

EMOTIONAL AGILITY – AN ESSENTIAL PREREQUISITE IN OPTIMIZING LEARNING*

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Abstract

Success in academic learning depends not only on the level of cognitive development, but also on the level of development of emotional intelligence, on the extent to which the student manages to be flexible in thoughts and emotions, in order to optimally adapt to situations. No matter how creative or intelligent we are, regardless of our personality type, emotional agility, that is, how we manage our inner world - thoughts, feelings, self-image, is what ultimately determines how successful we will be. The study aims to emphasize the importance of the intrapersonal dimension in the learning process. Starting from the premise that emotions are the binder between thought and action, the proposed experimental program aimed at carrying out personal development activities that would determine the awareness of limitative thoughts and beliefs, of the importance of changing the way of perceiving a situation an event (positive interpretation of situations). The data of the research have shown that although negative thoughts and emotions appear, they can be shaped, restructured, so as to allow an optimal and balanced adaptation to various situations.

Key words: *Emotional agility; Socio-emotional intelligence; Self-image; Limitative thoughts; Positive interpretation of situations.*

1. Introduction

Man's cognitive system consists of two subsystems: one sensory, the other complex, logical, specific only to man, which includes thinking, language, memory, imagination and intelligence. Thinking is the most important component of the human intellect because it itself reaches high levels of manifestation on the one hand, and on the other hand, it significantly influences the other components. Under its influence, memory becomes logical, imagination reaches superior results, language

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increases its role in communication, and for intelligence, thinking is the central component. Thinking allows solving the theoretical and practical problems faced by the student, allowing him to discover the connections between what is known and what is required to be solved.

Memory is a complex cognitive process that conditions the development of other psychic processes and is the basis of various human activities. It allows the imprinting in the mind of knowledge, keeping it and then updating it in the form of recognition and reproduction.

Imagination is the complex cognitive process that puts the student in touch with the future, the possible, the probable and thus the behaviors are also regulated according to the anticipated requirements. Imagination transforms the data of previous experience and reaches new, original, ingenious mental products. Imagination is the most important component of creativity through which the educated produces remarkable changes in the environment.

Learning methods based solely on the transmission of knowledge are no longer enough. The requirements of today's society request learners and graduates to cope with the multitude of requests and responsibilities, to be able to adapt to any situation. Therefore, education specialists are meant to take measures that determine the optimal adaptation and management of emotions and stress.

In the framework of learning, it is required that the students discover, imagine, build and redefine the meanings, filtering them through the prism of their own personality and requesting superior psychic processes of thought and creation. The active learner is "his own initiator and organiser" of learning experiences, able to permanently reorganise and restructure his own acquisitions, in systemic vision. By developing this type of learning, teachers stimulate students to become able to develop personalised learning projects, to take responsibility for learning, becoming aware, applying, (self)evaluating, managing and progressively gaining autonomy in their own training (Bocoş, 2002, p. 63).

The teacher must promote responsible, participatory and creative learning, must motivate the involvement of students in their own training, develop various competences (effective learning, communication, evaluation, digital, etc.), thus reducing academic abandonment or failure.

Success in learning depends not only on the level of cognitive development, but also on the level of development of emotional intelligence, on the extent to which the student manages to adequately monitor his feelings, emotions in relation to himself, to others or to a particular situation in which he is involved.

Fernández-Abascal showed that the idea of emotional regulation is not new (Clouston, used it since 1884), and regulation involves "learned natural processes, through which we can exert an influence on our emotions, especially on the time, manner and the duration of their expression and manifestation", while "dysregulation" is seen as a lack of control which leads to hyperactivity, to very intense emotions, which destabilize us (Fernandez-Abascal, 2022, p. 125).

Affective control means the awareness of emotions, of affective states and their management. In order to finalize emotional control, self-motivation is necessary, which helps in overcoming obstacles, failures, and frustrations.

Emotional control involves effective strategies for regulating temper, anger and irritation in the face of frustrations (OECD, 2020, p. 8).

