

Development of Emotional Competences in Higher Education: The Effects of a Self-Leadership Program from a Dexplis Design

Adolfo Montalvo-García

Universitat Ramon Llull. FPCEE Blanquerna. Spain.
adolfofg@blanquerna.url.edu

Margarita Martí-Ripoll

Universitat Ramon Llull. ESADE. Spain.
margarita.marti@esade.edu

Josep Gallifa

Universitat Ramon Llull. FPCEE Blanquerna. Spain.
josepgr@blanquerna.url.edu



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Abstract

Research on emotional competence development (ECD) in university students is scarce and shows mixed results. This research establishes what is possible to expect from an optional self-leadership program (SLP) consisting of eight workshops of three hours each, and with a student-centered and experiential approach. The research method was a mixed DEXPLIS design ($n=126$), which is quasi-experimental ex-post-facto for the first quantitative phase, with experimental and control groups where the CDE A35 self-informed instrument of Bisquerra and Pérez-Escoda was administered, and with participation in qualitative interviews in the second phase. The results indicate global progress in ECD, more evident in intrapersonal emotional competence (EC), although the SLP has not been effective in interpersonal EC. The students perceive their ECD as being very important. In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), ECD is part of the acquisition of generic or transversal competences, which contribute to more effective and integral training, as well as to a better preparation for the world of work.

Keywords: emotional competence development; self-leadership; emotional awareness; emotional regulation; social competences; emotional welfare

Resum. *Desenvolupament de competències emocionals a l'educació superior: els efectes d'un programa d'autolideratge des d'un disseny Dexplis*

La recerca sobre el desenvolupament de competències emocionals (DCE) en estudiants universitaris és escassa i mostra resultats dispars. Aquesta investigació estableix què és possible esperar d'un programa d'autolideratge opcional de vuit tallers de tres hores, amb un enfocament experiencial i centrat en l'estudiant. Presenta un disseny Dexplis mixt ($n = 126$), quasi experimental ex post facto per a la primera fase quantitativa, amb grups experimentals i de control, on es fa servir l'instrument autoinformat CDE-A35 de Bisquerra i Pérez-Escoda, i amb participació en entrevistes qualitatives en la segona fase. Els

resultats indiquen un progrés global en DCE, més evident en les competències emocionals (CE) intrapersonals, encara que l'SLP no ha estat eficaç en les CE interpersonals. Els estudiants perceben el seu DCE com a molt important. En l'espai europeu d'educació superior, el DCE és part de les competències genèriques o transversals, que contribueixen a una formació més eficaç i integral, així com a una millor preparació per al món laboral.

Paraules clau: desenvolupament de competències emocionals; autolideratge; consciència emocional; regulació emocional; competències socials; benestar emocional

Resumen. *Desarrollo de competencias emocionales en la educación superior: los efectos de un programa de autoliderazgo desde un diseño Dexplis*

La investigación sobre el desarrollo de competencias emocionales (DCE) en estudiantes universitarios es escasa y muestra resultados dispares. Esta investigación establece qué es posible esperar de un programa de autoliderazgo opcional de ocho talleres de tres horas, con un enfoque experiencial y centrado en el estudiante. Presenta un diseño Dexplis mixto ($n = 126$), cuasi experimental ex post facto para la primera fase cuantitativa, con grupos experimentales y de control, donde se aplica el instrumento autoinformado CDE-A35 de Bisquerra y Pérez-Escoda, y con participación en entrevistas cualitativas en la segunda fase. Los resultados indican un progreso global en DCE, más evidente en las competencias emocionales (CE) intrapersonales, aunque el SLP no ha sido eficaz en las CE interpersonales. Los estudiantes perciben su DCE como muy importante. En el espacio europeo de educación superior, el DCE es parte de las competencias genéricas o transversales, que contribuyen a una formación más eficaz e integral, así como a una mejor preparación para el mundo laboral.

