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EVALUATION OF A PROGRAM TO IMPROVE EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES, ANXIETY, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

EVALUACIÓN DE UN PROGRAMA PARA LA MEJORA DE LAS COMPETENCIAS EMOCIONALES, ANSIEDAD Y RENDIMIENTO ACADÉMICO

Raquel **Gomis**[1]

Universidad de Lleida. Facultad de Educación, Psicología y Trabajo Social. Departamento de Ciencias de la Educación. Lleida, España

Jon **Berastegui-Martínez**

Universidad del País Vasco. Facultad de Educación, Filosofía y Antropología. Departamento de Ciencias de la Educación. San Sebastián/ Donostia, España

Maria **Priego-Ojeda**

Universidad de Lleida. Facultad de Educación, Psicología y Trabajo Social. Departamento de Ciencias de la Educación. Lleida, España

Èlia **López-Cassà**

Universidad de Barcelona. Facultad de Educación. Departamento de Didáctica y Organización Educativa. Barcelona, España.

ABSTRACT

The acquisition of emotional competences plays a vital role in children's development. Recognizing its significance, this paper focuses on evaluating a specific program designed to enhance emotional competences, reduce state anxiety, and ultimately improve academic performance in children in 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade of Primary Education. The program consists of 25 activities per grade (5 activities for each emotional competence: emotional awareness, emotional regulation, social competence,

[1]*Correspondencia*: Raquel Gomis. Correo-e: raquel.gomis@udl.cat

emotional autonomy, and life skills and well-being), incorporating the Happy 8-12 video-game for 3rd-grade students. A sample of 773 primary school students from various regions of Spain is used (594 from the experimental group and 179 from the control group), sampling being non-random convenience. The following questionnaires have been administered: CAS, CDE 9-13, Emotional Development Observation Scale, as well as considering the students' grades. A quasi-experimental pretest-postest design with a negative control group has been used. For the statistical analysis, a mixed linear model is employed, considering the following factors: group (experimental and control), time (pretest and posttest), and gender. These analyses enable a rigorous evaluation of the program's impact on the development of emotional competences. The evaluation of the program reveals positive outcomes, with first- and third-grade students showing enhanced emotional competences. However, there are no notable differences observed in anxiety levels and academic performance variables among the participants. These findings underscore the significance of implementing emotional education programs in schools as a systematic practice.

Key Words: Emotion, anxiety, performance, primary education, education.

RESUMEN

La adquisición de competencias emocionales desempeña un papel vital en el desarrollo. Reconociendo su importancia, este artículo se centra en evaluar un programa específico diseñado para mejorar las competencias emocionales, reducir la ansiedad estado y mejorar el rendimiento académico en niños y niñas de 1º, 2º y 3º de educación primaria. Este programa consta de 25 actividades por curso (5 actividades de cada competencia emocional: conciencia emocional, regulación emocional, competencia social, autonomía emocional y competencias para la vida y bienestar) añadiendo el videojuego Happy 8-12 en el alumnado de 3º de primaria. Para ello, se utiliza una muestra de 773 estudiantes de escuelas de educación primaria de varias regiones de España (594 de grupo experimental y 179 de grupo control), el muestreo es por conveniencia no aleatorio. Se han administrado los cuestionarios: CAS, CDE 9-13, Emotional Development Observation Scale y las calificaciones de los estudiantes. Se emplea un diseño cuasiexperimental pretest-postest con grupo control negativo. Para el análisis estadístico, se emplea un modelo lineal mixto que considera los siguientes factores: grupo (experimental y control), tiempo (pretest y postest) y género. Estos análisis permiten una evaluación rigurosa del impacto del programa en el desarrollo de las competencias emocionales. La evaluación del programa revela resultados positivos, con estudiantes de primer y tercer grado mostrando competencias emocionales mejoradas. Sin embargo, no se observan diferencias significativas en los niveles de ansiedad y variables de rendimiento académico entre los participantes. Estos hallazgos subrayan la importancia de implementar programas de educación emocional en las escuelas como una práctica sistemática.

Palabras clave: Emoción, ansiedad, rendimiento, enseñanza primaria, educación.

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Introduction

In recent decades, several studies have examined emotional competences as decisive factors for children's learning process, health, and well-being (Eriksen & Bru, 2022; Ros-Morente et al., 2017). Most studies have focused on anxiety, among other things, because of its high rates of prevalence before and during the pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (OMS, 2017), in 2015, some 300 million people (3.6% of the world's population) presented symptoms of anxiety, with children and young people suffering the bulk of the mental health risks. As the pandemic continues, its impact on children's and young people's psychosocial well-being and mental health is growing, increasing the risk of experiencing health and behavioral problems (Mansfield et al., 2021).

In the context of school, high levels of anxiety reduce learning quality (Mogg & Bradley, 2016) and affect students' well-being (Abend et al., 2018). The development of emotional competences at an early age can be a protective factor (Miles et al., 2018). Several meta-analyses have confirmed the existence of a significant relationship between emotional competences and health (Martins et al., 2010). In fact, these studies hold that people who present a high level of emotional competence have fewer anxiety symptoms (Sánchez-Gómez et al., 2020).

The education system places importance on academic performance as an indicator of the level of learning achieved by students. Academic performance is a complex, dynamic, and multidimensional concept, which makes it difficult to establish a sound and stable theoretical approach (Albán & Calero, 2017) that includes internal variables such as personal or social skills (Edel, 2003) as well as external elements such as the educational environment provided by the family (Mayorquín & Zaldívar, 2019) or participation in extracurricular activities (Pros, 2015). Traditionally, student grades serve as the primary measure of academic performance, assessing not only knowledge acquisition but also factors like behavior, interpersonal relationships, and collaborative abilities. While grades have faced criticism due to their potential subjectivity, they persist as the most widely accepted metric for evaluating academic performance (Córdoba et al., 2011).

Hence, several studies have shown that emotional competences influence school success or failure (Martínez-Sánchez, 2019). One recent study concludes that low levels of emotional competence from an early age are associated with a lesser likelihood of academic achievement throughout compulsory education (Smith et al., 2019).

