Exploring the Connection between Emotional Intelligence and Inclusive Education

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Abstract: Introduction. The body of research on the contributions of emotional intelligence to inclusive education has grown exponentially in recent years. In the age of artificial intelligence, pedagogy cannot concentrate solely on the power of technology and machines; it also needs to focus on people, their well-being, their identity, respect for diversity, and the cultivation of both emotional and social intelligence. Method. This paper provides a theoretical review of the existing connections between emotional intelligence and inclusive education from an educational perspective. Results. The article highlights the importance of building an inclusive emotional education system that contributes to eradicating the exclusionary and discriminatory processes faced by a significant number of children and youth in Spain. Discussion. The conclusions go beyond traditional demands, often centred on improving initial and ongoing training in emotional intelligence and diversity awareness for education professionals. The discussion also addresses other issues, including driving a shift in educational policy that accords greater weight to the role of emotional competence in the currículum and affirms inclusion as an urgent, non-negotiable right; transforming school cultures to make inclusive emotional education possible; re-orienting practice to foster a sense of belonging and emotional and relational well-being, while safeguarding the presence, participation and achievement of all students without exception.
Keywords: emotional intelligence; social-emotional learning; inclusive education; school.

ᴱˢ Inteligencia emocional y educación inclusiva: explorando sus conexiones

ᴱˢ **Resumen:** Introducción. La línea de investigación que estudia los aportes de la inteligencia emocional al campo de la educación inclusiva ha crecido exponencialmente en los últimos años. En plena era de la inteligencia artificial, el punto de mira de la pedagogía no puede centrarse exclusivamente en el poder de la tecnología (de las máquinas), sino que también necesita focalizar la atención en las personas, su bienestar, su identidad, el respeto a la diversidad y el cultivo tanto de la inteligencia emocional como social. Método. Desde la panorámica de la enseñanza, este trabajo presenta una revisión teórica cuya lente de análisis se posiciona en la exploración de las conexiones existentes entre la inteligencia emocional y la educación inclusiva. Resultados. El artículo pone sobre la mesa de debate la importancia de construir una educación emocional inclusiva que contribuya a erradicar los procesos de exclusión y las situaciones de discriminación a las que se enfrenta una parte importante de la infancia y de la juventud en España. Discusión. Las conclusiones apuntan más allá de las reivindicaciones tradicionales, que suelen postularse hacia la mejora de la formación inicial y permanente en materia de inteligencia emocional y atención a la diversidad de los profesionales que están ligados al ámbito de la enseñanza. Unido a ello, se hace alusión a otras cuestiones que tienen que ver con: un cambio en la política educativa que otorgue mayor peso a la competencia emocional en el currículo y blinde el derecho a la inclusión como aspecto innegociable e improrrogable; la transformación de las culturas escolares para que la educación emocional inclusiva sea posible; y, en consecuencia, un nuevo rumbo en la práctica, que desarrolle el sentimiento de pertenencia y de bienestar emocional y relacional, al tiempo que salvaguarde la presencia, la participación y el logro de todos los estudiantes, sin excepción.
Palabras clave: inteligencia emocional; aprendizaje socioemocional; educación inclusiva; escuela.

Introduction

Any advanced society worthy of its name prides itself on education as a means to progress. However, an education system that segregates students into specific classrooms (sometimes called 'open classrooms', as is the case in the Murcia region, even though they are in fact closed) or into special education centres (such as the Spanish system) cannot be reasonably regarded as a model of progress in education, but rather, the opposite. When 21st century society—including schools—continues to perpetuate cycles of exclusion and to discriminate against children and young people on the basis of gender, religion, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity and disability, among other grounds, it becomes clear that progress is falling short.

In his book on the history of humanity told through emotions, Firth-Godbehere (2022) argued that emotions significantly influence the decisions we make, and can even shape the world we live in. From a broader inclusive perspective, conflict arises when education legislation segregates and excludes a growing percentage of the student population, while those with the power to address the situation fail to do so.

