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The Impact of Playful Educational Interventions on the Development of Emotional Skills in Early School Age

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Abstract: *In the context of current educational challenges, where academic performance often takes precedence, the development of emotional skills in early school-aged children is frequently neglected. However, research consistently highlights the positive impact of emotional intelligence on academic achievement, social adaptation, mental health, and overall well-being. This study investigates the impact of an experiential learning initiative aimed at developing emotional competencies in young students. The research aimed to analyse the impact of structured playful activities on four key dimensions of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. A quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-testing was employed on a sample of 40 urban students, divided equally into experimental and control groups. Emotional skills were measured using an adapted version of the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT). The intervention, spanning 12 weeks, involved didactic games focused on emotional regulation, empathy, and communication. Results indicated a meaningful statistical gain in favour of the experimental group relative to the control group ($t = 3.62$, $p = 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.04$), with notable gains in empathy and self-control. These findings validate the importance of playful learning in promoting emotional development and support the inclusion of such methods in personal development curricula. The study offers practical insights for educators, counsellors, and policymakers in designing preventive and early intervention strategies in primary education.*

Keywords: *emotional intelligence; didactic play; socio-emotional development; educational intervention; early school age.*

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Introduction

In a constantly evolving educational landscape, marked by a strong emphasis on academic performance and standardized assessment, the development of emotional skills often remains secondary, despite extensive scholarly support for their importance in academic success (Agnoli et al., 2022) and social adaptation (Camacho-Morles et al., 2021). A deep understanding of personal emotional states, as well as an awareness and the effective regulation of the feelings of others are key factors for the educational climate, interpersonal relationships, and students' well-being (Greenberg et al., 2017; Elias et al., 2018; Gkintoni et al., 2024).

Emotional intelligence, formally conceptualized by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and later expanded by Goleman (1995), is now widely recognized as an important predictor of school success (Cortés Pascual et al., 2019). According to a recent systematic review, emotional intelligence—in all its theoretical forms (trait, ability, or mixed)—is positively correlated with academic motivation, school engagement, social competence, and educational performance (Gkintoni et al., 2024). These findings support the explicit integration of emotional development into the school curriculum, particularly in the early years of schooling, when mechanisms of self-regulation and self-other awareness are being formed.

Early school age represents a critical stage in shaping emotional identity and relational competencies (Pancer & Weinstein, 1987), wherein the initial experience within a structured educational environment expects from children not only to perform cognitively but also to cooperate, follow rules, manage frustration, and build healthy relationships. Research shows that children with higher levels of emotional intelligence display greater autonomy (Granero-Gallegos, Gómez-López & Manzano-Sánchez, 2023), self-confidence (Cheung et al., 2014), intrinsic motivation for learning (Taibolatov et al., 2024; Kwon et al., 2018), and increased prosocial behavior and cooperation (Cao & Chen, 2025).

Within this framework, the specialized literature proposes several educational strategies aimed at emotional development, among which personal development play stands out due to its adaptable, reflective, and self-exploratory nature (Moser, 2013; Miller & Kocurek, 2017). This type of play, defined by Garaigordobil et al. (2022), is designed to achieve formative goals at the cognitive level (e.g., creativity and communication development), the social level (e.g., empathy, prosocial behaviours), and the emotional level (e.g., self-regulation, emotion identification, self-confidence). Through its flexible nature, play provides a safe context in which children can explore,

reflect, and actively learn about themselves and others (Fatourehchi et al., 2024).

Additionally, contemporary approaches to student-centred learning, supported by theories such as experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) or neuroeducation (Fredrickson, 2001), argue that deep learning occurs when the educational activity is accompanied by emotional engagement and introspection. Personal development play, with its emotional and participatory content, addresses these needs and proves to be an effective tool for early emotional competency development (Gkintoni et al., 2024; Estrada et al., 2021).

The literature has consistently highlighted the direct link between emotional development and academic success (Taibolatov et al., 2024; Quílez-Robres et al., 2021), psychological well-being, and the quality of interpersonal relationships (Durlak et al., 2011; Goleman, 1995; Greenberg et al., 2017; Jung et al., 2023). In this context, the development of emotional intelligence becomes not just a desirable component, but an educational necessity. Abilities such as recognizing and understanding emotions, demonstrating compassion, managing affective states, and fostering constructive interpersonal connections are considered fundamental for academic and social adjustment, especially among children at the beginning of their educational journey (Jung et al., 2023; Lim, 2023).