These contributions indicate that emotional competences can considerably improve students' well-being and performance. Several authors thus advocate that emotional education should be considered a matter of health promotion (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Pérez-González & Qualter, 2018) and an essential aspect for students' comprehensive development and well-being (Bisquerra & Mateo, 2019). Additionally, having good emotional competences decreases the predisposition toward conflict (Guerra et al., 2021; Sánchez et al., 2012).

In this regard, emotional education emerges as a primary prevention strategy. To this end, it should be understood as an educational process for the acquisition of emotional competences – i.e., the "set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes needed to become aware of, understand, express, and appropriately regulate social phenomena" (Bisquerra, 2009, p. 146) – that aims to equip students with the necessary tools to effectively and efficiently deal with the challenges, tasks, and situations they will encounter in their lives (Pérez & Filella, 2019).

In this line, and due to the rise of research on emotions, important programs have been designed for the development of emotional competences and promotion of healthy behavior in students with positive results (Corcoran et al., 2018; Gálvez-Iñiguez, 2018; Taylor et al., 2017; Riquelme-Mella & Montero, 2016; Ambrona et al. 2012). Specifically, improvements have been observed in students' emotional competences, prosocial behavior, and behavioral problems, as well as in their academic

performance (Weissberg et al., 2015) and psychological well-being (Patafio et al., 2021; Van de Sande et al., 2019), along with reductions in anxiety rates (Keefer et al., 2018; Sánchez-Gómez et al., 2020) and mental health problems (Piqueras et al., 2019). Studies have also shown the positive effects of programs that include video games, resulting in improvements in students' adaptive capacity, self-regulation, and well-being (Agulló et al., 2011; Filella et al., 2014; Ros-Morente et al., 2018).

The research conducted to date thus shows that training primary school students in emotional competences both improves academic performance and reduces students' anxiety symptoms (Cabello et al., 2019).

With regard to the gender variable, the existence of contradictory findings regarding the correlation between the level of emotional competences and gender has been highlighted in the literature (Suberviola, 2020). Some studies do not find significant data with regard to these variables in childhood (e.g. Godoy & Sánchez, 2021). Others conclude that the level of development of emotional competences in the early years of primary school is much higher in girls than boys (e.g. Carretero & Nolasco, 2016).

Consequently, there has been limited research examining the impacts of educational programs concerning emotional competences, anxiety, and academic performance in children during the early years of compulsory education. This study emphasizes the distinct attributes and advantages of an intervention program designed for children aged 6 to 9 years. The novelty of this program lies in its incorporation into a tutorial action plan based on the emotional competence model of Bisquerra & Pérez-Escoda (2007), featuring activities where the child takes center stage. These emotional competences model encompass five important dimensions: emotional awareness, emotion regulation, emotional autonomy, social competence, and life skills and well-being. Additionally, the educational program integrates the gamified tool Happy 8-12 (Filella et al., 2014), specifically aimed to work conflict resolution and promote emotional competences. The program also includes teacher training in emotional competencies, which constitutes a crucial component, ensuring its comprehensiveness and relevance within educational settings. Therefore, despite the proliferation of programs in this domain (e.g., Merchán et al., 2014), the originality of our approach with the Happy 8-12 gamified tool, the tutorial action plan, and teacher training justifies the significance and necessity of this study.

This study aims to analyze an emotional education program designed for primary education. The study's overarching objective is divided into three specific goals: firstly, to examine the emotional competencies, anxiety levels, and academic performance of students in first to third grade of primary school; secondly, to assess the impact of the emotional education program on these variables; and thirdly, to determine potential differences between genders and across educational levels. Accordingly, the hypothesis posits that participation in the educational program will enhance students' emotional competence, reduce anxiety levels, and improve academic performance, regardless of gender or educational level.

Method

Design

This research uses a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a negatieve control group. The interval between the evaluation pretest and posttest was nine months.

Participants

The sample comprised 773 primary school students, with 52.1% boys and 47.9% girls, drawn from public, private, and semi-private schools across various regions of Spain. The sample size calculation confirms that our sample of 773 students, exceeding the required 385, represents the population of children aged 6 to 9 in Spain (1837315) with a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error. Specifically, at the time of testing, the students were distributed across first grade (N=225; 29.1%), second grade (N=186; 24.1%), and third grade (N=362; 46.8%). Their ages ranged from 6 to 9 years, with an average age of 7.15 (SD=0.48). The experimental group consisted of 594 students (72.9%), while the control group comprised 179 students (23.1%). Participants were selected through non-random convenience sampling (Otzen & Manterola, 2017). Group selection was randomized, with the control group designated as negative control. Tables 1, 2, and 3 present the sample sizes and any missing cases for each group, categorized by gender, time, and grade level.

Instruments

To carry out the present study, the following questionnaires and measures were used:

The First-Cycle Emotional Development Observation Scale was adapted from Filella et al. (2014). This instrument is grounded in the emotional competence model established by the Research Group in Psychopedagogical Orientation (GROP) (Bisquerra & Pérez-Escoda, 2007). It comprises 41 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (almost always). The scale was utilized to assess emotional competences (including emotional awareness, emotion regulation, emotional autonomy, social competence, and life skills and well-being) among first- and second-grade students, as perceived by their teachers. In this study, all dimensions of emotional competence exhibited high internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values between .82 and .95 and McDonald's ω scores between .83 and .92.

The Emotional Development Questionnaire (CDE 9-13) [CDE 9-13 from the original Spanish], developed by Pérez-Escoda et al. (2021), was employed to assess the emotional competences of third-grade students. This instrument is based on the emotional competence model established by the GROP (Bisquerra & Pérez-Escoda, 2007). The self-report questionnaire comprises 41 items rated on an 11-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (very rarely or never) to 10 (almost always), distributed across five dimensions: emotional awareness, emotion regulation, emotional autonomy, social competences, and life skills and well-being competences, along with one general dimension. In this study, the Cronbach's α values ranged from .62 to .79 and the McDonald's ω scores ranged from .63 to .79, except for the emotional autonomy dimension (α = .52; ω= .53).