Palabras clave: desarrollo competencial emocional; autoliderazgo; consciencia emocional; regulación emocional; competencias sociales; bienestar emocional

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1. Introduction

Antagonistic conclusions in recent research about what can be expected in terms of the impact of self-leadership programs (SLPs) in emotional competence development (ECD) in higher education make it necessary to have a better understanding of this issue. The discrepancies can also be found in the theory: different constructs are in place such as emotional intelligence (EI), emotional competence (EC), social-emotional competences, or soft skills, among others. In this regard, Extremera & Fernández Berrocal (2003) speak of terminological confusion, from which more than 20 models of EI or EC have been developed (Gilar-Corbí et al., 2019).

In the EHEA framework, ECD is carried out through generic competences (Gallifa & Garriga, 2010). Although its integration in regular curricula has been rare (Rey, 2000), emotions play a fundamental role in the teaching-learning process and are essential for experiencing a more comprehensive education (Amutio et al., 2015; Pekrun & Perry, 2014). Furthermore, from the job market point of view, ECs contribute to a better professionalization of students (Köppe et al., 2019).

1.1. The Bisquerra and Pérez-Escoda EC Model

Bisquerra (2003) conceives emotional education as “an educational process, continuous and permanent, which aims to promote the development of EC as an essential element of the person’s integral development, to enable them for life. All this is aimed when increasing personal and social well-being” (p. 27). And EC are “the set of knowledge, capacities, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand, express, and regulate emotional phenomena appropriately” (p. 24). Bisquerra and Pérez-Escoda’s EC Model (2007) considers, besides a *total* score in ECD, five blocks of EC: Emotional Awareness (EA), Emotional Regulation (ER), Emotional Autonomy (Eau), Social Competences (SC), and Emotional Well-being (EW).

EA is understood as the perception that individuals have of the social climate, both of their own emotions and those of others (Lane & Schwartz, 1987); ER is the level of adaptation in complicated social situations, with a three-step process of perception, assessment, and responding (Gross, 1998); Eau, refers to personal emotional self-management (Bandura, 1977); and CS stresses that reading the emotional requirements of social situations is essential (Mayer et al., 2016) as a basis for modelling behaviors appropriately, contributing to positive emotional contagion, and containing the negative since “social relationships are interwoven with emotions” (Bisquerra, 2018, p 13). Finally, EW is understood as a universal value both for academic settings (Pérez-Escoda & Alegre, 2016) and professional life.

1.2. The Self-Leadership Program

This SLP is voluntary and transversal in a business school in the city of Barcelona; it aims to complement specific training by raising EA and strategically mobilizing each student’s self-leadership in the form of a set of ECs. It consists of eight workshops of three hours each from a highly experiential approach (Kolb, 1984). Table 1 shows the structure of the four blocks and topics of the SLP; its architecture is based on the Socio-Emotional Competences Model (Boyatzis et al., 2000).

ECs are developed along the lines of self-directed learning theory (Kolb & Boyatzis, 1970). The aim is not to achieve the best leader by carrying out the SLP, which would be closer to the approaches of EI ability (Mayer et al., 2016), but to facilitate the development of each self, which depends

Table 1. Structure of the SLP

I. Self-knowledge as the basis for leadership	II. How my relationships with other people are
1. Who I am, and what motivates me	3. Trust as a basis
2. How I see the world	4. Emotion and attitude
III. Key strategies to action	IV. How I work with others
5. Achievement orientation and time management	7. How I communicate and influence people
6. Flexibility, creativity, and change adaptation	8. Organizations and leadership

Source: Montalvo-García (2021).

on each individual's personal freedom and how to work on his/her self-realization.

Previous research findings have shown that similar interventions to improve EI or EC, for instance in two meta-analyses consulted, pointed to moderate improvements (Mattingly & Kraiger, 2019; Hodzic et al., 2018). Montalvo (2021), on the other hand, reported 31 studies that demonstrated in general positive improvements in EC in similar programs. Considering EA, research on university interventions obtained positive results, except Herpertz et al. (2016). Regarding ER, investigations identified an impact, except Wing et al. (2006). Concerning Eau, we identified five studies (Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2012; Görgens-Ekermans et al., 2015; Kasler et al., 2013; McEnrue et al., 2009; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2019), all of which reported favorable results. Finally, three out of five works on EW found positive results (Nélis et al., 2011; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2019; Vesely et al., 2014).