However, current literature also reveals several gaps in the implementation and evaluation of emotional interventions at the lower primary level. SEL-type studies often focus on heterogeneous samples or older age groups, and only rarely do analyses differentiate between the various components of emotional intelligence. Furthermore, interventions are frequently conducted by professionals external to the classroom, with limited involvement of teachers in the educational process. Therefore, there is a need for applied research conducted in real educational settings, focusing on primary school children and supported by rigorous evaluation methods.

Against this background, the current research investigates the effects of a structured educational program based on personal development games on the development of emotional intelligence in young schoolchildren, with an emphasis on four essential dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Through this research, the aim is to contribute to filling a gap identified in the literature—the lack of differentiated and applied studies in the lower primary cycle—and to provide evidence-based support for the integration of emotional education into everyday teaching practice.

Literature Review

Within current educational research, emotional intelligence (EI) is considered a key dimension of child development, directly influencing academic achievement, learning motivation, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being (Greenberg et al., 2017; Elias et al., 2018; Taibolatov et al., 2024). This perspective is further reinforced by findings from a recent systematic review carried out by Gkintoni et al. (2024), which synthesizes the conclusions of 64 studies, demonstrating that all theoretical constructs of EI—the trait model, the ability model, and the mixed model—are positively associated with school engagement, intrinsic motivation, and the educational climate.

Emotional intelligence, initially defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and later expanded upon by Goleman (1995), is now widely regarded a significant contributor to academic achievement and social adaptation. Currently, the conceptual definition of emotional intelligence varies depending on the adopted model. The trait EI model emphasizes personality traits and affective self-perceptions; the ability EI model conceptualizes emotional intelligence as a form of emotional information processing; and the mixed model integrates both approaches into a comprehensive framework that includes empathy, emotion regulation, self-motivation, and social awareness (Gkintoni et al., 2024).

Goleman's model (1995, 1998) organizes this construct into four essential dimensions: self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, social awareness (empathy), and relationship management. These components have been empirically validated and incorporated into Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, becoming fundamental benchmarks for designing educational interventions focused on early personal development (Elbertson et al., 2010; Jagers et al., 2019).

Self-awareness is the fundamental dimension of emotional intelligence, defined as the capacity to identify and reflect upon personal emotional states, cognitive patterns, and peculiar tendencies, along with their influence on one's actions (Moore et al., 2007). This competence involves emotional self-knowledge, self-confidence, and accurate self-assessment—key skills for behavioural self-regulation and the development of self-esteem (Rochat, 2003; Elias et al., 2018). Goleman (2018) emphasizes that self-aware individuals can identify not only their emotions but also their triggers, which allows them to respond consciously and avoid impulsive behaviours. The lack of this ability leads to difficulties in emotional regulation and in managing inner conflicts (Elias et al., 2018). Therefore, self-awareness

becomes a crucial marker for balanced functioning in both school and social contexts.

Emotional self-regulation involves the capacity to deliberately regulate internal emotional responses in a constructive manner, control impulses, and maintain adaptive behaviour in challenging situations (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012). This dimension essentially refers to the capacity to delay gratification, reduce impulsive reactions, and adapt behaviour in accordance with long-term personal goals (Tucker et al., 1995; Moffitt et al., 2011). The literature emphasizes that self-regulation is not a fixed trait, but a skill that can be developed through specific strategies such as reflective pauses, perspective-taking, or breathing exercises (Calkins & Leerkes, 2004; Barnes et al., 2008; Hasson, 2016). Scientific evidence has shown that a high level of self-control in childhood predicts success in adulthood—personally, professionally, and socially (Moffitt et al., 2011; Allemand et al., 2019). Thus, self-regulation is a necessary condition for healthy emotional functioning and effective social interaction.