The frequency of learning difficulties decreases to a considerable extent, in relation to the increase in the level of emotional intelligence, expressed behaviorally, through assemblies of competences: communication, adaptation, decision-making, problem solving, conflict situations, tension, self-regulation, self-management. Emotional agility, in this context, is an essential condition in the process of (self)development and achieving academic success.

2. Positive interpretation of situations and focus on well-being – the first step in emotional agility

Research shows (David, 2016, p. 12) that emotional rigidity – attachment to thoughts, emotions and behaviors that are no longer helpful to us – is associated with a number of psychological disorders, such as depression and anxiety. Instead, *emotional agility – being flexible in thoughts and emotions*, in order to respond optimally to everyday situations – is essential to feel good and be successful. Emotional agility involves, says the author, relaxing, calming down and living with more intention.

It is not what happens to us that determines how we feel emotionally, but the meaning that we assign to those events. Even if negative thoughts and emotions arise, we can immediately spot them and analyse how unrealistic and useless they are (Wilding, 2018, p. 95). When negative thoughts arise, it is recommended to ask ourselves: *Is it really so? Can situations be viewed differently?*

Here are some examples of interpretation of some situations:

**Table 1. Interpretation of situations
(adapted from Hasson, 2016, p. 19)**

Situation	Negative thought, useless	Positive thought, useful
I watch my students play in a play.	I feel like crying, I have to master myself.	I'm proud. It's an emotional moment, it's normal to shed a few tears.
I am congratulated by a colleague for the success of an activity.	Everyone in the office has heard, I feel embarrassed. It is best to be modest and reject the compliment.	I find it nice on the part of my colleague to congratulate me.
I have to tell a student that he failed the exam.	The student is ready to cry, I feel embarrassed and try to get him to stop.	It is understandable that he is angry, although he has learned, he has not been able to pass the exam.

As teachers, in order to develop social-emotional competences in students, we believe that we must ourselves focus on well-being. Well-being, the ability to be happy is influenced by a number of factors (Stein, Book, 2003, p. 207): - *Reality testing* (environmental assessment, positive/negative reporting on everything that happens); - *Self-respect*; - *Self-fulfillment*; - *Expectations, desires* (by testing reality we can change our goals to make them easier to achieve and more appropriate).

How can we achieve well-being? Here are some suggestions:

- To be active, to keep fit physically and mentally;
- To have close family and friends (social contacts help to have a state of well-being, to be happy);
- Let's set realistic goals (pay attention to the claims to oneself !);
- Let's enjoy what we do, to avoid the thought that we always have to achieve more;
- Let's try to be satisfied with the life we have and not envy others.

3. From emotional agility to a positive self-image

In our development and in achieving success, the relationship with ourselves is the first, essential stage. Traditional intelligence (high IQ) is not enough for success in life "(...) Socio-emotionally intelligent individuals are able to recognize what they feel and intentionally generate other states of mind to achieve their goals" (Yeung, 2018, p. 13).

Emotional intelligence defined as "the ability to make healthy decisions, based on accurate identification, understanding and managing well both one's own feelings and those around him" (Cope, Bradley, 2019, p. 21), came as a criticism of the classical concept of intelligence, which was considered as a "univocal characteristic by which the individual was born with a genetically predetermined potential and limits, difficult to modify and easy to evaluate by classical intelligence tests" (Fernández-Berrocal, 2021, p. 17).

Emotional intelligence is not necessarily a characteristic with which we are born, it can be appropriated and developed. The development of emotional intelligence is a process that never ends. Through the development of emotional intelligence we understand ourselves and increase our self-control, we understand the emotions, thoughts and motivations of others, we build harmonious relationships with ourselves, but also with the people around us, we form a positive self-image. Greenberg *et al.* (2003) promoted the idea of integrating social-emotional development programs into the school curriculum, the students being involved in activities both in the classroom and outside them.

The concept of self-image is three-dimensional, encompassing: self-concept, self-appreciation and self-presentation (Stan, 2001, p. 47). The interrelationship, interconditioning of the three elements in the formation of the self-image is shown in Figure 1.

