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Predictor variables of socio-emotional competence in pre-service early childhood and primary teachers

Variables predictoras de la competencia socioemocional en futuros docentes de infantil y primaria

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Resumen

El desarrollo de la competencia socioemocional contribuye de forma significativa al bienestar del docente, lo que resulta clave para educar de forma eficaz. Determinar qué características de la persona docente se relacionan con esta competencia es clave cuando se diseñan programas de intervención para su desarrollo. En este trabajo se utiliza un modelo multivariante para analizar si las variables género, experiencia docente y autoeficacia tienen un efecto estadístico significativo sobre el nivel de competencia socioemocional. En el estudio participaron 700 estudiantes que cursaron los Grados de Maestro en Educación Infantil y Primaria durante el curso 2023/24, en la Universidad Internacional de La Rioja. Se evidenció una diferencia de género en algunas habilidades socioemocionales, con puntuaciones superiores en las mujeres. Los resultados indicaron que la experiencia docente se asocia con una disminución en la mayoría de las subescalas de la competencia socioemocional durante los primeros tres años de ejercicio, tras lo cual se produce un aumento progresivo en dichas competencias. Entre las variables analizadas, la autoeficacia docente para las estrategias de enseñanza y aprendizaje presentó una asociación estadística superior con la competencia socioemocional, con efectos significativos e importantes en prácticamente todas las subescalas. Estos resultados tienen importantes repercusiones para la práctica educativa. Subrayan la importancia de promover programas formativos orientados a fortalecer la autoeficacia docente como medio para favorecer el desarrollo socioemocional del profesorado.

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Palabras clave: competencia socioemocional; autoeficacia; experiencia docente; futuros docentes.

Abstract

Developing their socio-emotional competence makes a significant contribution to teachers' well-being, which is key to effective education. Identifying which teacher characteristics are associated with this competence is essential when designing intervention programmes to foster its development. This study employs a multivariate model to examine whether the variables gender, teaching experience, and self-efficacy have a statistically significant effect on the level of pre-service teachers' socio-emotional competence. A total of 700 students enrolled in the Early Childhood and Primary Education Degree programmes during the 2023/24 academic year at the International University of La Rioja took part in the study. A gender difference was observed in certain socio-emotional skills, with women scoring higher in some categories. The results indicate that teaching experience is associated with a decrease in most subscales of socio-emotional competence during the first three years of professional practice, after which a progressive increase in these competencies is observed. Among the variables analysed, teachers' self-efficacy regarding teaching and learning strategies showed the strongest statistical association with socio-emotional competence, with significant and substantial effects on virtually all subscales. These findings have important implications for educational practice. They underscore the need to promote training programmes aimed at strengthening teachers' self-efficacy as a means to support the socio-emotional development of educators.

Keywords: socio-emotional competence; self-efficacy; teaching experience; pre-service teachers.

Introduction

The emotional and social development of future teachers, in addition to their intellectual development, contributes to their professional success in the classroom (Delgado et al., 2019). Specifically, in prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers, it has been shown that the development of socio-emotional competences not only enhances their experience at university but also strengthens their sense of being role models for their students, directly and indirectly influencing student behaviour (Borrachero et al., 2012; Brígido & Borrachero, 2011; Dávila et al., 2015). Teachers' socio-emotional competence is currently regarded as one of the strongest predictors of success in educational settings, determining effective teaching and influencing students' academic performance (Fernández-Viciana & Fernández-Costales, 2019; Wenn et al., 2018).

Teacher self-efficacy, gender and years of teaching experience are significant factors that appear to influence educational practice and socio-emotional development of teachers (Aparisi et al., 2020; Valente et al., 2020). Given the contradictory findings regarding the relationships among these variables (Arteaga-Cerdeño et al., 2022; Barrientos-Fernández et al., 2020; Suárez & Martín, 2019), further research is needed to better understand how they may be affecting teachers' level of socio-emotional competence (García-Domingo, 2021). In this regard, we believe that a deeper understanding of

how teachers' sociodemographic and professional profiles shape their socio-emotional competencies is necessary. Moreover, we consider that such knowledge could inform the design of teacher training programmes by guiding the selection of pedagogical strategies that effectively address students' socio-emotional needs. Based on the arguments presented, this study examines the potential predictive effect of gender, teaching experience and perceived self-efficacy on the socio-emotional competence of pre-service teachers in Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers.