Emotions play a very important role in people's lives; some emotions in fact can leave an indelible mark on a person's life. Fernández and Tapia (2024) argued that certain experiences may result in deep 'emotional imprints' on someone's mind, especially when these emotions originate during a period of greater vulnerability such as childhood. The concept of 'social pain' is strongly related to these imprints, as it precisely refers to the feeling caused by emotional distress that originates in situations of exclusion and rejection. According to Pérez *et al.* (2020, 267):

> Social pain is defined as an unpleasant emotional experience triggered when an individual perceives themselves as being excluded or rejected by people or groups with whom they wish to interact, producing the same feelings of suffering as physical pain.

Children and young people who are rejected and excluded from school, university or other educational institutions within the mainstream system directly experience this social pain; however, their suffering does not only affect them. It extends to their families, who feel the need to protect their children and are often compelled to resist socially and emotionally when confronted with injustice, such as the compulsory transfer of a student from a mainstream school to a special education centre. This right to protection also includes taking legal action in cases of violence, abuse or mistreatment, as happened in the case of Rubén Calleja, whose parents (renowned inclusion activists) fought against the system, like David against Goliath. A system that excluded their son with Down's syndrome and violated his right to an inclusive education. Although Spain has ratified the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), there are many similar experiences across the country, although not all received the same media attention as Rubén's. His case resulted in a ruling requiring the State to compensate him for the violation of his right to inclusive education and became a legislative milestone. It marked a turning point that set a legal precedent and helped clear the way for future generations, so that the goal of educational and social inclusion could become a reality sooner rather than later.

After decades of struggle, despite having a sense that little progress has been made in terms of inclusive education, it must be acknowledged that some steps forward have been taken. Many children and young people from diverse backgrounds in general, and those with disabilities in particular, continue to be deprived of their human right to inclusive education (Calderón, 2018). However, while these situations still exist, some hopeful examples can be identified, such as the case described by Calderón (2014) about his brother Rafael, who found the inclusive environment that his school had failed to offer him in music activities outside school.

In this ocean of emotions and intertwined stories, there are not only painful experiences, but also glimmers of light and efforts to build a better world. This aspect is highlighted in the following section, which showcases the struggle of those citizens who seek to be heard and make a different kind of education possible.

Inclusive education: To want it is to create it

In recent years, a considerable number of strongly committed, resilient people has become activists and built support networks among professionals, families and students. They have a shared purpose to defend the right to high-quality inclusive education that leaves no one behind, whatever their characteristics or circumstances. It is in this context that the movement 'Inclusive education: To want it is to create it' has emerged, which has been gaining momentum and is backed by:

– A large number of families, who use this platform not only to report the situations that their children face, but also as a source of guidance and support.
– Leadership teams, who are committed to an inclusive school project and share the daily challenges they encounter in their institutions.
– Teachers, who are trying to implement inclusive education in their classrooms despite the restrictive conditions and legislative limitations under which they work;
– University researchers in the field of inclusion, who collect relevant evidence and testimonies while studying and contributing to the developments in the discipline, in order to advance both theory and practice;
– Educational counselling professionals, who deal with the dreaded rulings and navigate ethical conflicts between what they are required to do by law and what their hearts truly tell them their course of action should be;
– Students, a traditionally silenced group, whose determined voices are beginning to be heard; and

– Many other educational and social agents in the community, who have joined these initiatives because they believe it is the right direction to take.

The driving force behind this movement lies in the emotional bonds formed between people are experiencing similar situations and support each other by creating inclusive spaces. They share feelings, frustrations and experiences that help them to remain focused on their struggle and not feel alone in it. This article presents emotion as a catalyst for inclusion, as will be evidenced in the following sections.

In light of the potential interplay between the field of emotional intelligence (hereinafter EI) and that of inclusive education, this article seeks to explore the connections between them from a critical perspective.