For SC, interpersonal EC worked differently (Bayot et al., 2020), with four out of ten investigations finding no statistically significant results (Kasler et al., 2013; Görgens-Ekermans et al., 2015; Gaudet, 2010; Clarke, 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The students who enrolled in the SLP were from different master's programs in management. The total number of participants in the study were $n=126$ with a mean age of 31.6 years, of which 37.5% were men and 62.5% were women.

2.2. Design

To study the effect of the SLP in ECD, a Dexplis mixed quantitative-qualitative sequential explicative design was used, which combines a first quantitative phase, complemented by a second qualitative phase (Sampieri, 2018).

The first quantitative part was quasi-experimental because the experimental group (EG; $n=63$) was composed of natural groups, with a control group (CG; $n=63$) formed by the same population of master's students but not enrolled in the SLP. We obtained pre-test and post-test measures with the same instrument. The study was ex-post-facto (Montero & León, 2007). The inde-

pendent variable was participation in the SLP. The hypothesis: SLP has significant effects in the experimental condition (EG). The dependent variable was the total ECD, and the EC subtests EA, ER, Eau, SC, and EW.

2.3. Instruments

The pre- and post-test instrument selected for the quantitative part was CDE-A35, the *Emotional Development Questionnaire for Adults*, constructed and validated for the Spanish population (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2010) with acceptable reliability (Cronbach's Alpha 0.92 for the global measure, and over 0.70 for the subtests).

At the end of the SLP, individual qualitative interviews were carried out according to the planned Dexplis design (Sampieri, 2018). Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with the EG students to collect qualitative data, which allowed students to complement their process of intentional change (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006), and from the perspective of research, to be able to understand the results in greater depth, giving voice to the protagonists of the intervention. To this end, a semi-structured interview was developed and all the EG participants were interviewed in a recorded session of approximately 25 minutes. The open questions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Open interview

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1. What did you think of the SLP?
 2. In general, do you think it has helped you:
 - in your EA?
 - in your ER?
 - in your Eau?
 - in your SC?
 - in your EW?
 3. Did you consider an ideal self at the beginning of the program? If so, what was your ideal self?
 4. Could you tell me what steps you have taken to get closer to your ideal self?
 5. Do you think that this SLP has been able to bring about any change in you?
 6. How do you think the SLP could be improved?
 7. Is there anything else you want to share?
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Source: Montalvo-García (2021).

2.4. Procedure

Just before starting the SLP, the CDE-A35 questionnaire was administered to the EG and the CG. The time required for completion was 25 minutes. Just after the end of the last workshop, the questionnaire was administered again to both groups. Immediately after the intervention, the interviews were conducted.

2.5. Data analysis

SPSS 26 software was used for the statistical analysis. The significance standard of $p = .05$ was adopted. The assumptions of normality were tested with

the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and Levene’s test was used to assess homoscedasticity. The Student’s t -test was applied for intra-group comparisons, as well as comparisons between groups. The alternative non-parametric tests were the Wilcoxon W test for intra-group comparisons, and the Mann–Whitney U test for extra-group comparisons. ANCOVA analysis was used to confirm causality and to study the expected effects.

The transcribed fragments of the interviews were coded, classified according to the dimensions of the model (Bisquerra & Pérez-Escoda, 2007), and analyzed. The more representative fragments, aligned with the quantitative findings, were used to give meaning to enhance the discussion by including the voice of participants.

3. Results

3.1. Results of the first quantitative phase

The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test gave a positive result in some cases and the Levene test did not reveal any problems of homoscedasticity.

The main descriptive statistics of the four groups that make up this research are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Means and variances of EG and CG in the pre-and post-tests

		EG						CG					
		EA	ER	Eau	SC	EW	ECD Total	EA	ER	Eau	SC	EW	ECD Total
Pre	M	7.18	6.70	5.94	4.62	7.48	6.53	6.99	6.19	5.39	4.66	7.22	6.23
	SD	2.26	3.34	4.43	4.04	2.44	2.00	2.48	3.19	3.33	4.14	2.16	1.63
Post	M	7.64	7.14	6.14	5.23	7.93	6.96	7.08	6.25	5.41	4.60	7.41	6.30
	SD	1.32	1,2	3.81	3.70	1.27	1.22	1.88	3.04	3.02	3.14	2.44	1.55

Source: Montalvo-García (2021).