Social awareness, or empathy, is the ability to identify and understand the emotions, thoughts, and perspectives of others, involving genuine openness to others' emotional experiences (Nurul et al., 2017). Unlike sympathy, which expresses compassion toward another person, empathy involves truly connecting to the other's experience without being overwhelmed by it (Cuff et al., 2016). Developing empathy during childhood supports the formation of prosocial behaviours and helps prevent the emergence of personality disorders or aggressive behaviour (Romano et al., 2005; Hay et al., 2021).

Relationship management is an advanced competency that draws upon the conscious use of the other dimensions of emotional intelligence to build and maintain healthy relationships based on effective communication, empathy, and constructive conflict resolution (Rahim et al., 2002; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). This competency includes, among other things, assertive communication—the clear and respectful expression of one's own needs without infringing on others' (Alberti & Emmons, 2017)—and the use of a language of responsibility that encourages collaboration and self-reflection (Nesbit, 2012). Effective relationship management is a key ability for group cooperation, forming authentic friendships, and reducing interpersonal conflict, all of which contribute to a positive learning environment (Herman et al., 2008; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018).

Studies conducted within SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) programs consistently highlight the positive effects of socio-emotional development interventions: improved peer relationships, reduction in

aggressive behaviours (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018; Nasti et al., 2023), decreased school-related anxiety (Siddiqui & Ventista, 2018; Santamaría-Villar et al., 2021), and increased active participation in educational activities (Durlak et al., 2011; Domitrovich et al., 2017).

A particularly valuable pedagogical tool for achieving these objectives is ***personal development play***, which differs from other types of play through its clearly defined objectives focused on the development of three core dimensions: cognitive, social, and emotional (Garaigordobil et al., 2022). This type of playful activity is aimed not only at practicing desirable social behaviours but also at stimulating introspection and self-exploration (Lei et al., 2013; Akman & Güçhan Özgül, 2015). Unlike recreational or competitive games, these activities create contexts for reflection and emotional learning, where the child is encouraged to consciously and effectively recognize, express, and regulate emotions (Herodotou et al., 2011; Fatourehchi et al., 2024). The flexible and participatory nature of these games fosters emotional engagement and creates a safe environment in which the child can genuinely explore and learn. Kolb (2014) argues that learning becomes effective only when supported by active reflection, which aligns perfectly with the structure of these educational activities. Progress is evaluated formatively, focusing on understanding behavioural changes and providing reflective feedback, rather than standardized results (Raimundo et al., 2012).

Socio-emotional skills—such as recognizing and appropriately expressing emotions, empathy, and behaviour regulation—have been recognized as fundamental factors in adapting to academic and social demands, especially for students at the beginning of their educational journey. Taibolatov et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence showing that high levels of emotional intelligence are correlated with stronger intrinsic academic motivation, increased self-regulation, and greater capacity for positive relationships—all associated with better school adjustment. These findings support not only the relevance of early EI development but also the need for differentiated measurement of its components within specific educational contexts.

Despite the theoretical recognition of these benefits, current literature highlights several important gaps. Both Gkintoni et al. (2024) and Taibolatov et al. (2024), through their meta-analyses, have pointed out that most studies on emotional intelligence have been conducted on middle and high school student samples, while applied research at the lower primary level remains limited. Moreover, there are few documented interventions

that use play as a systematic strategy for personal development in real educational settings, with the direct involvement of teaching staff.

Given these considerations, this research seeks to fill the identified gap through an examination of the effects of a playful educational program on the development of emotional intelligence in primary education, distinctly measuring four dimensions: self-awareness (SA), self-management (SM), social awareness (SoA), and relationship management (RM)t. The intervention is implemented in a real classroom environment, with the support of teachers, and aims to provide a replicable model of best practices for the early development of emotional competencies in young schoolchildren.

Methodology

Participants

The sample of participants in this study consisted of a total of 40 students aged between 7 and 8 years, divided into two equal groups: an experimental group (Gexp) (N=20, M_EG=7.10, SD=0.30, 11 girls and 9 boys) and a control group (Gc) (N=20, M_CG=7.15, SD=0.36, 10 girls and 10 boys).

Participants were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling method, considering group accessibility and the willingness of the educational institution to collaborate. The two classes were chosen to ensure relative homogeneity between the groups in terms of age, developmental level, and gender distribution, to support the comparability and validity of the results.