Emotional intelligence: a catalyst for inclusive education?

Social-emotional skills are essential for functioning in every area of life, including education. Schools are privileged settings for developing these kinds of skills. An increasing number of programmes are currently being created to promote social-emotional skills in teaching in order to promote more inclusive schools. Azorín and Ainscow (2020) focused on the importance of guiding schools on this journey, a journey in which EI can become the fuel that ignites and spreads the flame of inclusion.

This section discusses the role of EI in promoting inclusion. EI and inclusive education are closely connected, as any teacher who pursues inclusive education is implicitly committed to EI and vice versa (Ceballos and Ayón, 2023; González, 2022). EI is even considered to be a catalyst capable of promoting more inclusive educational practices. The combination of emotional intelligence and inclusive education has attracted interest in recent literature. The connection between these two elements has been considered key in terms of well-being and harmonious coexistence (Zúñiga and Luque, 2021). Authors such as Bisquerra (2016) have stressed the need for positive inclusive emotional education. Others, such as Rodríguez *et al.* (2022, 746), have referred to the potential of emotional education from the point of view of inclusion:

> Emotionally positive inclusive education instils in all students the ability and willingness to truthfully express their opinions and listen to those of others, enabling effective, affective communication without discriminatory coercion.

Kumar (2024) saw EI as a predictor of effectiveness in inclusive education. He also questioned whether EI contributes to the promotion of a more inclusive education system. When some children and youth are expelled from the mainstream education system and referred to special education centres, what fails is the heart perspective; these approaches lack humanity. Many education systems around the world, including the Spanish one, have segregated and excluded students with special educational needs for decades. There is currently a growing trend for mainstream schools to remove students with disabilities, relegating them to special education centres. The educational landscape in Spain reflects a discriminatory system that divides teaching into mainstream and special education. It upholds segregated centres under the banner of freedom of choice, and it also maintains specific classrooms within mainstream schools that effectively keep these pupils on the premises while separating them from everyday school life and their wider context. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2024) has long maintained that these actions taken in Spain are in serious violation of the right to inclusive education and continue to perpetuate a discriminatory education system. Under the current Organic Law Modifying the Organic Law on Education (LOMLOE), segregated special education is based on a biomedical approach that focuses on the needs of students with disabilities, rather than on the context. In addition, there are worryingly rising cases of bullying and inaction on the part of the political authorities responsible for eradicating these practices.

It is worth noting that schools must take responsibility for emotional education from childhood onwards. According to Bisquerra (2012), emotional education, when viewed through the lens of inclusion, involves making use of socio-emotional skills to respond to the needs of students as a whole. Emotional education therefore enables students to manage and regulate their own emotions, as well as to understand those of others. The way students handle certain situations and relate to others can be guided through the effective use of emotions, thus promoting an atmosphere of respect and collaboration.

Emotional education is a skill that is strongly linked to teamwork, enhanced relationships with others, effective communication and peaceful conflict resolution. It also nurtures the basic competences for building healthy social relationships based on respect and tolerance. EI acts as a facilitator in socio-educational inclusion processes and helps address the needs of student diversity.

Another important aspect is self-esteem and self-confidence. Emotional education provides the tools needed to manage emotions and complex situations. For students experiencing discrimination or bullying, emotional education is even more important in helping them to cope with these challenges. Inclusive values must be promoted and developed from childhood, promoting the well-being of students and enabling a safe learning environment, free from prejudice and stereotypes, in which students feel comfortable expressing themselves and are not afraid to show themselves as they are, without feeling unfairly judged by others. Emotional education allows people to open their minds to diversity, understanding that it is part of human nature to learn from differences. In turn, emotions influence perceptions, the way diversity is either accepted or rejected, or simply how people judge others.