Child Anxiety Scale (CAS) (Gillis, 1980; Spanish adaptation by Gómez-Fernández & Pulido, 2011). This scale was used to measure the level of anxiety in first- to third-grade students. It consists of 20 dichotomous items (yes-or-no questions) with a single total score. In this study, the instrument had a reliability of $\alpha = .83$ and $\omega = .83$.

Academic Report: The overall grade point average (on a scale of 0 to 10) served as a quantitative indicator of academic performance, the most widely accepted metric for evaluating academic performance (Córdoba et al., 2011). This data was obtained from the course tutors.

Procedure

The study unfolded in several stages: (1) Interested schools were contacted and meetings were set up with those that agreed to participate. (2) Consent for the study was secured from the legal guardians of minor students, and (3) confidentiality agreements were signed with each participating school to ensure the privacy of results. (4) Questionnaires were administered by school staff under the supervision of the research team, in line with Helsinki recommendations and with approval from the corresponding Ethics Committees (CEIC-2473). (5) Staff at the experimental group schools received 30 hours of training to administer tests and implement the intervention program, whereas control group staff were only given guidelines on using the evaluation instruments. (6) The pretest questionnaires were administered in both groups (experimental and control), (7) then the intervention was implemented in the experimental group, and (8) data from posttest questionnaires were collected. (9) Finally, reports on the findings were provided to the schools.

Intervention program

The intervention program consisted of a set of 25 activities (López-Cassà, 2023) for first, second, and third graders. As noted, in third grade, the activities were supplemented with the Happy 8-12 video game. The program is based on the emotional competence model developed by Bisquerra and Pérez-Escoda (2007), which includes: emotional awareness, emotion regulation, emotional autonomy, social competence, and life and well-being competences. The activities are sequenced by age and type of emotional competence. The methodology is highly active and practical and includes group and partner dynamics, role playing, reflection and discussion, relaxation and breathing exercises, games, story-telling, etc.

The Happy 8-12 video game was specifically designed to enable children to learn to better manage emotional competences and, thus, be able to assertively resolve conflicts arising in their everyday lives. The software presents a total of 25 conflicts, 15 of which take place in a school context and 10 in a family setting. The conflicts are posed to the entire class group and, working together, the students have to decide which of the various possible responses they consider most correct (the assertive one). The video game allows players (students) to experience different roles in the conflict, including those of the aggressor, the victim, and a bystander, in order to better reflect the various possibilities for action they might encounter in a conflict situation.

Data analysis

A preliminary descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the mean scores and standard deviations for each of the study variables, categorized by group (experimental or control), time (pretest or posttest), and gender. To assess the program's effectiveness, a mixed linear model was employed. This analytical approach allowed for the definition of clusters and fixed measurements based on the characteristics of the groups. The normality of the sample was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests. For variables that did not meet the normality

assumptions of the mixed linear model, a two-step correction was applied through percentile ranks and inverse-normal transformation (Templeton, 2011). The Mahalanobis distance was utilized to identify outliers, but no cases exhibited extreme values, and all cases were included in the analysis. Cases with missing values were eliminated using listwise deletion.

The model incorporated time (pretest or posttest), group (control or experimental), and gender (boy or girl) as factors, evaluating both their individual effects and the interactions among them. Following the confirmation of significant differences between pretest and posttest means, post hoc rank tests and corresponding multiple comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni test. The effect size was determined using the partial eta-squared statistic (η^2p), with values of .009, .058, and .137 indicating small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1969). Data analyses were performed using the open-source statistical software Jamovi 23 (The Jamovi Project, 2021) for descriptive and mixed model analyses, while data curation and the two-step correction were conducted using SPSS Statistics 27.0 software.

Results

Differences in emotional competence, anxiety level, and academic performance in first graders

First, a descriptive analysis was performed of the variables taking into account group, time, and gender (see Table 1).

Table 1

Emotional competence, anxiety level, and academic performance of first-grade students on the pretest and posttest

Variables	Group	Time	Gender	N	Missing	Mean	SD
Emotional awareness	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	82	0	30.48	8.97
			Girls	101	0	32.50	7.60
		Posttest	Boys	82	0	37.35	12.22
			Girls	101	0	40.82	12.23
	Control	Pretest	Boys	19	0	35.89	6.28
			Girls	23	0	42.70	11.25
		Posttest	Boys	19	0	38.47	7.17
			Girls	23	0	45.96	10.49
Emotion regulation	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	82	0	14.29	5.14
			Girls	101	0	14.86	5.08

		Posttest	Boys	82	0	15.84	4.50
			Girls	101	0	17.20	4.64
	Control	Pretest	Boys	19	0	15.74	4.99
			Girls	23	0	17.83	5.23
		Posttest	Boys	19	0	16.00	5.60
			Girls	23	0	18.57	5.85
Emotional autonomy	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	82	0	17.61	4.92
			Girls	101	0	17.08	4.75
		Posttest	Boys	82	0	19.87	4.98
			Girls	101	0	20.73	5.32
	Control	Pretest	Boys	19	0	18.05	4.89
			Girls	23	0	22.48	3.44
		Posttest	Boys	19	0	19.74	5.03
			Girls	23	0	23.57	2.99
Social competente	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	82	5	16.82	6.55
			Girls	101	19	18.06	6.21
		Posttest	Boys	82	3	19.79	4.87
			Girls	101	2	21.70	5.40
	Control	Pretest	Boys	19	1	19.42	4.90
			Girls	23	3	22.61	4.10
		Posttest	Boys	19	0	19.00	5.96
			Girls	23	0	22.17	4.54
Life and well-being competences	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	82	0	9.63	3.23
			Girls	101	0	9.77	2.89
		Posttest	Boys	82	0	11.05	2.72
			Girls	101	0	11.70	3.01
	Control	Pretest	Boys	19	0	10.47	2.63
			Girls	23	0	12.26	2.63
		Posttest	Boys	19	0	10.00	3.12
			Girls	23	0	12.13	2.83
Total emotional competence	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	82	0	88.83	25.73
			Girls	101	0	92.28	24.29
		Posttest	Boys	82	0	103.9	24.82
			Girls	101	0	112.16	27.29

