

# **How parents' and teachers' emotional skills foster academic performance in school music students**

## **Abstract**

*This paper explores the importance and effects of parents' and teachers' attitudes on students' academic performance in music. To this end, the research literature on the effects of parental and teacher behaviour on the behaviour of their children and students is reviewed, focusing on parents' and teachers' emotional skills. The review looks at general education and more specifically at music education. The review shows a positive relationship between emotional skills and academic performance, as well as a positive correlation between the development of parents' and teachers' emotional skills and the academic performance of their children and students. Thus, parents' and teachers' emotional skills may be a vital aspect for an effective music education.*

*Keywords:* academic performance, emotional skills, music education, parents' behaviour, teachers training, general education.

## **Introduction**

A great deal of mainstream education could be said to adopt a mechanistic point of view in that it mainly focuses on learning concepts (Mahmoudi, Jafari, Nasrabadi, & Liaghatdar, 2012). However, a more global view of education, known as holistic education, also exists. According to Mahmoudi et al. (2012), "holistic education addresses the broadest development of the whole person at the cognitive and affective levels" (p. 179). Holistic education enables students to develop optimally in all of the different aspects of their lives. One of the ways to teach students about their emotions is through emotional education, since it allows students to develop emotional skills as a tool for a comprehensive personal development and to train them for life (Bisquerra Alzina & Pérez Escoda, 2007).

Music education is an excellent vehicle through which to acquire and develop emotional skills, since music and emotion are naturally connected (Pellitteri, Stern, & Nakhutina, 1999). Nevertheless, humans have to learn emotional skills just as they learn any other kind of knowledge or skill. For this reason, to ensure emotional skills are developed correctly and efficiently, it is necessary that music teaching should be focused on

developing these skills. Furthermore, parents and teachers should be able to help students to develop emotional skills, and should therefore be trained to do so (Gil-Olarte Márquez, Guil Bozal, Serrano Díaz, & Larrán Escandón, 2014; Hagenauer, Hascher, & Volet, 2015; Nizielski, Hallum, Lopes, & Schutz, 2012). In this paper, the importance of an appropriate training in emotional education for parents and teachers, and how this might affect children's emotional skills and academic performance, are explored.

## **Parents**

Studies show that a balanced family environment fosters students' academic performance (Robledo Ramón & García Sánchez, 2009; Torres Velázquez & Rodríguez Soriano, 2006). According to Robledo Ramón and García Sánchez (2009), this issue is so important that, currently, in some countries, subjects dealing with concepts such as family and school have been introduced into the curricula of teacher training degrees in universities with the aim of intensifying the importance of family influence upon formal education.

The emotional balance within family environment essentially depends on two main factors: family structure and parenting styles. Family structure is, to a large extent, related to economic resources and stability, and these are found to be the main cause of most of the academic problems that can occur in children (Robledo Ramón & García Sánchez, 2009; Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994; Torres Velázquez & Rodríguez Soriano, 2006). According to Thomson et al. (1994), single-parent families are more vulnerable than married couples, since their incomes are lower. As a consequence, the members of single-parent families have to spend a greater number of hours at work, so they may not have enough time to be involved in their children's education. Furthermore, in a few cases, parents may see education as a waste of time as the primary requirements are not covered (Torres Velázquez & Rodríguez Soriano, 2006). Families with bigger incomes are more likely to be involved in their children's education, since they may have more time or funds to help their children with educational and academic tasks including homework (Thomson et al., 1994): parental involvement is one of the most important determinants of good academic performance (Khajehpour & Ghazvini, 2011; Topor, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins, 2010; Vahedi & Nikdel, 2011). As far as musical practice is concerned, a musical environment at home that involves the parents can

enhance children's development of musical skills from an early age, such that they are more likely to achieve favourable outcomes in music education (Hallam, 2002; McPherson, 2009).