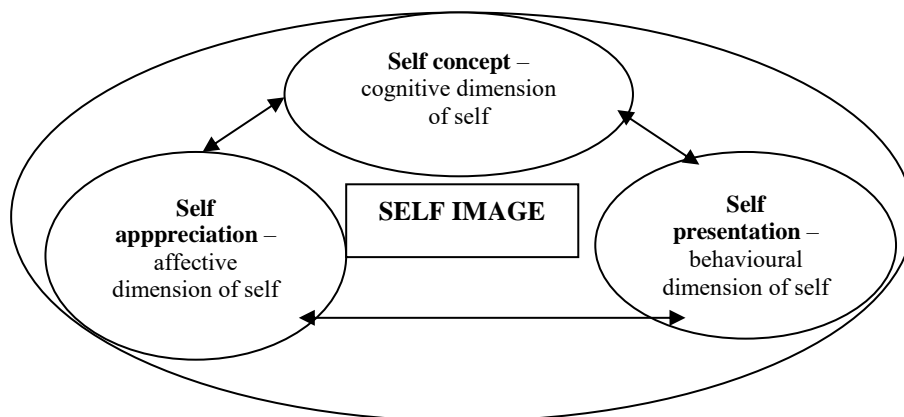


Figure 1. The Elements of Self-Image
(Brehm, Kassin, *apud* Stan, 2001, p. 47)

Self-image tells us how good we feel about ourselves, it reflects the personal level of self-acceptance, with good and bad (Hughes, Terrell, 2013, p. 45). The self-image (the self) comprises several dimensions (Băban, 2001): *the real self(s)*, *the future self(s)*, *the ideal self(s)*. In turn, the real or actual self comprises several sides:

- *The physical self* refers to the image that the individual has of his own corporeality, to the way he perceives himself from a physical point of view and to the way he imagines that he is perceived by others;
- *The cognitive self* involves the way in which the self perceives and organises its information about its own person or about those around it; the most objective, realistic, without exaggeration of evaluations (both positive and negative) contributes to maintaining an adequate mental tone and to the formation and maintenance of a self-image as close as possible to the real one;
- *The emotional self (intimate self or private self)* refers to the set of affective experiences, emotions, feelings towards oneself, towards those around;
- *The social (interpersonal) self* requires that side of the personality, that "face" of each person, which they want to show, to reveal to others;
- *The spiritual self* brings together the axiological system of each person, the set of values, principles, norms that direct personal existence;
- *The future self (possible)* refers to how each individual imagines his own evolution, based on the possibilities he believes he has;
- *The ideal self*, unlike the future self, assumes the desired, dreamed personality model, to which everyone tends, aspires, even though they are aware of the fact that they do not have the necessary potential to achieve it.

The appearance of the self-image, its consolidation along the evolution of the individual represents a complex and complicated process, determined and influenced by a multitude of factors and conditions. We believe that a positive self-image is

essential in making our thoughts and emotions flexible, in order to optimally adapt to the situations we face.

4. Research methodology

The purpose of the present study was to emphasise the importance of emotional agility in optimising learning. Students can be taught to think positively, to replace the state of stress determined by certain thoughts, limiting beliefs, with more useful ones.

In the research undertaken, I outlined the following **general hypothesis**: *If the teacher creates and trains students in experiences of changing the optics/meaning they attribute to certain events, then progress can be registered at the level of managing emotions (overcoming limiting thoughts and beliefs, well-being/balance, self-confidence).*

The micro-research was carried out within the University of Craiova, and **the sample** included a number of 68 students, enrolled in the psycho-pedagogical module.

Starting from the question *How does the way of thinking influence our emotional state?*, the experimental program designed aimed at carrying out activities with an emphasis on the use of reflection: the students had the task of identifying the thoughts outlined at the time of training in a learning task. The objectives of the experimental program were: awareness of limiting beliefs, changing the way of perceiving a situation/event, developing a positive self-image.

The activities with the students took place both synchronously and asynchronously, on 2 digital platforms: Google Classroom and Zoom. Student groups participated online in video conferences focused on optimising the learning process and developing socio-emotional skills and benefited from various theoretical and applied materials, some shared during the video conferences, others posted/uploaded on Classroom: PowerPoint presentations, quizzes, tests, applications, reflection tasks, examples with lessons/lessons/formative-educational conclusions, etc.