Given the diversity and heterogeneity of classrooms, teachers must be prepared to promote inclusive emotional education among their students. Emotional education builds bridges for healthy relationships and contributes to strengthening a more inclusive, fair and welcoming education for all. It is essential for teachers to be highly competent in EI and to be particularly sensitive when dealing with the families of students with

educational needs, who often require teachers and administrators to see things from their perspective. The suffering experienced by the many families who see their children's rights to inclusive education ignored makes this group particularly vulnerable. This is why emotional competence is essential, as it enables people to place themselves in another's position.

According to Rajendran *et al.* (2020), EI is significantly and positively related to inclusive education. In fact, it helps enhance the responses provided to students' needs, as it promotes well-adapted behaviour, higher quality social relationships, better coping strategies and leadership skills. The authors also concluded that 'when teachers poorly manage the social and emotional demands of teaching, students' both academic achievement and behaviour will suffer ' (p. 179). They also showed that teachers with higher levels of EI demonstrate a resilient attitude in response to stress and are less likely to become overwhelmed or feel invaded by pessimistic attitudes and negative emotions. As in all aspects of life, there are positive and negative aspects when it comes to emotions and inclusion. Villaescusa (2017, 20) argued that 'emotions in interaction with elements of the school context can facilitate teaching and learning processes and student participation in school life, but they can also be a barrier to inclusion.' Emotions are strongly related to feeling good at school (student well-being). For Villaescusa (2017, 21-22), the challenge of inclusion with regard to well-being involves transforming schools into learning and healthy coexistence environments where all students can feel welcomed, protected and recognised:

> Every student has the right to learn and, equally importantly, to feel good at school. Emotional well-being in a social context has to do with acceptance and a sense of belonging. A person feels that they are a member of a group or community when they are recognised by the other members and, as a result, they feel the desire to participate and show solidarity and mutual support.

However, it is essential to ensure that emotional education is implemented in schools for these inclusive conditions to occur. This raises several questions, including: What role does EI play in the curriculum? Is emotional competence taught from childhood? Are students helped to understand emotions and empathise with differences? Do teachers work with students in this regard?

According to Cepa *et al.* (2017, 74): 'Emotional education has always been present in schools, although not explicitly. Relegated to the background, for years it was part of the hidden curriculum.' Currently, within the curriculum, this content is found in personal, social and learning-to-learn skills, which includes emotion management and motivation, among other aspects. Nevertheless, emotional education should be promoted at all stages and levels of education, so that emotional competence can become an essential personal resource for professional teaching performance and the improvement of academic performance for all students, without distinction (MacCann *et al.*, 2020).

Previous studies on emotional intelligence and inclusive education

A glance at the literature reveals that the volume of studies in this line of research focusing on the teaching profession is greater than that on other groups. Studies such as that by Varo (2021) on inclusive education and socio-emotional skills in teachers referred to the responsibility for educating citizens to display inclusive and prosocial attitudes, and advocated including emotional skills in teacher training, beyond specialist/technical training in their area. Other research, such as that conducted by Martínez-Saura *et al.* (2022), have focused on emotional competence of early childhood and primary education teachers. They concluded that more empathetic teachers and students have a greater ability to share emotions and place themselves in another's position. Their findings point to an association between emotional training and more satisfactory professional development for teachers, who become less vulnerable to burnout syndrome, and suggest that this can be conducive to more positive relationships in the classroom (Oberle *et al.*, 2020; Villa, 2019). This, in turn, leads to better conflict management, prosocial behaviour and the creation of environments in which empathy, positive communication, motivation and respect for diversity are manifested (Puertas *et al.*, 2018). Marco-Arenas *et al.* (2020) reviewed the emotional competences that education professionals should develop in their work with families and children/young people, such as empathy, self-awareness and communication skills. Skura and Swiderska (2022) highlighted the role of EI and the social skills of teachers who teach students with special educational needs. Their results suggested that the difficulties reported by teachers when working with these students were related to the level of development of the teaching professionals' EI and social skills. Teachers' with a good level of EI find it useful to meet the needs of students and the diversity that prevails in classrooms. EI is also a critical element in understanding teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, as it is associated with positive adaptive behaviours and better coping skills that enhance their ability to address the diverse needs of students (Rajendran *et al.*, 2020). The study conducted by Chinaza *et al.* (2023) examined the impact of EI on teachers' attitudes, concerns and feelings about inclusive education. It found that EI among the study's participants was associated with attitudes and concerns about inclusive education. Other studies have also shown the positive effect of teachers' EI on students' academic performance and, therefore, on learning outcomes in inclusive schools (Jaimes Del Moral, 2023; Sowiyah and Fitriyanti, 2022). Arias-Pastor *et al.* (2023) studied how the EI variable had a positive effect on teacher well-being and enabled inclusive educational processes and responding to diversity. Teachers with higher levels of EI developed greater resilience to cope with the challenges posed by diversity in the classroom (Richards *et al.* 2018). More recently, the results of research carried out by Lourenço *et al.* (2024) showed that EI is a predictor of the types of teaching approaches used by teachers and that those with higher levels of EI opt for a more comprehensive and less transmissive approach.

