions, requires a certain education of the inner forum. In the end, solving conflicts, adopting a cooperative attitude, relate to the need for communication, with all that it implies. These are arguments that justify the attention given to emotional intelligence in an ever higher number of the civilized countries.

The expression of the feelings within the classroom, both by the teacher and by the students, may improve the emotional atmosphere and help relieve the tension in conflict situations. Reciprocal channeling (teacher-students, students-teacher) towards understanding feelings and their empathic approach fluidizes the formation of interpersonal connections based on real affects. In this sense, interpersonal communication, which is not limited to “communication between persons”, but implies the involvement of the affective component, acquires new valences. The *emphatic* and *interpersonal* dimensions of communication are intermediated, first of all, by the nonverbal channel through which we send around information on ourselves. Approaching with the same naturalness the positive emotions and those with which we feel in dissonance can be achieved first and foremost with the help of the nonverbal component, and listening is included in the same field: that of communication. A “transfer” of positive affects is best achieved nonverbally, a skill related to EI.

Ensuring a productive and supportive environment, founded on the emotional intelligence of the teachers, will contribute to the significant improvement of the skills of this type; in this context, both parties benefit.

The series of research that point out the connection between emotional intelligence and the didactic performance of the teachers prove the attention given to this issue. One of the conclusions of the researches concerned with the connection between educational performance/self-efficiency and the variables of age, gender, and professional experience is that none of these influences the emotional intelligence potential of the teachers. As a result, in terms of EI improvement, theoretically there are no limits, boundaries, as this component can be perfectly “modelled” anytime and for anyone.

Conclusive considerations

1) The dimensions *empathic* and *interpersonal* of communication are intermediate, in the first place, by the nonverbal channel through which we do transmit around information about us. Approaching with the same naturalness both of the negative and positive emotions, also of those with which we feel in dissonance may be achieved at best with help of the nonverbal component of communication, the art of listening gaining value of virtue.

2) A “transfer” of positive affects is achieving at best on the nonverbal way, an ability which is circumscribed, by definition, to the emotional intelligence.

3) Expressing the feelings in the classroom framework, both by the teacher and pupils, may improve the emotional atmosphere, in the same time helping in distension of the conflict situations. Bidirectional channeling (teacher-pupils, pupils-teacher) to understanding the feelings and approaching them with empathy fluidizes the human interconnections based on real affects.

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