To determine whether these differences are statistically significant, Table 4 summarizes the results of the intra-group Student’s t -test for the EG. Differences are identified in both total ECD and all the EC blocks, except for SC, with $p = .348$.

Table 4. EG Intragroup differences

Measure	Pre and Post EG		
	<i>T</i>	<i>GI</i>	<i>P</i>
ECD Total	-3.376	62	0.001
EA	-3.104	62	0.003
ER*	-2.352	62	0.022 0.025*
Eau	-2.987	62	0.004
SC	-0.946	62	0.348
EW	-2.901	62	0.005
*Wilcoxon W			

Source: Montalvo-García (2021).

Table 5 shows the results of the intra-group control crossing, where there are no differences in the evolution of the students.

Table 5. CG Intragroup differences

Measure	Pre and Post CG		
	<i>T</i>	<i>GI</i>	<i>P</i>
ECD Total	-0.607	62	0.546
EA	-0.546	62	0.587
ER*	-0.302	62	0.764 0.556*
Eau	0.246	62	0.807
SC	-0.103	62	0.919
EW*	-1.109	62	0.268*
* Wilcoxon W			

Source: Montalvo-García (2021).

Finally, Table 6 presents the exploration of differences in the post-tests between the EG and the CG. The results show significant differences, except for EAu by a very narrow margin $p = 0.058$.

Table 6. Differences between extragroup EG and CG post-test

Measure	EG and CG Post		
	<i>T</i>	<i>Gf</i>	<i>P</i>
ECD Total	3.145	124	0.002
EA	2.476	124	0.015
ER*	3.146	124	0.002 0.002*
Eau	1.911	124	0.058
SC	2.217	124	0.028
EW*	2.107	124	0.037

***Mann–Whitney U**

Source: Montalvo-García (2021).

Following these results, we decided to perform a new analysis to measure the effects of the experimental situation. We performed ANCOVA analyses for each of the variables using the pre-test as a covariable. With these analyses via regression we could extract the initial situation in EC of the model and contrast the effect of the experimental situation in the corrected model. This model allows verifying the causality of the independent variable (SLP) in the ECD.

Table 7. ANCOVA Analyses

ANCOVA analyses of the EG and CG with the corresponding pre-test as a covariable					
Dependent variable	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Estimated experimental effects***	<i>P</i>
ECD Total	10.051	0.002*	0.527	0.479	0.002*
EA	6.613	0.011*	0.413	0.457	0.011*
ER	7.363	0.008*	0.413	0.615	0.008*
Eau	6.147	0.015*	0.391	0.650	0.015*
SC	2.455	0.120	0.391	0.416	0.120
EW	3.447	0.066**	0.290	0.389	0.066**

* Significant

** Almost significant

*** Sidak adjustment for multiple comparisons

Source: Montalvo-García (2021).

The results of the analyses confirm experimental effects in all the cases except SC, with the effects in EW being quasi-significant. These results are more reliable because the analysis was done only on the experimental effect. The percentage of variability explained by the regression that contains the pre-test situation ranges from 29% to 52%, having the ECD total the highest

value, as expected. Regression can explain the small differences with the exploratory *t*-tests.

The model allows the estimation of the effects of the experimental situation and their significance. These effects are significant except for SC and almost significant for EW. These values (from 0.38 to 0.65 on a 0–10 scale) are the gains that can be expected for participating in the experimental situation, which is participation in the SLP independently of the initial individual ECD. These gains can be calculated independently because they came from independent constructs. Nevertheless, they are not summative as they were calculated ex-post-facto in the same population.

3.2. Results of the second qualitative phase

Even though the perception of oneself is not aligned with the results obtained in self-information tests because people give more importance to thoughts and feelings (Vazire, 2010, quoted in Boyatzis et al., 2015), in our study the qualitative results were highly coherent with the quantitative ones. In this sense, no opinions had been expressed against the SLP in general terms; only one contrary opinion in EA; and for ER, EAu, and EW there were five, six, and eight unfavorable responses, respectively. In SC, eleven opinions were critical of the SLP.