Other studies have highlighted the emotional skills of school counselling professionals from the perspective of inclusive education, as found in the contribution made by Fernández and Malvar (2020).

Another key profile is that of leadership teams. Rodríguez and Reverté (2023) advocated the need for inclusive leaders to have a high command of emotionally intelligent attitudes and behaviours, including commitment to inclusion, humility, awareness of prejudice, curiosity about others, cultural intelligence and effective collaboration. As concluded in the study by Rajendran *et al.* (2020), EI is significantly and positively related to more adaptive behaviour, higher quality social relationships, effective coping strategies and leadership skills that improve individuals' personal and interpersonal experiences.

With regard to students, Berastegui-Martínez *et al.* (2024) argued that there are increasingly more proposals for emotional education programmes, but very few studies that have evaluated the impact and effectiveness of educational interventions based on students' emotional competence. Emotional education supports the development of more empathetic students who accept differences as part of human diversity. A more refined awareness of one's own emotional states, coupled with the capacity to assume the standpoint of others, is essential to ensure that equal value is given to all individuals. This is fundamental in creating an inclusive school environment that is free from any type of discrimination or exclusion. Diversity should be seen as an opportunity that enriches students and allows them to learn from others. In this regard, research has shown the positive impact of emotional education programmes on students with specific educational support needs, which resulted in a significant increase in emotional regulation levels, specifically in empathy and problem identification and resolution (Cepa *et al.*, 2017; Garbenis, Geležinienė and Šiaučiulytė, 2020). In practice, the application of EI programmes is proliferating as a means of developing inclusive education (Roldán *et al.*, 2016).

A vision upheld by international organisations

According to UNESCO (2021), human beings need both social and emotional connections in order to learn. For students to thrive, it is essential for them to feel emotionally welcome and safe at school. This requires addressing EI in the curriculum and acknowledging the benefits it brings to educational innovation and its necessary evaluation in the school system. The PISA 2022 report analysed learning strategies and attitudes for life, including students' social and emotional skills that were seen as a key aspect of their education. The five social and emotional skills considered in the international report entitled 'PISA 2022 Results (Volume V): Learning Strategies and Attitudes for Life' (OECD, 2024) were: stress resistance, cooperation, emotional control, curiosity and persistence. The report therefore provided a structured and comprehensive overview of key aspects related to social and emotional skills, highlighting their impact on independent and collaborative learning. One of the most significant points was how emotional control and stress resistance enable the management of frustration, both in individual and group contexts. This approach underscores that the incorporation of emotional competencies is an essential factor for academic success and personal development throughout life. Furthermore, it emphasises the indirect relationship between emotional control and academic performance, mediated by self-efficacy. This finding reinforces the need for educational interventions aimed at strengthening students' self-efficacy in order to maximise their performance. It also highlights how these skills not only benefit students in their academic years, but also contribute to lifelong learning, promoting adaptability and sustained motivation in an ever-changing world. However, it alludes to the need for in-depth discussion of practical strategies for integrating these skills into school curricula and effectively measuring their impact over time. This may include the use of active learning methodologies or emotional development programmes from an early age. It also suggests that it would be interesting to analyse contextual or cultural differences in the development and application of these skills, as the PISA report includes a variety of contexts that may influence the interpretation of the data.