Inclusion criteria for the study required that students be enrolled in the first grade during the current academic year, have regular attendance, obtain informed parental or legal guardian consent, and not present any significant cognitive, neurological, or emotional disorders. Exclusion criteria included diagnosed learning difficulties, severe disabilities, or simultaneous participation in other educational or psychological interventions that could influence the study's outcomes.

From an ethical standpoint, the research adhered to educational and psychological ethical principles, respecting the rights and dignity of the children involved. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from parents, and all activities carried out during the research were non-invasive, age-appropriate, and integrated into the students' regular educational environment. Anonymity and data confidentiality were ensured throughout the entire data collection and analysis process.

Measures

To assess emotional intelligence, the dependent variable of the study, the *Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT)* was used. This questionnaire was originally developed by Schutte et al. (1998) and later revised by Schutte et al. (2009). The instrument is developed in alignment with Salovey and Mayer's (1990) conceptual framework of emotional intelligence.

The SSEIT consists of 33 items formulated as statements and rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). It is organized into three subscales: Subscale I – Self-awareness (16 items), Subscale II – Self-management (9 items), Subscale III – Social awareness and relationship management (8 items).

The scoring scale spans from 33 to 165, with greater values corresponding to enhanced emotional intelligence. According to Schutte et al. (2009), the average score in large samples is M = 124 (SD = 13), and the internal consistency of the scale is high, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90, reflecting good reliability.

For processing the data obtained from the instrument, IBM SPSS Statistics 29 software was used. The statistical analysis included both descriptive analyses—calculating means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis coefficients—and inferential analyses. To test the research hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted to evaluate differences between the experimental and control groups across pre-test and post-test measurements. Additionally, to further interpret the effectiveness of the intervention, Cohen's d was calculated to provide insight into the effect size of the educational program's impact on the dependent variable.

Procedure

This study employed an intergroup quasi-experimental design with a pretest–post-test structure. The design involved comparing the performance of two first-grade student groups: an experimental group, which participated in an educational program focused on developing emotional intelligence, and a control group, which continued with their regular curriculum activities. Both groups underwent evaluation at two distinct stages: prior to and following the intervention —using the same measurement instrument.

The study was structured into three phases: pre-experimental (T1), formative intervention, and post-experimental (T2). During T1, the SSEIT questionnaire was administered. This was followed by the implementation of the program "EQ – A Superpower!", conducted over a period of 12 weeks, exclusively in the experimental group. The program consisted of 12 sessions (one per week), each lasting approximately 50 minutes, held during the

Personal Development class. Activities were organized as interactive educational games designed to stimulate the development of the four dimensions of emotional intelligence.

The games were thematically structured as follows: for the development of self-awareness, students participated in the first seven games: Joy Booster, Musical Statues with Emotions, Musical Chairs with Emotions, Watch Out – It Burns! The Emotion Race, Who Am I? and Beauty Detectives. Self-management was targeted through games 8 and 9: Claps, Snaps, catch! and A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed. Social awareness was addressed in games 10 and 11: If I Were... and In Someone Else's Shoes, while relationship management was developed through game 12: Me Too!

The program began with an introductory activity - the viewing of the animated movie *Inside Out* directed by Pete Docter (2015), produced by Pixar Animation Studios - to familiarize students with basic emotions.

The program began with an introductory activity—the viewing of the animated movie *Inside Out*, directed by Pete Docter (2015), produced by Pixar Animation Studios—to familiarize students

To support the activities, various auxiliary materials were used to facilitate understanding and encourage active student participation. These included emotion boards, consisting of four colour-coded panels, each representing a basic emotion (green – joy, red – anger, blue – sadness, yellow – fear), accompanied by illustrative facial expressions, regulation strategies, and example situations. Another important tool was the emotion journal, a personalized notebook completed by students after each session in which they described how they felt, what they learned, and how they could apply what they discovered to everyday life. Additionally, illustrated cards and thematic worksheets were used within games for identifying and expressing emotions.

Each session followed a clear pedagogical structure: introduction of the topic, announcement of objectives, explanation of rules, conduct of the activity, optional task extension, and a final reflection and feedback session. In T2, the SSEIT questionnaire was re-administered to all students (both experimental and control groups) under the same conditions in order to evaluate the changes observed in the measured dependent variables.