	Control	Pretest	Boys	19	0	99.58	20.63
			Girls	23	0	117.87	21.42
		Posttest	Boys	19	0	103.21	24.52
			Girls	23	0	122.39	21.49
Anxiety	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	79	0	7.41	3.11
			Girls	99	0	7.03	2.59
		Posttest	Boys	74	0	6.80	2.87
			Girls	90	0	6.70	2.97
	Control	Pretest	Boys	18	0	6.83	2.72
			Girls	21	0	7.05	2.85
		Posttest	Boys	18	0	7.72	3.12
			Girls	22	0	8.23	3.86
Academic performance	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	82	5	6.78	1.12
			Girls	100	19	7.19	1.12
		Posttest	Boys	81	3	7.19	1.25
			Girls	99	2	7.55	1.11
	Control	Pretest	Boys	19	1	7.34	1.13
			Girls	23	3	8.46	0.90
		Posttest	Boys	19	0	7.43	1.34
			Girls	23	0	8.68	1.07

Source: Self made

The results obtained for the first-grade students, based on the mixed linear model, show significant effects in the group factor for the variables emotional awareness ($F(1,221)= 23.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .094$), emotion regulation ($F(1,221) = 3.92$, $p = .049$, $\eta^2p = .013$), emotional autonomy ($F(1,221)= 10.68$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2p =.043$), social competence ($F(1,221)= 4.43$, $p = .036$, $\eta^2p = .017$), and academic performance. As for the time factor, significant differences were found in emotional awareness ($F(1,221) = 23.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .094$), emotion regulation ($F(1,221) = 8.86$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2p = .034$), emotional autonomy ($F(1,221) = 20.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .083$), social competence ($F(1,221) = 7.27$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2p = .030$), life and well-being competences ($F(1,221) = 5.91$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2p = .022$), and academic performance ($F(1,221) = 18.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .075$).

The post hoc tests, by means of the Bonferroni test, reveal significant pre-post differences in the experimental group for the variables emotional awareness ($t(221) = -7.45$, $p < .001$), emotion regulation ($t(221) = -5.47$, $p < .001$), emotional autonomy ($t(221) = -7.27$, $p < .001$), social competence ($t(221) = -7.16$, $p < .001$), life and well-being competences ($t(221) = -6.86$, $p < .001$), and academic performance ($t(218) = -7.13$, $p < .001$). No significant pre-post differences were found in the control group.

Significant differences were found between the control and experimental groups, with the control group receiving higher pretest scores for emotional awareness ($t(221) = -4.83$, $p < .001$), emotional

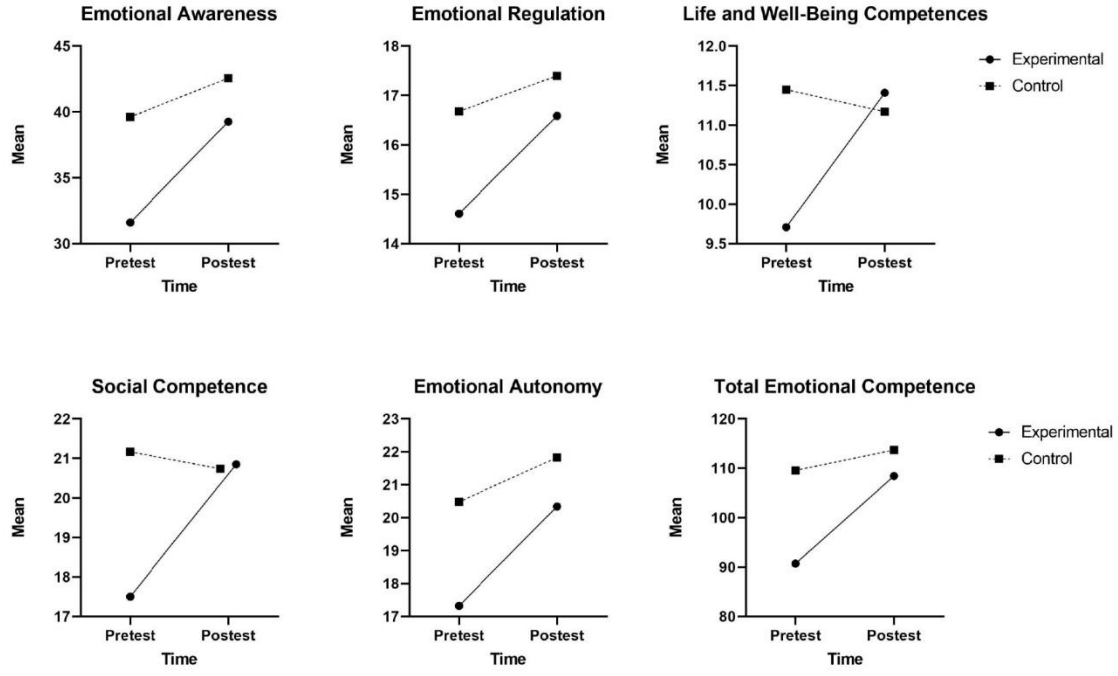
autonomy (t(221) = -3.70, p = .001), social competence (t(221) = -3.68, p = .002), life and well-being competences (t(221) = -3.29, p = .007), and academic performance (t(266) = -4.64, p < .001), as well as higher posttest scores for academic performance (t(266) = -3.48, p = .004).