Accordingly, the following objectives are proposed: (1) to examine whether sociodemographic and professional characteristics (gender and years of teaching experience) are related to, and show statistical predictive capacity for, the level of socio-emotional competence among prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers, and (2) to analyze whether perceived teacher self-efficacy functions as a statistical predictor of the level of socio-emotional competence among prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers.

Theoretical framework

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in the acquisition and development of soft skills among professionals across disciplines, alongside the technical competences specific to their fields (Espinoza & Gallegos, 2020; Gómez-Gamero, 2019). This interest was further intensified by the global COVID-19 pandemic, as the sudden suspension of face-to-face teaching and the abrupt transition to unfamiliar educational contexts had a profound impact on society, forcing rapid adaptation without time for adequate preparation (Martínez-Saura et al., 2022; Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2021).

Within the field of education, emotional competences have increasingly taken centre stage as a means of addressing the diverse and unforeseen affective challenges faced by students (Morón & Biolik-Morón, 2021; Pérez-González et al., 2020; Ramirez-Asis et al., 2020). This emphasis reflects a commitment to students' holistic development, encompassing both academic and socio-emotional competences (Alemany, 2016; Moè & Katz, 2020).

Various theoretical models have sought to define and operationalize socio-emotional competencies from complementary perspectives. Buck (1990) defines emotional competence as the ability to manage emotional information effectively, including one's own feelings and desires. Salovey and Mayer's (1990) emotional intelligence model conceptualized these competencies as cognitive abilities that enable individuals to perceive, understand, and regulate emotional information effectively. They further argued that emotional intelligence constitutes a component of social intelligence, encompassing a set of skills related to the accurate appraisal, effective expression, and regulation of emotions in oneself and others, as well as the use of emotions to motivate, plan, and achieve life goals. From a more explanatory perspective, Bandura's social-cognitive theory posits that socio-emotional functioning relies on self-regulatory processes and self-efficacy beliefs that guide teaching practice and classroom adaptation (Bandura, 1997). Similar, the CASEL framework (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) defines these competencies as an integrated set of skills related to self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making

(Schlund et al., 2020). This framework adopts a broad and applied educational approach. Although these models differ in their levels of analysis, they converge in highlighting that emotional regulation and social interactions are fundamental to effective teaching performance. This integrative perspective allows socio-emotional competence to be understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing skills, self-regulatory processes, and professional beliefs.

A substantial body of research indicates that effective mastery of socio-emotional competences—such as the ability to collaborate with individuals from diverse backgrounds, engage in socially and emotionally appropriate behaviours, and act responsibly and respectfully—is associated with greater well-being and improved educational outcomes (Eriksen & Bru, 2023). Conversely, insufficient development of these competences may lead to a range of personal, social, and academic difficulties (Extremera et al., 2019; MacCann et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2020). Consequently, socio-emotional competences extend beyond emotional intelligence alone, as they involve the mobilisation of knowledge, capacities, skills, and attitudes within social context.

It is therefore reasonable to assume that, if students are to develop high levels of these competences, they must first be clearly defined and fostered in teachers (Llorent et al., 2020). Although the current situation has intensified this issue, the idea itself is not new. As proposed by Bisquerra and Pérez (2007), emotional competencies are a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to understand, express, and appropriately regulate emotional phenomena. This study builds on the work of Mikulic et al. (2015), who identify nine dimensions of socio-emotional competences, namely (pp. 310–311): "assertiveness, self-efficacy, autonomy, emotional awareness, expressive communication, empathy, optimism, pro-social behaviour and emotional regulation. These dimensions integrate elements that are common across different theoretical approaches (Bar-On, 1997; Graczyk, et al., 2000; Saarni, 2000; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). In line with this approach, Mikulic et al. (2017) developed and validated an inventory to assess socio-emotional competences in adults within contexts such as education and the workplace, for use in research as well as in intervention and prevention programmes.