The other important factors which contribute to children's academic achievement are parenting styles and parenting practice (McPherson, 2009). Darling and Steinberg (1993), define parenting styles as the "constellation of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create an emotional climate in which the parent's behaviours are expressed" (p. 488). On the other hand, parenting practice includes the behaviours that parents use to socialize their children (McPherson, 2009, p. 93). These behaviours should be focused on developing children's psychological needs, such as building their self-concept or confidence in their abilities which, at the same time, facilitate academic performance (Hallam, 2002; McPherson, 2009; Sichivitsa, 2007). Parents' involvement in their children's studies is important, as are the ways in which this involvement takes place. In music education, for example, in order to help children to develop their self-concept, self-esteem and confidence in their musical skills, parent should be an active interest in their lessons and in their feelings about the instrument. Supervising their work and helping them to plan study is even more important (Hallam, 2002; McPherson, 2009). Other recommendations include encouraging children to enjoy their playing (McPherson, 2009) and supporting them even if the outcomes are not as good as expected, especially if they have made an obvious effort (Hallam, 2002). According to these authors, parents should avoid being too critical, and imposing unrealistic expectations. This kind of behaviour could lead to their children developing low self-esteem, and even to giving up the instrument. Thus, we can say that in order to develop effective strategies to educate their children, parents should be aware of their own behaviour and able to modify it to improve their children's positive achievements. Emotional skills are essential for this purpose (Goleman, 1996; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Furthermore, according to McPherson (2009), children whose parents display self-efficacy and self-regulation, are more likely to develop their own self-efficacy and self-regulation (McPherson, 2009). Managing emotions is a skill that needs to be developed through human interactions, given that personality traits are present in the process (Alegre, 2010). According to Alegre (2010), "for children the most important interaction happens with their parents" (p. 57). In addition, Goleman (1996) claims that emotional skill learning begins from birth and continues throughout the whole of childhood, building the

emotional mind of children. Given that emotional learning takes place more quickly during the first four years of life than at any other time, it is important for parents to become aware of the ways in which they emotionally interact with their children. Also, it is important to acknowledge that children tend to imitate their parents' behaviour, probably to a greater extent than they follow the advice that their parents' give to them (Filliozat, 2001). Given the connection between parenting styles and emotional skills, parental styles can be considered as a non-constant aspect since emotional skills can be learnt and, therefore, changed (Gardner, 1983).

Apart from behaviour, parental beliefs are also a very important consideration, since parents who have a fixed idea about the competence of their child, may behave in ways which give rise to this level of competence: this is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Pomerantz & Dong, 2006). McPherson (2009) suggests that this phenomenon is particularly relevant in music education, since musical skills are often considered as an innate gift. Given the impact of the emotional skills of parents on their children, it might be appropriate for teachers to encourage parents to acquire these skills by attending to specific emotional education programs (Gil-Olarte Márquez et al., 2014; Khajehpour & Ghazvini, 2011).

## **Teachers**

Teachers could help parents to learn about and develop their emotional skills, as well as developing their own, in order to improve their children's academic performance. However, this is not the only reason why teachers should develop their emotional skills. Another important reason is that teaching is a difficult task (Hargreaves, 1998, 2000) in which the teacher has to manage and deal with challenging emotional situations during lessons (Edgar, 2013; Hagenauer et al., 2015). Emotional skills education provides teachers with the tools to promote positive emotions which, at the same time, can foster a positive environment in class, as well as good relationships and communication between students and teachers (Nizielski et al., 2012; Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Brackett, 2008). Teachers with high *emotional intelligence* (EI) are more likely to find effective strategies to face stressful situations (Palomera et al., 2008) and to have better psychological well-being (Yin, Lee, Zhang, & Jin, 2013). In addition, positive emotions and well-being can help teachers to improve

their practice (Hagenauer et al., 2015; Yin et al., 2013) and, as a result, students acquire better results in relation to their performance and also their own well-being. A lack of emotional skills in teachers may cause significant problems, since negative emotions in teachers foster students' misbehaviour and a lack of classroom discipline (Hagenauer et al., 2015). Moreover, a teacher with low emotional intelligence is more likely to be more controlling and less warm in class; these attitudes generate lower motivation and confidence in students, thereby affecting students' academic performance (Martin & Dowson, 2009). In relation to music education, Hallam (2002), points out that when students are strongly criticised by teachers they can develop negative emotions and anxiety towards music. As a result, students could lose motivation and give up their musical studies.