With regard to the gender factor, the results were significant for the variables emotional awareness (F(1,221) = 14.67, p < .001, η^2p = .059), emotion regulation (F(1,221) = 4.86, p = .003, η^2p = .017), emotional autonomy (F(1,407) = 10.85, p = .001, η^2p = .043), social competence (F(1,221) = 8.61, p = .004, η^2p = .034), life and well-being competences (F(1,407) = 7.86, p = .005, η^2p = .030), and academic performance (F(1,221) = 17.26, p < .001, η^2p = .071). These differences were observed between girls and boys from the experimental group. The girls scored higher than the boys on the pretest for emotional awareness (t(221) = -3.83, p < .001), emotion regulation (t(221) = -2.20, p = .029), emotional autonomy (t(221) = -3.29, p = .001), social competence (t(221) = -2.93, p = .004), and life and well-being competences (t(221) = -2.80, p = .005). Following completion of the program, these differences were maintained in the emotion regulation dimension (t(221) = -4.91, p < .001).

Additionally, interaction effects were observed between group and time for social competence (F(1,221) = 12.23, p < .001, η^2p = .051), life and well-being competences (F(1,221) = 12.27, p < .001, η^2p = .051), and total emotional competence (F(1,221) = 6.49, p < .012, η^2p = .026). While the control group's scores decreased, the experimental group's scores increased. In contrast, neither direct nor interaction effects were found for the anxiety variable.

Figure 1

Effects of the intervention on emotional competences in first graders



Source: Self made

Differences in emotional competence, anxiety level, and academic performance in second graders

Table 2 shows the descriptive data for the second graders' scores in the dimensions of emotional competence, anxiety, and academic performance on the pretest and posttests, by group and gender.

Table 2

Emotional competence, anxiety level, and academic performance of second-grade students on the pretest and posttest

Variables	Group	Time	Gender	N	Missing	Mean	SD
Emotional awareness	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	83	0	33.53	11.28
			Girls	63	0	36.21	9.80
		Posttest	Boys	83	0	32.14	9.59
			Girls	63	0	36.71	9.57
	Control	Pretest	Boys	23	0	35.61	8.94
			Girls	17	0	41.18	8.67
		Posttest	Boys	23	0	39.70	7.31
			Girls	17	0	45.47	13.76
Emotion regulation	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	83	0	14.94	5.45
			Girls	63	0	16.08	3.99
		Posttest	Boys	83	0	14.47	5.26
			Girls	63	0	16.40	5.08
	Control	Pretest	Boys	23	0	15.22	5.38
			Girls	17	0	18.41	4.24
		Posttest	Boys	23	0	17.22	4.97
			Girls	17	0	19.00	6.08
Emotional autonomy	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	83	0	17.88	4.98
			Girls	63	0	18.52	4.44
		Posttest	Boys	83	0	18.28	5.13
			Girls	63	0	19.25	4.88
	Control	Pretest	Boys	23	0	16.65	5.13
			Girls	17	0	18.24	3.9
		Posttest	Boys	23	0	18.17	4.56
			Girls	17	0	20.24	5.87

Social competente	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	83	0	18.92	4.84
			Girls	63	0	20.54	4.23
		Posttest	Boys	83	0	17.90	5.31
			Girls	63	0	20.60	5.17
	Control	Pretest	Boys	23	0	19.35	5.15
			Girls	17	0	21.82	5.07
		Posttest	Boys	23	0	21.39	3.95
			Girls	17	0	22.59	6.65
Life and well-being competences	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	83	0	10.25	3.33
			Girls	63	0	11.08	2.61
		Posttest	Boys	83	0	9.63	3.18
			Girls	63	0	11.33	2.92
	Control	Pretest	Boys	23	0	10.04	2.36
			Girls	17	0	11.65	2.47
		Posttest	Boys	23	0	10.65	2.77
			Girls	17	0	12.47	3.95
Total emotional competence	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	83	0	95.52	23.86
			Girls	63	0	102.43	19.44
		Posttest	Boys	83	0	92.42	23.96
			Girls	63	0	104.30	23.74
	Control	Pretest	Boys	23	0	96.87	18.64
			Girls	17	0	111.29	16.15
		Posttest	Boys	23	0	107.13	17.19
			Girls	17	0	119.76	34.48
Anxiety	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	81	2	7.35	3.48
			Girls	62	1	7.84	3.01
		Posttest	Boys	82	1	7.50	3.38
			Girls	63	0	7.86	3.34
	Control	Pretest	Boys	17	6	7.94	3.07
			Girls	12	5	8.25	2.63
		Posttest	Boys	20	3	7.50	4.08
			Girls	15	2	7.00	3.34
Academic performance	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	30	53	6.47	1.31
			Girls	23	40	6.57	1.38

	Posttest	Boys	22	61	7.23	1.77
		Girls	19	44	7.89	1.73
Control	Pretest	Boys	4	19	7.25	1.5
		Girls	3	14	7.67	1.53
	Posttest	Boys	3	20	6.67	1.15
		Girls	2	15	8.00	0.00

Source: Self made

Among second graders, significant differences were found in the group factor in emotional awareness ($F(1,182)= 13.150$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .066$), emotion regulation ($F(1,182)= 5.70$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2p = .026$), and social competence ($F(1,182)= 4.91$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2p = .021$). With regard to the time factor, the data indicate a significant change in emotional awareness ($F(1,182) = 5.07$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2p = .026$) and in emotional autonomy ($F(1,182) = 6.95$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2p = .031$).

The post hoc tests revealed differences between the control group's pretest and posttest scores for emotional awareness ($t(182) = -2.83$, $p = .030$). No significant changes were observed in the study variables for the experimental group.