Other research methods we used in this research were: observation, questionnaire, through which I sought to obtain answers to the following questions: *Do students give importance to personal development activities? Does the experimental program meet student expectations? Do the collected written reflections reveal changes in the way of relating to a situation (thoughts, emotional state, meaning attributed to the context)? Are there improvements in self-image?*

5. Results and discussions

In the following, we will present some of the results recorded as a result of the experimental program.

Most students questioned, respectively 93% appreciate that it is necessary to carry out personal development activities in the faculty. 2% of the students considered that these activities were not necessary, and 5% did not answer this question (Table 2 and Figure 2).

Table 2. Students' opinion regarding the necessity of personal development activities

Is it necessary to conduct personal development activities for students?	Percentage
a) YES	93%
b) NO	3%
c) I don't know/I don't answer	4%

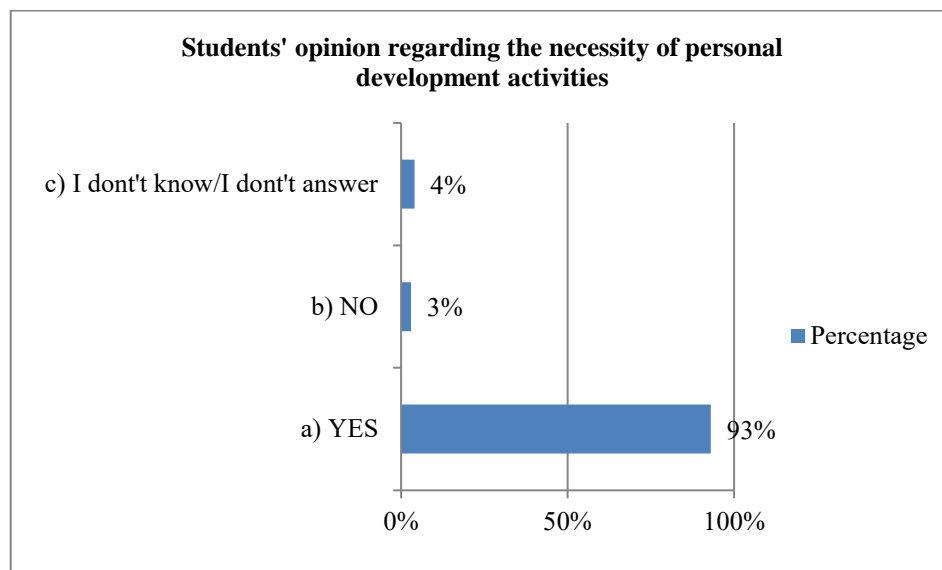


Figure 2. The need given by students to personal development activities

Regarding *the changes identified by the students following the experimental program* (Table 3, Figure 3), 29% identify changes in the level of the emotional state, in the sense of decreasing the tension felt; 25% state that they have fewer negative thoughts; 22% appreciate an increase in the level of self-esteem; 21% realise a greater openness to the new.

Table 3. Changes identified by students following the experimental program

Changes identified by students following the experimental program	Percentage
a) at the level of the emotional state (tension/strain decreases)	29%
b) at the level of thoughts (fewer negative thoughts)	25%
c) at the level of self-esteem (increase)	22%
d) at the level of general attitude (greater openness to new things)	21%
f) I don't know/I don't answer	3%