In this regard, mastery of socio-emotional competences enhances professional performance by equipping individuals with problem-solving skills and strengthening learning processes (Bisquerra & Pérez, 2007). Programmes such as that proposed by Repetto et al. (2007, p. 161) for guidance in the development of socio-emotional competences serve "a preventive function against future school failure and other risk factors, such as absenteeism, school drop-out, or violence (bullying)" and, in turn, improve students' intrinsic motivation, learning processes, academic achievement, and integration into school and society. This underscores the notion that teachers, in addition to acquiring robust pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge, must be capable of creating learning environments that foster students' motivation and academic engagement (Fernández-Viciana & Fernández-Costales, 2019; Piovano et al., 2020). The ability to achieve this depends largely on teachers' professional self-concept and their confidence in their capacity to support student learning (Prieto, 2007). In this regard, teacher self-efficacy is understood as a set of beliefs concerning teachers' abilities to teach effectively, manage the classroom, and motivate and engage students, even in challenging situations (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2001). These beliefs influence the goals teachers set and the effort they invest

in achieving them. Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to demonstrate greater trust in their students, employ more active teaching methodologies, and feel more capable of fostering student engagement (Holzberger & Prestele, 2021).

Several studies have reported low (Catacora, 2020) or moderate (Anastasiou, 2020; Sepúlveda-Ruiz et al., 2021) levels of socio-emotional competence among students enrolled in Early Childhood and Primary Education degree programmes. Given the central role of socio-emotional competence in teacher education—particularly for future Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers (Extremera et al., 2019)—it is essential to strengthen the development of these competences during initial teacher training, enabling prospective teachers to recognise and regulate their emotions from the outset of their professional careers.

Accordingly, numerous studies have examined the relationships between socio-emotional competence and specific sociodemographic and professional characteristics of Early Childhood and Primary Teachers. Recent research has identified a positive association between socio-emotional competence and teacher self-efficacy, suggesting that teachers who perceive themselves as more capable in their professional role tend to manage their emotions and social relationships more effectively, both, inside and outside the classroom (Marcos Sánchez et al., 2023; Munir et al., 2023, Wenn et al., 2018). Teachers' self-efficacy is strongly related to many significant educational results such as teachers' persistence, enthusiasm, commitment and educational behaviour (Zee & Koomen, 2016). It is also linked to student outcomes, such as achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy beliefs (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2001), insofar as it relates to the personal sense of control over learning—one of the main sources of intrinsic motivation for lifelong learning and a fundamental pillar of Bandura's social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 1995). Therefore, perceived self-efficacy is an important yardstick when studying the professional development of teachers in class, as well as the performance and motivation of their students (Giaconi et al., 2018). Furthermore, feelings of self-efficacy impact teaching actions in the classroom, enabling teachers to feel capable of involving, teaching, handling and understanding their students on a day-to-day basis (Covarrubias & Mendoza, 2015). Teachers' beliefs in their own effectiveness have been identified as a key determinant of educational quality and of the emotional well-being of the teacher, something that influences the socio-emotional development of the students (Aparisi et al., 2020; Valente et al., 2020). Accordingly, it is hypothesised that perceived teacher self-efficacy is positively related to socio-emotional competence among prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers.

On the other hand, several studies have shown that variables such as gender and teaching experience influence teachers' socio-emotional competences and should therefore be considered in the design of teacher training programmes. However, previous research has not yielded unanimous or conclusive results regarding the relationship between these variables and socio-emotional competences. Some studies have found better emotional skills in women (Llorente et al., 2020), for example, in emotional regulation (Suárez & Martín, 2019). Others, such as those by Arteaga-Cerdeño et al. (2022) and Domínguez et al. (2022), note that men achieve higher levels of emotional regulation, while some studies do not find significant gender differences in socio-emotional skills (Barrientos-Fernández et al., 2020; Cejudo & López-Delgado, 2017). Despite the lack

of consensus in previous research, the evidence reviewed suggests that gender may play a role in the development of socio-emotional competences. Therefore, this study examines whether gender is significantly associated with differences in socio-emotional competence among prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers.