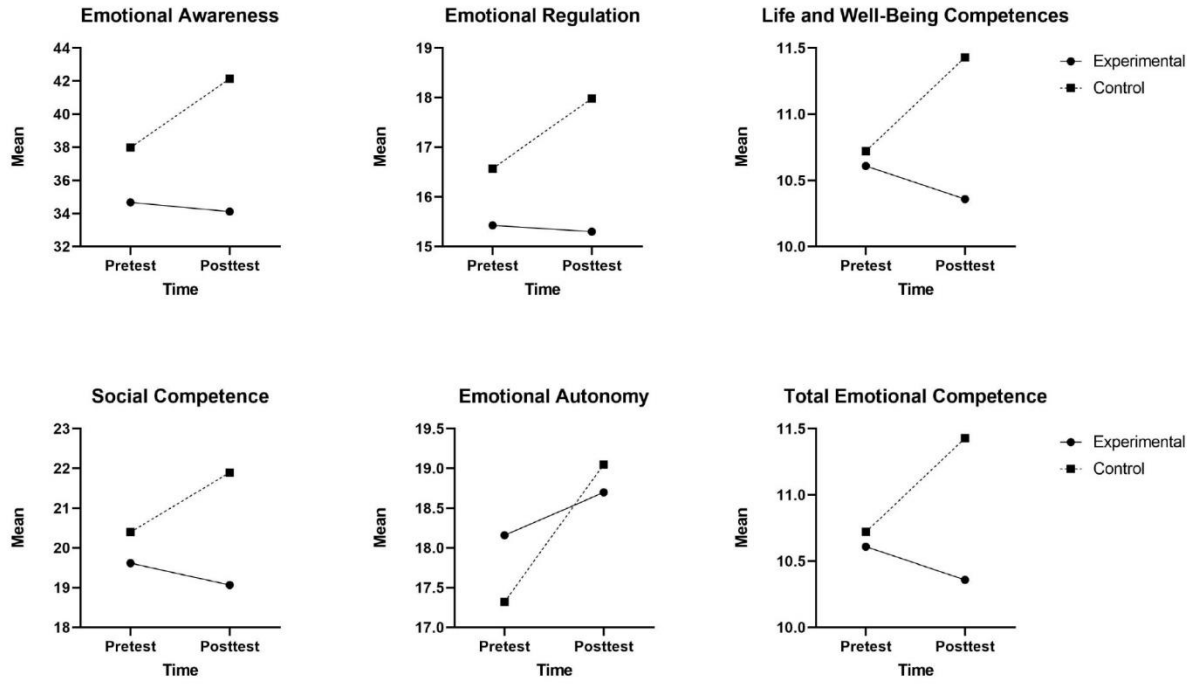
Differences were found with regard to gender in the variables emotional awareness ($F(1,186) = 8.33$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2p = .041$), emotion regulation ($F(1,186) = 5.83$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2p = .026$), social competence ($F(1,186) = 6.08$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2p = .042$), and life and well-being competences ($F(1,186) = 8.83$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2p = .041$). These differences were between the posttest scores of the girls and boys in the experimental group. Following completion of the program, the girls scored higher than the boys on social competence ($t(262) = -3.24$, $p = .038$) and life and well-being competences ($t(262) = -3.37$, $p = .024$).

There was a significant interaction effect between the time and group factors for the variables emotional awareness ($F(1,182) = 7.71$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2p = .037$), social competence ($F(1,182) = 5.78$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2p = .026$), life and well-being competences ($F(1,182) = 4.34$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2p = .021$), and total emotional competence ($F(1,182) = 6.81$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2p = .031$). In other words, while the experimental group's scores for these variables decreased following completion of the program, the control group's scores increased.

No significant direct or interaction effects were found in second-grade students for the variables anxiety and academic performance.

Figure 2

Effects of the intervention on emotional competences in second graders



Source: Self made

Differences in emotional competence, anxiety level, and academic performance in third graders

Table 3 shows the descriptive analysis of the pretest and posttest scores of the third-grade students for the variables of interest, broken down by group and gender.

Table 3

Emotional competence, anxiety level, and academic performance of third-grade students on the pretest and posttest

Variables	Group	Time	Gender	N	Missing	Mean	SD
Emotional awareness	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	140	4	80.78	18.46
			Girls	111	5	89.29	18.71
		Posttest	Boys	123	21	92.85	15.11
			Girls	95	21	94.80	14.56
	Control	Pretest	Boys	45	4	84.91	18.45
			Girls	45	3	88.11	16.22
		Posttest	Boys	47	2	87.28	20.94
			Girls	45	3	89.42	17.09
Emotion regulation	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	140	4	66.34	16.71

			Girls	111	5	74.01	16.20
		Posttest	Boys	123	21	70.45	16.51
			Girls	95	21	73.86	16.76
	Control	Pretest	Boys	45	4	70.80	15.58
			Girls	45	3	77.49	13.28
		Posttest	Boys	47	2	72.74	16.04
			Girls	45	3	69.80	17.53
Emotional autonomy	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	140	4	30.61	6.33
			Girls	111	5	31.76	6.39
		Posttest	Boys	123	21	33.69	5.83
			Girls	95	21	34.04	5.60
	Control	Pretest	Boys	45	4	32.04	6.00
			Girls	45	3	31.58	6.07
		Posttest	Boys	47	2	32.74	5.95
			Girls	45	3	33.00	5.60
Social competente	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	140	4	53.86	11.93
			Girls	111	5	59.13	11.26
		Posttest	Boys	123	21	60.49	10.45
			Girls	95	21	61.84	10.85
	Control	Pretest	Boys	45	4	55.40	10.36
			Girls	45	3	58.93	11.23
		Posttest	Boys	47	2	56.64	12.48
			Girls	45	3	59.80	12.62
Life and well-being competences	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	140	4	45.22	8.88
			Girls	111	5	48.28	8.35
		Posttest	Boys	123	21	49.54	7.75
			Girls	95	21	50.37	7.14
	Control	Pretest	Boys	45	4	47.00	7.11
			Girls	45	3	46.31	8.06
		Posttest	Boys	47	2	48.68	9.46
			Girls	44	4	48.32	8.39
Total emotional competence	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	140	4	276.81	45.76
			Girls	111	5	302.46	48.46
		Posttest	Boys	123	21	307.01	43.25