The Delors Report (1996) includes general encouragement to work with emotions in education, since this can foster human development. Emotions are present throughout the whole report, and specifically in the section that addresses "The four pillars of education", in which Delors reflects on learning to live together and learning to be. Although the importance of emotional skills becomes evident, the reality is that obstacles for implementing them in education do exist, and there are two main types of these. Firstly, teachers are often not adequately trained in practical emotional skills education to enable them to efficiently develop this kind of teaching (Bisquerra Alzina, 2009; Edgar, 2013; Goleman, 1996; Palomares Ruíz, Garrote Rojas, 2014). This may happen because it is assumed that teachers possess natural abilities and resources to manage their emotions in class, although these skills need to be learnt like any other different skill (Bisquerra Alzina, 2009; Hagenauer et al., 2015). Harvey and Evans (2003), organise the emotional skills that teachers need to work effectively into five different dimensions: (1) emotional relationships, (2) interpersonal awareness, (3) emotional intrapersonal beliefs, (4) emotional interpersonal guidelines and (5) emotional management. To ensure teachers' training in these dimensions, Edgar (2013) suggests that teachers should be trained in *Socio Emotional Learning* (SEL). "Teacher training must include emotional competencies if we wish to be coherent with what research teaches us, with what educational legislation requires of us, and with the model of European society which pursue" (Palomera et al., 2008, p. 448). Unfortunately, while professional development on SEL has been developed and implemented for general education teachers, it hasn't yet been developed for music educators yet (Edgar, 2013).

The second main obstacle to the affective implementation of emotional skill learning in education practice is the difficulty of defining and concretising the objectives and contents linked with emotional skills into the official teaching curriculum. Nevertheless, a subject including emotional education, which is necessary to work and acquire emotional skills properly (Bisquerra Alzina, 2009, p. 158), is not specified within the curriculum in many countries yet.

In summary, teachers' own emotional skills are a key factor in helping their students to develop their own. In addition, we shouldn't forget that teacher serves as model for students, as students often tend to imitate their teachers (López Delgado & Joyanes Romo, 2014). It is worth pointing out that emotional skills, apart from enhancing academic performance, can also prevent violence, aggressiveness, stress and school absenteeism in students (Palomares Ruíz & Garrote Rojas, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The main objective of the body of research that we have reviewed in this paper is to explore the relation between parents' and teachers' emotional intelligence, and students' musical performance. On the basis of the literature selected for this review, we assert that: (1) the acquisition of emotional skills allows students to become more psychologically balanced and as a result, they perform better in the academic field, and (2) teachers' and parents' emotional skills are the main source of help for encouraging children to develop their own emotional intelligence. As emotional skills must be learnt, it is recommended that teachers should receive practical training to develop them, in order to prepare them to provide a good emotional education for students. This aspect becomes particularly necessary in music education, since music teaching is very demanding for students, who have to spend a large amount of time studying alone. This may become even more difficult if students don't have their parents' understanding and support. Emotional skills might be able to help parents in this regard. Music educators require their students to make a big effort; in addition, students have to face other challenging aspects, including competitiveness, performance anxiety and extreme perfectionism, amongst others. All this may cause psychological problems and can negatively influence a good academic performance. Therefore, if teachers develop their emotional skills, they will be able to introduce parents to emotional

education, which should enable them to develop their own emotional skills. This aspect may be vital for the effective education and development of children.

Although schools are becoming increasingly aware of emotional education (Fernández-Berrocal & Ruiz Aranda, 2008), there is still a long way to go until this kind of teaching can be introduced into both teacher training degrees curricula in universities, and into school curricula in primary, secondary and professional music education.

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