3.3. Tested hypotheses

Effects of the SLP were found in general ECD, and also in the EC blocks related to intrapersonal EC, such as EA, ER, EAu, and EW (almost significant).

In interpersonal EC, represented by SC, no effect was found by participating in the SLP.

It is possible to quantitatively estimate the causal effects by participation in the SLP.

4. Discussion

All the participating students agreed on the impact of SLP in ECD in all of the interviews conducted, as illustrated by the following fragment:

I think that social skills should be taught to everyone ... I think that from childhood teachers should teach us about self-leadership skills because a technical skill is taken by anyone, but learning to be good people: good leaders do not learn overnight. (Student 9)

Progress was experienced in all the EC (with EW being almost significant) except SC, which means that intra- and interpersonal EC worked separately (Bayot et al., 2020) presenting different levels of difficulty.

The results coincide with the conclusion obtained in the longest longitudinal study, of 25 years, published to date (Boyatzis & Cavanagh, 2018) where

SC are not fully reached. However, they differ from the line of literature that shows ECD in SC in short periods of time (Fletcher et al., 2009; Gilar-Corbí et al., 2018; Gilar-Corbí et al., 2019; Groves et al., 2008; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2019; Vesely et al., 2014).

The development of self-leadership leads to better academic performance and EC contributes to reducing the gap between the exit profile of university students and the necessary professional profile (Villanueva, 2014). According to Macías et al. (2017), the mission of the university is to develop professional skills; understood as part of a broader set of personal skills of each student with the current focus on doing. Additionally, a university should be an instrument for integral training and to develop education to contribute to global social justice (Bourn, 2020).

As concerns EA, these results expand on the literature, where similar interventions in the university have been found to be generators of changes (Clark, 2014; Fernández Carrascoso, 2016; Nélis et al., 2009; Nélis et al., 2011; René 2015). Boyatzis and Sokol (1982) reported partial results, since they noted a 4% increase in personal self-knowledge but a 3% decrease in social awareness. The only exception with no changes in EA is Herpetz et al. (2016). Therefore, the SLP provides a more differentiated, integrated, and explicit EA (Ciarrochi et al., 2003), and offers greater knowledge about self-emotions and people's feelings (Boden & Thompson, 2015). This issue appeared recurrently in the semi-structured interviews:

Yes, because suddenly the day-to-day and the culture of many companies, there is a lot of talk about results orientation, about meeting objectives, but sometimes we forget that behind all these objectives there are people; that to understand a little bit about what people do, we have to understand a little bit about who the people are with whom we relate to identify these points of connection and be able to work in a group. (Student 23)

ER includes motivation, emotion, and cognition (Mayer et al., 2016), making it more difficult to develop. ECD programs are more effective in perceiving and understanding emotions than in facilitating effective thinking and ER (Hodzic et al, 2018). However, this SLP does achieve differences in the progress of this EC: students incorporate the need to find their habitual ER strategies. Learning self-regulation has proven to be effective for university students (Panadero, 2017, cited in Alonso-Tapia et al., 2020). Therefore, the literature that reports significant changes in ER is also extended (Boyatzis & Sokol, 1982; Fernández Carrascoso, 2016; Nélis et al, 2009; Nélis et al, 2011), and specifically also in emotional self-control (Boyatzis & Sokol, 1982). Moreover, the results differ from the only study identified that establishes that after a similar intervention at university no significant achievements were reached (Wing et al., 2006). A participant said the following about ER:

... it's not that easy, you have to look inward first, and then you can look out. Don't respond when you're angry, take a step back, think, put all your options on the table. (Student 2)

In Eau, similar interventions at university level, such as Görgens-Ekermans et al. (2015), did not find changes in Eau, while other studies have reported increased personal effectiveness after the intervention (Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2012; Kasler et al., 2013; McEnrue et al., 2009). Positive opinions have been collected in Eau, for instance:

... it is linked to being safe with the decisions I am making and not having to depend on other people. In this sense, I do consider myself to be very self-sufficient and to seek solutions to whatever comes up in my life, and to assume the consequences. (Student 7)