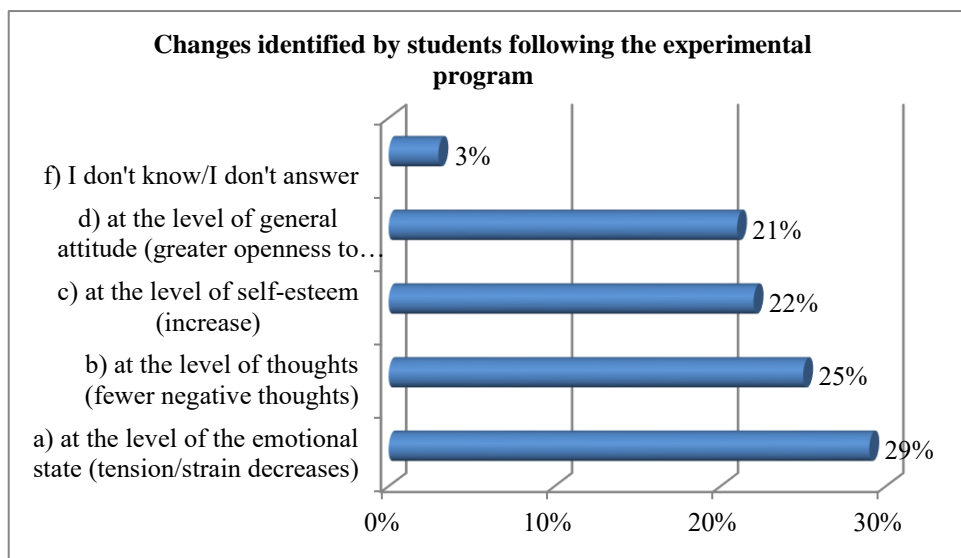


Figure 3. Changes identified by students following the experimental program

The measure of the importance of personal development activities in changing the way of relating to a situation is shown in Table 4 and Figure 4: 41% of the students rated them to be largely important, 31% of the students rated them to be extremely largely important, 20% to some extent. But there is also a percentage of 2% who consider these activities to be of minor importance and also, 2% to a very small extent.

Table 4. Measure of the importance of personal development activities in changing the way of relating to a situation

To what extent have personal development activities positively changed the way you relate to a situation?	Percentage
a) To a very small extent	2%
b) To a small extent	2%
c) To some extent	20%
d) To a large extent	41%
e) To a very large extent	31%
f) I don't know/I don't answer	4%

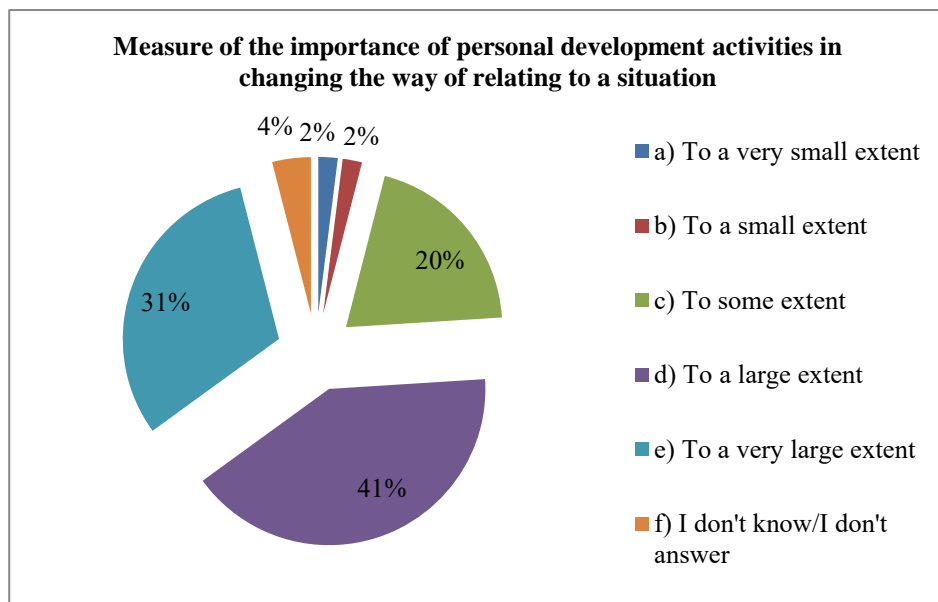


Figure 4. The measure of importance given by students to the activities of personal development

Those who have emotional agility better manage stress and mistakes, know how to adapt, put their actions in line with personal values, make small but significant changes that will optimize their learning. The measure of stress reduction felt by the sample subjects in the learning process is shown in Table 5 and Figure 5.