With regard to teaching experience, some evidence suggests that teachers with more years in the profession demonstrate more developed socio-emotional competences (Sanmartín López et al., 2018). In the study by García-Domingo (2021) with early childhood and primary teachers, age and experience seemed to reduce socio-emotional competences when these were acquired during their teaching career. Other studies have reported no significant relationship between professional experience and socio-emotional competence (Barrientos-Fernández et al., 2020; Suárez y Martín, 2019). The cause of these contradictory results might be the complexity of socio-emotional competence as a construct and the range of instruments used to evaluate it (Graham et al., 2020). Given these inconsistent findings and the complexity of socio-emotional competence as a construct, further research is required to clarify the role of teaching experience. Consequently, this study explores whether years of teaching experience are significantly associated with socio-emotional competence among prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers.

Against this background, the present study explores whether sociodemographic and professional characteristics (gender, years of teaching experience) and perceived self-efficacy are significantly associated with socio-emotional competence among prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers.

Method

Design

The effects are studied using a quantitative, non-experimental and cross-sectional approach with a descriptive and explanatory aim. A multivariant model was tested empirically, taking as independent variables gender, years of experience (nominal and ordinal qualitative factors respectively) and perceived teacher self-efficacy (quantitative variable), while the dependent variables were socio-emotional competence and the subscales that determine it: self-efficacy, optimism, assertiveness, expressive communication, emotional awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, prosocial behaviour and autonomy (all of them considered to be quantitative variables).

Population and sample

Non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used, with the resulting sample comprising 700 students who were taking the Early Childhood and Primary Teaching degrees during the 2023–24 academic year at the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, which are taught wholly online. Of the sample, 89.28% are women and 10.71% are men, with the mean age being 34.79 years. With regards to teaching experience, 44.85% do not have any, 10.57% have less than 1 year, 13.29% have between 1 and 3 years and 31.29% have 4 or more years' experience.

Measures

To assess teachers' perceived socio-emotional competence, we used the previously validated socio-emotional competences inventory developed by Mikulic et al. (2015). This psychometric instrument evaluates nine subscales that constitute socio-emotional competence: self-efficacy, optimism, assertiveness, expressive communication, emotional awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, pro-social behaviour and autonomy. It incorporates the socio-emotional competencies included in the major models cited in the theoretical framework, and the authors conducted rigorous psychometric validation. Its application in educational settings was further supported by the subsequent study of Mikulic et al. (2017). The instrument comprises 72 items evaluated using a Likert-type scale (1- Completely disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neither agree nor disagree, 4- Agree and 5- Completely agree). Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.932, indicating excellent internal consistency.

The instrument used to measure teacher self-efficacy is an adapted version of the Teachers' Self Efficacy Scale (TSES) developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk (2001), which assesses key dimensions of teachers' professional performance. It is also adapted for both pre-service and in-service Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers. Covarrubias and Mendoza (2015) produced a valid, reliable, and theoretically grounded adaptation based on the concept of teacher self-efficacy. This adaptation retains the structure of the original instrument while incorporating contextual and linguistic adjustments that enable comparison with previous international research. This adapted version is the one used in the present study and is organized into four dimensions: efficacy in teaching and learning strategies (TLS), efficacy in class management (CM), efficacy in student engagement (SE) and efficacy in attention to student distinctiveness (ASD). It comprises 17 items, which were evaluated using a Likert-type scale (1- None, 2- Little, 3- Some, 4- A fair amount and 5- A lot). The reliability of the instrument was analysed using Cronbach's alpha, which gave a value of 0.919, and so it was considered to be adequate for the study that was to be performed.

Data collection and Analysis Procedure

The study carried out is part of an internal project, funded by the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, which has had a positive evaluation by the Ethics Committee (code PI: 098/2023). The questionnaire was sent to students online at the start of the 2022–23 academic year. The students were informed of the aim of the research that they were asked to participate in and their anonymity was guaranteed.

To determine the relationship and statistical effect of gender, years of experience and perceived teacher self-efficacy on the socio-emotional competence, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted. The independent variables were gender, years of experience and perceived teacher self-efficacy while the dependent variable was the level of socio-emotional competence and the individual subscales that define it. This technique makes it possible to assess simultaneously the statistical effect of several independent variables on a set of correlated dependent variables, providing a more comprehensive view of the multivariate pattern of results.