Results

In accordance with the research hypothesis, we aimed to investigate the impact of the educational program *EQ – A SuperPower!* on accelerating the development of core emotional skills among first-grade students. To test the research hypothesis, we used the SSEIT scores obtained by students in

both Gexp and Gc at T1 and T2, and we also calculated the effect size using Cohen's d coefficient. The collected data were processed using the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics 29.

Since the distribution of the recorded data was symmetrical, an independent t-test was conducted to examine performance differences between Gexp and Gc at both T1 and T2, to determine to assess the presence of statistically meaningful variation between the groups following the implementation of the educational program in the experimental group.

Table 1 and Table 2 present the outcomes derived from the independent t-test analysis during the pre-test stage for both groups.

Table 1. Mean scores obtained by Gc and Gexp at T1

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
Control groups pretest	20	129.45	7.864	1.758
Experimental groups pretest	20	128.65	12.558	2.808

Table 2. Independent t-Test outcomes for Gc and Gexp at T1

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper
SCOR	Equal variances assumed	3.809	0.058	0.241	38	0.405	0.800	3.313	-5.907	7.507
	Equal variances not assumed			0.241	31.914	0.405	0.800	3.313	-5.950	7.550

In the initial stage (T1), Levene's test applied to assess the homogeneity of variances indicated no statistically meaningful variance between Gexp and Gc in terms of their scores on the SSEIT scale ($p = 0.058 > 0.05$), thereby supporting the applicability of the independent t-test. As indicated by the data in Table 2, the comparison revealed no statistically meaningful differences recorded between the means of the two groups ($t =$

0.241, p = 0.405), a finding also confirmed by the similar mean values reported in Table 1. Therefore, the level of emotional skills development among students in the two groups can be considered comparable at the pre-test stage.

Moreover, the pre-test mean SSEIT scores in both groups were relatively close (M_ControlGroup = 129.45, M_ExperimentalGroup = 128.65), indicating a similar degree of emotional intelligence development at baseline. The non-significant difference between the two means is reflected in the significance threshold value of p = 0.405.

Table 3 and Table 4 present the outcomes of the independent t-test comparing the two groups at the post-test stage (T2).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Gexp and Gc at T2

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
Experimental group posttest	20	139.85	9.483	2.120
Control group posttest	20	131.05	7.294	1.631

Table 4. Results of the independent samples t-test for the Gexp and Gc at T2

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper
SCOR	Equal variances assumed	1.211	0.278	3.290	38	0.001	8.800	2.675	3.384	14.216
	Equal variances not assumed			3.290	35.654	0.001	8.800	2.675	3.373	14.227

Based on Levene's test for equality of variances, we conclude that there are no significant differences in the variances of the SSEIT results recorded by students in the Gexp and those in the Gc at T2 (p = 0.278 > 5%). This result allows us to proceed with analysing the findings presented in the first line of Table 4, regarding the equality of means for SSEIT scores obtained by the experimental and control groups at T2.

Upon examining the data in Table 3 and Table 4, we conclude that a statistically meaningful variation occurs at the level of emotional skill development at T2 among students (t = 3.290, p = 0.001). Consequently, the study's hypothesis is supported, as the significance threshold p is below 0.05.

Furthermore, a significant disparity was found in the average SSEIT scores at T2 for the two groups (M_ControlGroup = 131.05, M_ExperimentalGroup = 139.85; p = 0.001). A considerable increase in the mean score is observed in the experimental group, while the control group shows relative stagnation. This notable increase is considered to result from the implementation of the *EQ – A SuperPower!* educational program in the experimental group, a program that contributed to the development of core emotional skills: SA, SoA, SM and RM. In other words, the statistics demonstrate that the intervention program designed for this study is effective in enhancing emotional intelligence in first-grade students.

To determine the effectiveness level of the *EQ – A SuperPower!* intervention program, Table 5 highlights the effect size calculated using Cohen's d.

Table 5. Effect Size of the Educational Program *EQ – A SuperPower!* (Cohen's d)

Independent Samples Effect Sizes					
		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
SCOR	Cohen's d	8.460	1.040	0.372	1.696

An inspection of the data presented in Table 5 shows that the Cohen's d coefficient, which indicates the effect size, is 1.040 (> 0.8), highlighting that the *EQ – A SuperPower!* educational program had a substantial contribution to enhancing emotional intelligence in first-grade students. This effect size value reflects a substantial and clear enhancement of emotional skill levels among students who participated in the experimental condition, emphasizing that the intervention program demonstrated high effectiveness.