Table 5. Measure of stress reduction felt in the learning process

To what extent have personal development activities diminished the stress felt in the learning process?	Percentage
a) To a very small extent	1%
b) To a small extent	2%
c) To some extent	20%
d) To a large extent	32%
e) To a very large extent	44%
f) I don't know/I don't answer	1%

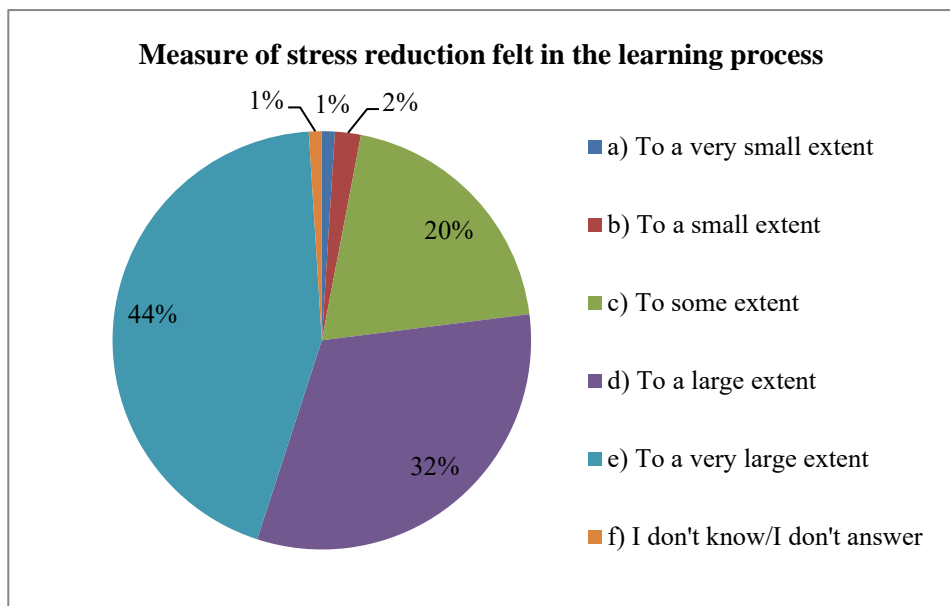


Figure 5. Measure of stress reduction felt in the learning process

6. Conclusions

School learning involves the permanent overcoming of obstacles, cognitive conflicts, involves active involvement, integration and accommodation of cognitive, affective-attitudinal and actional structures. The emotional, affective-motivational dimension is as important as the (meta)cognitive one. The range of affective experiences is essential both in teaching and in personal activities. After running the experimental program, we found that:

- **At the cognitive level** – thinking and metacognition, the ability to self-assess/monitor progress through reflection and reflexivity was practiced. Following the collection, analysis and interpretation of the students' reflections, it was found: the modification of the students' attitude towards the required task, that of reflecting; self-centeredness, on one's own cognitive approach (expressing one's own opinion, manifesting a reflexive attitude towards a theory, an idea, developing metacognitive capacity); Below there is a list of students' questions that have been extracted from their reflections: *What are my thoughts when I learn? How do I have to change my way of looking at the situation, if my thoughts are negative? How to identify the optimal ways to positively interpret a context? Do I know myself enough? What are the values that guide me? What difficulties did I encounter in learning and how did I overcome them?etc.*

All these questions, raised by the students, do not reflect anything other than the training, development, affirmation of (meta)cognition, show the awareness by students of the importance of thoughts in carrying out actions.

• **On an emotional level** – the students have become aware and verbalised their own emotions, affective states, have even confessed that they have reflected on their own strengths and weaknesses and that they have been able to effectively manage difficult emotional situations. The students understood that the change of thoughts causes the change of the emotional state and implicitly, a better management of the stress felt.

• **At the level of self-image** – they became aware and verbalised the limits of personal fulfillment; failures, successes, aptitudes, desires have been related to one's own image; when the opinion about oneself is positive, the student is active, open, flexible, safe and bold; when it is negative, the student becomes anxious, complexed, suspicious, passive.

As such, we appreciate that, by participating in the activities carried out, the students have made cognitive and socio-emotional progress. It is important that social-emotional development programs contribute to the development of skills to cope with stress. We support Kaslow's *et al.* view (2020), that stress management programs must support management and responses to stressors caused by the situation, determine the finding of resources for emotional support interventions and healthy behavior.

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