Concerning SC, the realization of this SLP is not sufficient for ECD. These results are in line with some of the previous works consulted (see, for example, Boyatzis and Cavanach, 2018) that found significant changes in some competences included in the SC block, such as adaptability, inspirational leadership, and influence, but did not see changes in others, such as conflict management, coaching and mentoring, results-orientation, or teamwork. In a previous study, Boyatzis and Sokol (1982) found a 3% decline in relationship management. Other authors that found no impact on SCs were Clarke (2010), Görgens-Ekermans et al. (2015), and Fonseca-Pedrero et al. (2017). In contrast, Gilar-Corbi et al. (2018; 2019), Pérez-Escoda et al. (2019), Vesely et al. (2014), Fletcher et al. (2009) or Groves et al. (2008) found achievements in SC. Considering the qualitative interviews there were more unfavorable opinions about the possibility of SC development, as the following excerpts suggest:

If, especially in assertiveness, I find it very difficult to say no, well, and when I set my goal, I know that it will be hard for me, I know that I have to say no, how do I do it? In the end, I feel very bad ... then there's a remorse that I'm still working on. (Student 35)

I feel that each of my actions are now much more reflexive, of course, putting them into practice is very complicated and above all in moments of tension. For example, under pressure, it didn't work well, and I still have a lot of work to do when I find myself in these situations, putting theory into practice as if it were an experience and taken to action. (Student 13)

Finally, the almost significant EW is a subjective question based on each person's own criteria (Loewe et al., 2014) and by the aforementioned circumstances of change in which they find themselves (Tuce & Fako, 2014). The SLP provides students with a meta-cognitive capacity, which has to do with understanding themselves in greater depth, with the search for meaning in life, and for deploying it through the values that each person freely chooses. And it helps them to visualize that their values, beliefs, and culture are conditioning their perception of well-being. Along the lines of the previous EC blocks, the participants in EW were also given a voice:

having a better attitude and enjoying the day-to-day, I always wanted to get to the top and in the workshop, I realized that the most important thing is to be enjoying every moment. (Student 11)

5. Limitations

Although the possible generalization of the results to a general population because of the inductive character of this piece of research and the representativeness of the sample composed of students of similar background and traits as students enrolled in master's programs in management, the quasi-experimental design is a limitation. The suggestion is to complement the results with new experimental designs in the future.

Another limitation is the difficulty of proving that a person has developed EC, even when a mixed perspective has been adopted. The difficulty of trying to measure based on self-perceived answers and opinions, questions which often have an internal component that is diffuse even for the protagonists themselves, is still there.

6. Conclusions

What should the university of the future be like? Is it enough for the university to be dedicated to developing technical skills? Will the university have to ensure the integral development of its students? Will it have to take care of their well-being? Can it be said that a university is effective if it does not prepare effective students?

The results of this piece of research demonstrate the causal influence of SLP in ECD and the method allows calculating the estimation of the effects. These shared findings encourage us to continue to advancing in the development of SLPs to achieve a more comprehensive perspective of university education. Socio-emotional learning programs should be launched (Coelho et al., 2014) because there is a need to train in all the competences, since one does not make sense without the others (Boyatzis & Cavanach, 2018).

SLPs at university are important from a threefold perspective: from the consideration of students' welfare (Escoda & Alegre, 2016), from better professionalization (Köppe et al., 2019), and finally, contrary to understanding university just instrumentally (Jiménez Peralta, 2019) because they are a way to deploy pedagogies that are better aligned with the parameters of the EHEA.

From the point of view of the professors responsible for designing students' training experiences, part of the work consists of understanding how students learn (Estrada et al., 2019). In this sense, some authors directly advocate the need to awaken positive emotions in educational contexts (López-González et al., 2016, cited in Oriol et al. 2016). Positive academic emotions are the precursor for the rest of the training experience with university students (Oriol et al., 2016, citing Knoop, 2011). Therefore, a deeper understanding of how to activate them for better learning is required, as well as a greater

understanding of the variables that determine the degree of involvement and activation that students are going to offer (Pekrun & Perry, 2014).

Strictly from a professional point of view, ECD offers a more adjusted framework for preparation for professional life, based on those behaviors that will have to be satisfied in working environments (Howard et al., 2017). Incorporating, processing, and developing responses that incorporate the emotional dimension translates into more efficient future professionals, as well as healthy people (Molero et al., 2017).

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