Discussions

The results obtained in this study support the research hypothesis, highlighting the significant positive impact of the *"EQ – A SuperPower!"* educational program on the development of emotional intelligence among first-grade students. The results of the statistical test indicated an absence of significant variation between the Gexp and Gc at the pre-test stage (T1) (Table 1 and Table 2), which confirms the initial homogeneity of the two

groups and provides a solid foundation for interpreting the differences observed at T2 as a direct effect of the intervention.

At T2, the significantly higher scores of the Gexp (M = 139.85), compared to the Gc (M = 131.05), support the idea that planned and structured playful activities can facilitate the development of emotional skills in early school-aged children (Table 3 and Table 4). The value of $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.001$) and the high effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.040$ – Table 5) confirm the strong effectiveness of the intervention and its alignment with the recommendations in the literature regarding experiential and early socio-emotional learning (Kolb, 2014; Garaigordobil et al., 2022; Gkintoni et al., 2024).

The improvements observed particularly in the dimensions of self-awareness and self-management reflect not only the relevance of the proposed activity content but also the suitability of the playful method for the developmental level specific to this age group. These results align with recent research emphasizing the potential of didactic play in the early development of self-regulation, empathy, and relationship skills (Estrada et al., 2021; Fatourehchi et al., 2024).

The social dimensions of emotional intelligence—empathy and relationship management—proved to be particularly responsive to the intervention, a finding supported by recent studies emphasizing the importance of these skills in building a healthy educational environment (Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018; Cuff et al., 2016). Themed playful activities, such as "In Someone Else's Shoes" or "Me Too", created opportunities for affective reflection and collaborative learning, stimulating the development of these social competencies.

A key strength of the intervention lies in its direct integration into the school routine, with the active support of teaching staff. Unlike SEL interventions delivered by external specialists, this approach ensured a more authentic learning ecology and deeper student engagement—an aspect recommended by Miller & Kocurek (2017), yet rarely implemented in practice, as noted by Gkintoni et al. (2024) and confirmed in the recent analysis by Camacho-Morles et al. (2021). The fact that the program was embedded directly into the classroom setting and implemented with the support of teachers, without relying on external resources, provides a realistic and scalable intervention model that can be replicated in similar educational contexts. Furthermore, the inclusion of auxiliary materials (the emotion journal, emotion boards, illustrated cards) strengthened the reflective component of the activities, contributing to the internalization of

emotional competencies, as emphasized by Nesbit (2012) and Kolb (2014) in their theories of experiential learning.

The present research adds novel insights to the existing body of literature by exploring the effects of an emotional education program at the lower primary level—a segment often overlooked in SEL research. The data obtained provide empirical support for the systematic integration of emotional education into the personal development curriculum and may serve as a valuable reference for teachers, school counsellors, and educational policymakers in shaping early intervention strategies.

Conclusions

The results of this study highlight those early educational interventions, based on carefully structured playful activities, can play a substantial role in fostering emotional intelligence development among lower primary school students. The program *"EQ – A SuperPower!"*, implemented as part of this initiative, demonstrated increased effectiveness in strengthening four essential dimensions of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

By using play as a learning medium, students were given the opportunity to experience, reflect on, and internalize emotional strategies in a format aligned with their cognitive and emotional maturity. The high effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.04$) emphasizes the practical value of this intervention and its potential to be integrated as a best practice within personal development curricular activities.

Beyond validating the program's effectiveness, the study contributes to filling a gap identified in the existing literature, providing applied evidence from a real educational context, with the direct involvement of teachers. As such, the research supports the importance of emotion-centered pedagogical approaches and recommends the systematic inclusion of structured emotional learning components within early education programs.

Looking forward, it is recommended that future research involve larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal analysis of the intervention's effects to better understand its long-term impact. Additionally, exploring the teacher's role as an emotional facilitator and integrating playful activities across other areas of child development would be valuable, in the spirit of a more integrative and balanced education.

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