Levene's test was used to determine the homogeneity of variance of the dependent variables (Field, 2018). This test was found not to be statistically significant ($p \geq 0.05$), and so the variances of these variables are equivalent. The equality of the covariance matrices of the dependent variables between the different groups was also tested, using Box's M test. The statistic was significant ($p < 0.001$), and so this equivalence cannot be assumed in the correlations between the dependent variables in the different groups. Therefore, in the MANCOVA analysis, it was considered that the most appropriate statistic for studying the effect of the independent variables on the socio-emotional competence was Pillai's trace. To analyse the impact and statistical contribution of the predictors, β regression coefficients were used. A significance level of $p < .05$ was adopted. Furthermore, for all significant effects, effect sizes were calculated using partial eta squared (η^2). To interpret the effect sizes, we relied on the benchmarks proposed by Hattie (2008), which are contextualized in the educational field of education. In his meta-syntheses, Hattie summarizes studies examining the relationship between educational variables to learning outcomes. Effects greater than .039exceed the average impact typically associated with educational variables and are therefore considered meaningful. Effects between .01 and .039 are regarded as comparable to those produced by a teacher-related or school-level characteristics on student outcomes and should therefore be taken into account. Effects below.01 are considered small. The data were organised, coded and analysed using the SPSS 29.0 statistical package.

Results

The analysis of the effect of the independent variables -gender, years of experience and teacher self-efficacy- on socio-emotional competence was conducted in several stages, applying different predictor models. First, a MANOVA was performed to examine the effect of gender and years of teaching experience, as well as the interaction between these two variables, on the subscales of socio-emotional competence. The interaction effect was not significant. In a second model, a MANCOVA was used to analyse the statistical contribution of the four teacher self-efficacy subscales to socio-emotional competence. Only the self-efficacy for teaching and learning strategies (TLS) subscale produced a significant effect. This result can be attributed to the moderately high correlations among the teacher self-efficacy subscales, which account for the same portion of variance in the dependent variable. For this reason, the TLS subscale was selected for the subsequent analysis. The third model is the one presented in this study. A MANCOVA was applied to analyse the effect of the gender, years of teaching experience and TLS self-efficacy variables on socio-emotional competence and its subscales. Pillai's trace was used to assess the multivariate criterion. The results are presented below.

The results showed a significant effect of gender on socio-emotional competence. The value of Pillai's trace had a value of 0.064, $F (9; 686) = 5.210$, $p < 0.000$, with an effect size of substantial magnitude ($\eta 2 = 0.064$). A significant effect of years of teaching experience was also found, with a Pillai's trace value of 0.073, $F (27; 2064) = 1.902$, $p < 0.003$, an effect size worth considering ($\eta 2 = 0.024$). Finally, self-efficacy in TLS showed a statistically significant association with socio-emotional competence, with a Pillai's trace value of 0.108, $F (9; 686) = 9.205$, $p < 0.000$, and an important effect size ($\eta 2 = 0.108$).

Table 1 shows the effects of each independent variable on the socio-emotional competence subscales. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) by gender were found for the expressive communication ($F = 6.154$), empathy ($F = 5.344$), emotional regulation ($F = 6.193$) and pro-social behaviour ($F = 16.171$) subscales. Only in the pro-social behaviour subscale can a considerable effect be observed, with the effects being small in the rest of the subscales. A statistically significant effect of years of teaching experience ($p < 0,05$) was found in self-efficacy ($F = 5.141$), optimism ($F = 4.828$), assertiveness ($F = 2.626$), expressive communication ($F = 2.973$), emotional awareness ($F = 2.993$), and autonomy ($F = 3.675$), with the effect sizes being considerable in all the dimensions. The detailed study of the effect of self-efficacy in TLS on the subscales of the emotional competences revealed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.000$) in all the subscales. Specifically, in self-efficacy ($F = 56.221$), optimism ($F = 68.297$), expressive communication ($F = 38.848$), emotional awareness ($F = 29.147$), with important effects. In assertiveness ($F = 19.817$), empathy ($F = 14.141$), emotional regulation ($F = 20.051$), pro-social behaviour ($F = 23.475$) and autonomy ($F = 17.769$), considerable effects were observed.