			Girls	95	21	314.92	41.50
	Control	Pretest	Boys	45	4	290.16	44.36
			Girls	45	3	302.42	45.34
		Posttest	Boys	47	2	298.09	50.88
			Girls	44	4	300.25	53.16
Anxiety	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	144	0	8.39	9.87
			Girls	114	2	7.18	3.17
		Posttest	Boys	114	30	7.70	3.59
			Girls	93	23	6.76	2.84
	Control	Pretest	Boys	47	2	6.81	3.01
			Girls	48	0	7.71	3.28
		Posttest	Boys	47	2	7.45	3.14
			Girls	46	2	7.28	3.29
Academic performance	Experimental	Pretest	Boys	96	48	6.91	1.50
			Girls	83	33	7.20	1.75
		Posttest	Boys	83	61	7.12	1.67
			Girls	63	53	7.38	1.76
	Control	Pretest	Boys	18	31	7.78	1.30
			Girls	19	29	8.16	0.95
		Posttest	Boys	17	32	8.00	1.50
			Girls	20	28	8.70	1.12

Source: Self made

Among third graders, significant effects were found for the time factor in emotional awareness ($F(1,314) = 20.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .059$), emotional autonomy ($F(1,310) = 21.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .063$), social competence ($F(1,317) = 16.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .048$), and life and well-being competences ($F(1,309) = 22.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .066$). With regard to the variable academic performance, significant differences were observed in both the time ($F(1,407) = 27.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .062$) and group factors ($F(1,407) = 18.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .042$).

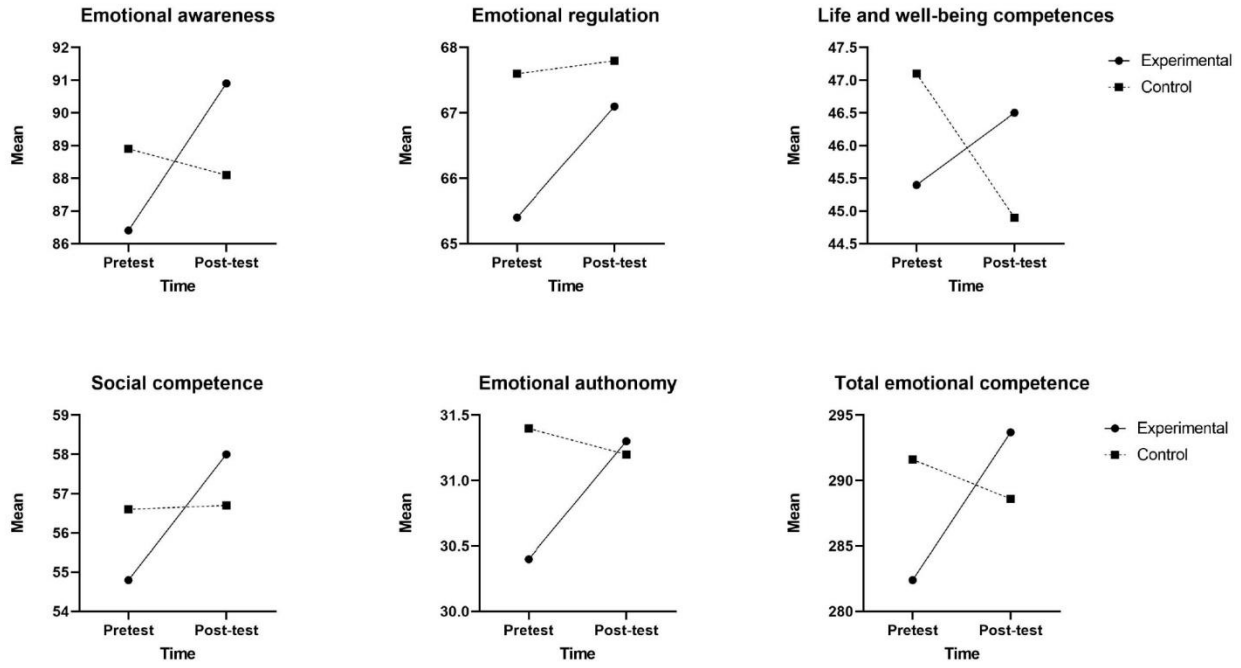
The Bonferroni test revealed significant increases in the experimental group's scores upon completion of the program for emotional awareness ($t(323) = -2.99$, $p = .018$), emotional autonomy ($t(324) = -6.08$, $p < .001$), social competence ($t(323) = -6.12$, $p < .001$), and life and well-being competences ($t(320) = -5.58$, $p < .001$). There were also differences between the two groups' pretest scores for academic performance, with the control group scoring higher ($t(256) = -4.18$, $p < .001$).

With regard to gender, the variables emotion regulation ($F(1,339) = 5.34$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2p = .014$) and social competence ($F(1,345) = 8.81$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2p = .022$) showed significant differences. Specifically, these differences were between the pretest scores of the girls and boys from the experimental group for emotional awareness ($t(322) = -3.89$, $p = .003$), emotion regulation ($t(322) = -3.57$, $p = .011$), and social competence ($t(322) = -3.65$, $p = .008$), with the girls scoring higher. No significant differences were found in the posttest scores.

Interaction effects were observed between group and time for emotional awareness ($F(1,314) = 7.96$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2p = .021$), emotion regulation ($F(1,311) = 6.12$ $p = .014$, $\eta^2p = .018$), social competence ($F(1,314) = 6.12$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2p = .018$), and total emotional competence ($F(1,320) = 11.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .034$). The control group's scores for emotional competence, social competence, and total emotional competence increased slightly, while the experimental group saw larger increases. The emotion regulation scores increased in the experimental group but decreased in the control group.

Figure 3

Effects of the intervention on emotional competences in third graders



Source: Self made

Conclusions and Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of the application of an educational program on the development of emotional competence, anxiety, and academic performance in first- to third-grade primary school students. In accordance with the proposed hypothesis, the results indicate that, upon completion of the intervention, and compared with the control group, significant improvements were perceived in the development of the participating students' emotional competences. However, the intervention did not have the same impact on the development of the emotional competence dimensions in each of the studied grades.

Upon completion of the program, the first graders' total emotional competence score improved significantly, as did their scores for the social competence and life and well-being competences

dimensions. In contrast, the second graders did not show significant changes in their emotional competence development after the intervention. Finally, after finishing the program, the third graders registered improvements in the results for emotional awareness, emotion regulation, social competence, and total emotional competence.