UNESCO (2024), however, in its recent report entitled 'Contributions to teaching socioemotional skills: Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE 2019)' includes empathy, self-regulation and openness to diversity among the social and emotional skills to be taught and measured. The importance of including the teaching of social-emotional skills in the curriculum is indisputable. Existing research on social-emotional learning highlights the need to integrate social-emotional skills into the curriculum across different subjects and, consequently, to develop teaching practices that promote social-emotional skills. In this regard, it is important to make material resources and time available to enable effective implementation in schools. The report emphasises the fundamental role of social and emotional skills as a cross-cutting theme in different areas of life (personal, social and work). It also underscores how these skills are essential not only for developing positive relationships and actively participating in society, but also for professional and personal fulfilment in a dynamic, fast-paced environment. A key point is the assertion that social-emotional skills are not exclusive to the early stages of development or to a specific cultural context. Their dynamic nature and their capacity for teaching and learning throughout life open a window of opportunity to design effective educational interventions that go beyond the mere transmission of academic knowledge and foster comprehensive development. Furthermore, the report emphasises that positive emotional environments are strong pillars for learning. This invites reflection on the shared responsibility of education systems, teachers and families in creating environments that are conducive to both well-being and effective learning. It also advocates for developing these skills as a 'repertoire' that allows people to understand and manage their own emotions and those of others, adapting to contextual challenges. Overall, this vision highlights the need for a form of education that integrates social and emotional skills as an essential component. In short, developing programmes and policies that prioritise these skills could have a transformative impact on people's lives, strengthening their ability to face the challenges of a complex and interconnected world.

How social and emotional learning can contribute to inclusion

Continuing with the line of argument that socio-emotional skills can be learned, CASEL's (2020) Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) model defines social and emotional learning as 'the process through which all young people and adults acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.' There are five specific areas of competence that this model addresses: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

Within the SEL model, self-awareness work allows individuals to understand their own emotions, thoughts and values, and to recognise their strengths and limitations. From the point of view of inclusion, this involves developing skills to integrate personal and social identities, value other cultures and languages, identify emotions linked to diversity, be honest, connect feelings, values and thoughts that emerge as a result of the process of inclusion/exclusion, and examine prejudices against students with disabilities, among other questions.

Self-control has to do with managing one's own emotions, thoughts and behaviours in different situations in order to achieve goals and aspirations. Stress management, motivation and the willingness to change in order to achieve personal and collective goals are crucial issues from an inclusive perspective.

Decision-making in connection with inclusive education entails considering ethical standards and assessing the benefits and consequences that certain actions may have for personal, social and collective well-being. When making decisions from an inclusive perspective, it is necessary to be open-minded about differences, identify solutions to problems and use critical thinking both inside and outside school.
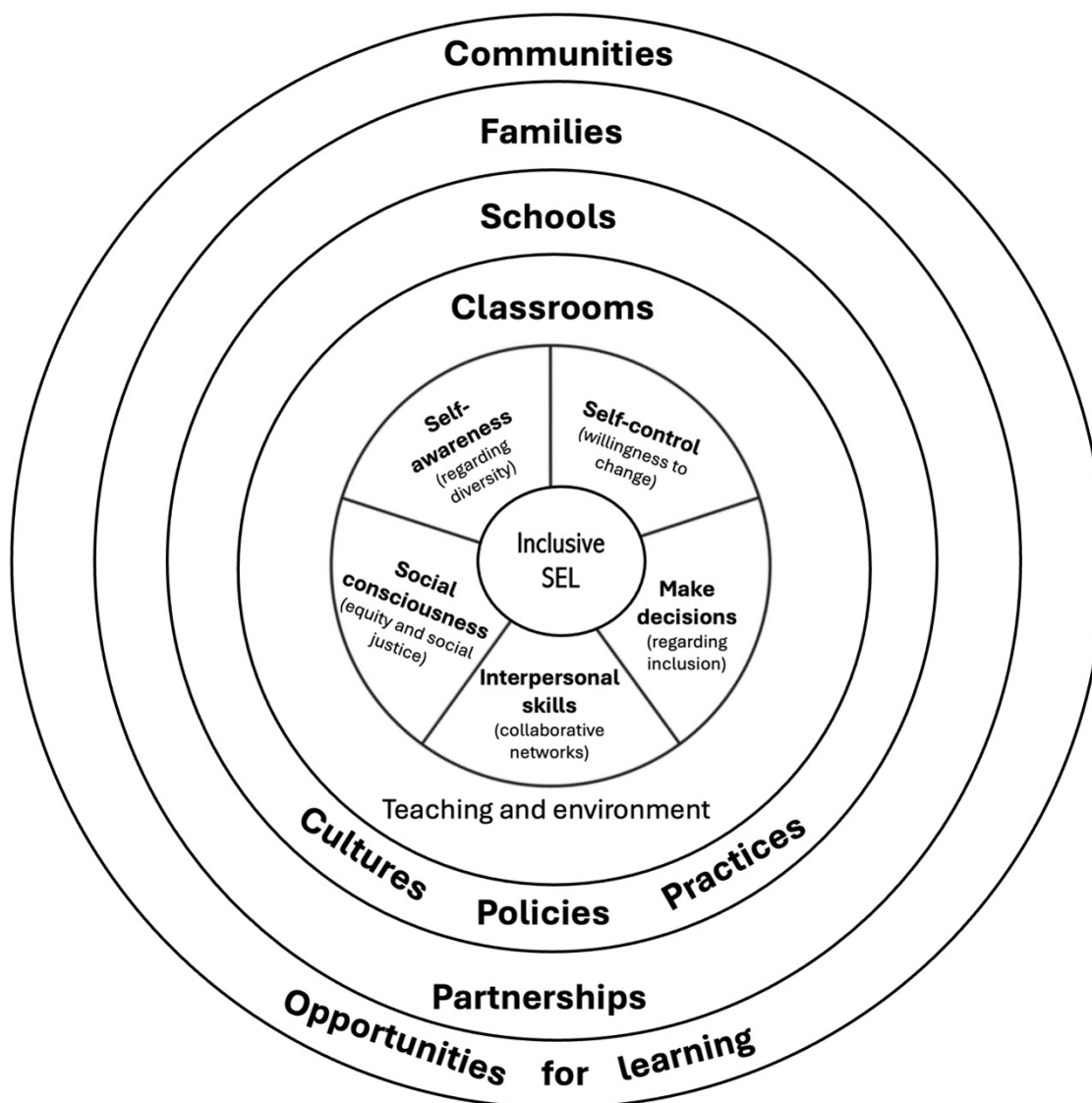
Interpersonal skills include the ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships. This involves aspects related to communication, active listening, cooperation, collaboration, conflict resolution, developing positive relationships, cultural competence, and advocating for the right to inclusion, among others.

Finally, social awareness refers to the ability to understand others' perspectives and show empathy for diverse backgrounds, cultures, contexts and circumstances. A relevant aspect is recognising the resources and support available from family, school and the community. This involves valuing the strengths of others, taking an interest in other people's feelings, understanding demands and taking advantage of opportunities that benefit the educational community as a whole.