The program's efficacy in first- and third-grade primary school students in terms of improving the development of emotional competences is in line with similar studies, which provide evidence of the effects of socio-emotional programs at these ages on social competence (Echeverría et al., 2020, Corcoran et al., 2018; Riquelme-Mella & Montero, 2016), life and well-being competences, total emotional competence (Corcoran et al., 2018; Filella et al., 2014; Mira-Galvañ & Gilar-Corbi, 2020; Taylor et al., 2017), and emotion regulation (Filella et al., 2014). The improvements registered by the third graders for emotion regulation may have been influenced not only by the emotional education program, but also the Happy 8-12 video game, which specifically provides training in the emotion regulation process. For this reason, it can be assumed that the strategy of using both programs had positive effects on the development of emotional competences in the students. It is also worth noting that the second graders did not achieve significant results such as those exhibited by the first- and third-grade samples following the intervention. This finding suggests that it may be necessary to examine in greater depth which aspects have contributed to the lack of improvement, such as a lack of student engagement, a lack of program systematization, insufficient time, or increased rigor on the part of the teachers in the second competence evaluation.

Simultaneously, concerning gender, the results indicate that first-grade girls exhibit higher levels of development in emotion regulation compared to boys. Similarly, second-grade girls demonstrate greater improvements in social competence and life skills and well-being after the intervention program than boys. However, despite the differences observed in emotion regulation and social competence during the pretest, no significant differences were reported in the posttest for the third-grade group. In this context, it can be hypothesized, as suggested by some authors, that girls may exhibit differences in maturity and cultural influences throughout the learning process, retaining sensitivity toward future learning of this nature (Posselt & Nuñez, 2022). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that, as demonstrated in this study, this effect diminishes with increasing age, such that in subsequent grades, the level of learning becomes comparable between genders, as supported by existing literature (Carretero & Nolasco, 2016; Filella et al., 2014). However, although differences related to gender were identified in emotional competences, these differences did not interact with the experimental condition, indicating that the program was equally effective for both girls and boys.

In line with the main hypothesis of the study, it was anticipated that the intervention program would reduce students' anxiety levels. However, based on the data analysis, it was found that there were no statistically significant differences at the conclusion of the intervention across the three primary school grade levels examined in the study. These findings contradict results from other studies where positive effects were observed in reducing students' anxiety levels through participation in emotional education programs (Filella et al., 2014). The current results may be attributed to the social context in which the research was conducted, as it began during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies have demonstrated a significant increase in students' anxiety levels during the pandemic, which could have influenced the perceptions of both students and teachers in evaluating this variable (Lavigne-Cerván et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2021).

Regarding the nonsignificant results for academic performance, previous studies have indicated a relationship between emotional competences and academic performance (Cabello et al., 2019). However, academic performance is a complex construct that requires time for modification. It is influenced by various factors, including internal variables (Edel, 2003) and external elements (Mayorquin, 2019; Pros, 2015). Some authors suggest that understanding the evolution of adjacent factors is necessary to deduce and predict changes in academic performance (Quílez et al., 2021). Therefore, social and emotional factors are considered an initial step and an indicator that changes in academic performance are likely to be detected in the longer term (Quílez et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2019).

Although the presented studies have shown a relationship between emotional competencies and academic performance, the changes produced by the program are likely not drastic enough to exert a significant influence on these variables. Furthermore, since both variables were assessed right at the end of the program, future implementations of the program should evaluate the long-term effects of improvements in the emotional competencies on performance and anxiety at a later time after the intervention ends.

Before presenting the conclusions of our study, several limitations need to be addressed. The size difference between the control and experimental groups is a significant limitation of the present study. This discrepancy is attributed to the accidental nature of the sample and the prioritization of the sample within the experimental group. Future studies would benefit from a larger and/or more balanced sample in terms of numbers. The use of self-reported questionnaires in the third-grade group, in contrast to other-reported questionnaires in the first- and second-grade groups, poses a potential source of bias. Furthermore, distributing the questionnaires in the same order on both occasions may have introduced bias as well. Moreover, results related to emotional autonomy in the third-grade group should be interpreted with caution, as this dimension did not exhibit solid internal consistency within this sample. Another limitation is the convenience-based sampling approach due to the nature of the research and the necessity of school involvement. This method relied on the willingness of schools to participate. Additionally, it would be beneficial to conduct follow-up assessments on these improvements in the near future. Lastly, future research should incorporate gamified resources similar to the Happy 8-12 video game in the first- and second-grade intervention programs, tailored to the corresponding ages. This would allow for a more controlled evaluation of the improvements associated with the video game.

In conclusion, the Emotional Education program (López-Cassà, 2023) and the gamified Happy program (Filella et al., 2014) effectively improved students' emotional competences in the first three years of primary school. This intervention was particularly significant given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring substantial effort from the research team and educational stakeholders responsible for its implementation.

Integrating emotional competencies into primary education counseling is crucial for students' holistic development. Despite teachers lacking specialized skills in this area, their influential role in mentoring cannot be overlooked (Repetto et al., 2007). Implementing these competencies under expert guidance effectively complements their educational role. Counseling encompasses clinical, consultative, and program-based models (Repetto, 2002), with this initiative focusing on the latter.

Including emotional competencies brings substantial benefits, enhancing the school environment (Pérez-Guevara & Puentes-Suárez, 2022) and helping students manage academic and personal challenges (Ros-Morente et al., 2017). Counselors, in collaboration with teachers, facilitate an understanding of others' emotions, conflict resolution, and better interpersonal relationships (Guerra et al., 2021; Sánchez et al., 2012). Early emotional competence training also identifies and supports students facing emotional or adjustment issues, acting as a protective factor (Aviles et al., 2006; Brotman et al., 2005).

Therefore, the proposed program is beneficial for effective primary education counseling, as its positive impacts on the development of emotional competences have been observed.

Given the scarcity of studies on the effects of emotional education programs in the early years of primary education – largely due to the difficulty and considerable work involved in evaluating emotional competences – the present research provides new evidence of the benefit of such programs in terms of the development of students' emotional competence in the early years of compulsory education.

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