This framework for action is developed in a series of key settings, such as classrooms, schools, families and communities. As with the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2011), a benchmark tool in the field of inclusion, the SEL Model focuses its framework for action on cultures, policies and practices, which is why the conclusions presented in the following section are geared towards change in these three areas.

The figure below (Figure 1) represents the 'Inclusive Social and Emotional Learning Framework', adapted from the SEL Model. The word 'masei' (which corresponds to the acronym for the Inclusive Social and Emotional Learning Framework in Spanish is also the plural possessive form of 'masá' in Hebrew, which means 'starting point' or 'journey'. It is hoped that this article will serve as a starting line to embark on a journey towards a more inclusive school and society, in which EI occupies the prominent place that it deserves.

Figure 1. 'Inclusive Social and Emotional Learning Framework' (MASEI).

SEL (Social Emotional Learning) model, originally sourced from CASEL (2020).

*Figure slightly adapted in its inner circle of skills for presentation as the 'Inclusive Social and Emotional Learning Framework'.

In short, the Inclusive Social and Emotional Learning Framework presented here, inspired by CASEL's SEL model and the Index for Inclusion, seeks to go one step further, combining both schools of thought (EI and inclusion) and committing to what we have come to call inclusive emotional intelligence, which can be defined as 'the capacity to value and celebrate human differences, recognising each person's diversity as an opportunity for learning and looking at them from the heart, adopting a tolerant, respectful, empathetic and prejudice-free attitude for building healthy relationships to move towards a more just and inclusive society'.

Final notes

This article provides a critical overview of the recent developments in inclusive education in Spain and how EI can contribute to building a more inclusive school that leaves no one behind. The connections between EI and inclusion have been the running thread throughout the text, since one cannot be understood without the other.

The study on the 'age of identity' conducted by Shirley and Hargreaves (2024) reminded us that no one should be oppressed or have to hide who they are, and that young people need to be prepared for a future in which they can learn to live together and help others. This is clearly interconnected with EI and inclusive education. It also has to do with respecting all people equally, regardless of their educational needs, abilities, origins, sexual orientations, etc. This involves learning to live alongside people who have diverse personality features and ways of thinking, recognising such diversity as a source of enrichment and learning. According to UNESCO (2024, 22):

> Openness to diversity relates to the ability to be aware and respectful of other people's characteristics. It involves the ability to accept and tolerate differences, which is closely linked to the principle of equality.

From a social justice perspective, this means that every student matters equally. Consequently, developing social-emotional skills such as tolerance, critical thinking, perspective-taking, respect for others and empathy is of the utmost importance.

Arias-Pastor *et al.* (2023) concluded that: EI helps to: 1) eliminate stereotypes, foster positive interactions in the classroom, and implement a design in which all students matter and are treated equally; 2) develop more positive attitudes, reduce levels of concern, improve diversity training and promote the development of inclusive methodologies and practices in the classroom, aspects that contribute to the well-being of teachers; and 3) foster responding to diversity in classrooms that facilitates a greater sense of security by promoting positive connections with others and with oneself, emotional regulation, and the prevention of negative emotional states and concerns in daily life.

With regard to future avenues of research and practice, a clear priority would be to strengthen and improve initial and ongoing teacher training in EI and responding to diversity, to ensure that inclusive emotional intelligence can be developed in ways that meet not only quality and equity standards. However, beyond traditional demands, there is an urgent need to implement a change in education policy that gives greater weight to emotional competence in the curriculum and safeguards inclusion as a non-negotiable and non-deferrable right; the transformation of school cultures to make inclusive emotional education possible; and, consequently, a new direction in practice that helps all students develop a sense of belonging and emotional and relational well-being, while safeguarding their presence, participation and achievement. From a research perspective, as argued here, emotion is the driving force behind inclusion, and there are high expectations for the use of EI as a tool to facilitate inclusion. Time will tell whether society and the education system as a whole are truly up to the task of moving towards progress or whether, on the contrary, there will be a setback in the advancement of the right to inclusive emotional education.

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