Table 1

Effect of the gender, teaching experience and TLS self-efficacy variables on socio-emotional competence subscales

Independent variable	Dependent variable	F	*p*	h^2
Gender	Expressive communication	6.154	0.013	0.009
	Empathy	5.344	0.021	0.008
	Emotional regulation	6.193	0.013	0.009
	Pro-social behaviour	16.171	0.000	0.023
Teaching experience	Self-efficacy	5.141	0.002	0.022
	Optimism	4.828	0.002	0.020
	Assertiveness	2.626	0.049	0.011
	Expressive communication	2.973	0.031	0.013
	Emotional awareness	2.993	0.030	0.013
	Autonomy	3.675	0.012	0.016
TLS self-efficacy	Self-efficacy	56.221	0.000	0.075
	Optimism	68.297	0.000	0.090
	Assertiveness	19.817	0.000	0.028
	Expressive communication	38.848	0.000	0.053
	Emotional awareness	29.147	0.000	0.040
	Empathy	14.141	0.000	0.020
	Emotional regulation	20.051	0.000	0.028
	Pro-social behaviour	23.475	0.000	0.033
	Autonomy	17.769	0.000	0.025

The statistical impact of the independent variables on the dependent variables was examined using multiple linear regression. In regression analysis, even when the design is cross-sectional or correlational, the term *predictor variable* is conventionally used to refer to the independent variables within the model. In this context, *predict* refers to the statistical estimation of the value of a dependent variable from another variable, without implying any causal relationship. Table 2 shows the β regression coefficients of the groups of predictor variables that showed a statistically significant association with the dependent variables.

Table 2

Regression coefficients of the effect of the predictor variables on the dependent variables

Dependent variable	Predictor variable	β	SE**	*p*	h^2
Self-efficacy	Intercept*	2.652	0.156	0.000	0.294
	No teaching experience	-0.140	0.057	0.013	0.009
	Less than 1 year's experience	-0.189	0.086	0.029	0.007
	Between 1 and 3 years' experience	-0.291	0.079	0.000	0.019
	TLS self-efficacy	0.276	0.037	0.000	0.075
Optimism	Intercept*	2.989	0.149	0.000	0.368
	No teaching experience	-0.134	0.054	0.013	0.009
	Less than 1 year's experience	-0.181	0.082	0.029	0.007
	Between 1 and 3 years' experience	-0.265	0.076	0.000	0.017
	TLS self-efficacy	0.291	0.035	0.000	0.090
Assertiveness	Intercept*	3.286	0.150	0.000	0.410
	Between 1 and 3 years' experience	0.170	0.076	0.026	0.007
	TLS self-efficacy	-0.157	0.035	0.000	0.028
Expressive communication	Intercept*	2.805	0.162	0.000	0.302
	Gender (male)	-0.202	0.082	0.013	0.009
	Between 1 and 3 years' experience	-0.240	0.082	0.004	0.012
	TLS self-efficacy	0.238	0.038	0.000	0.053
Emotional awareness	Intercept*	3.253	0.168	0.000	0.351
	Between 1 and 3 years' experience	-0.245	0.085	0.004	0.012
	TLS self-efficacy	0.214	0.040	0.000	0.040
Empathy	Intercept*	3.204	0.152	0.000	0.389
	Gender (male)	-0.178	0.077	0.021	0.008
	TLS self-efficacy	0.136	0.036	0.000	0.020
Emotional regulation	Intercept*	2.592	0.171	0.000	0.249
	Gender (male)	0.214	0.086	0.013	0.009
	TLS self-efficacy	0.181	0.040	0.000	0.028

Dependent variable	Predictor variable	β	SE**	*p*	h^2
Pro-social behaviour	Intercept*	3.482	0.128	0.000	0.517
	Gender (male)	-0.259	0.064	0.000	0.023
	TLS self-efficacy	0.146	0.030	0.000	0.033
Autonomy	Intercept*	2.780	0.167	0.000	0.285
	Between 1 and 3 years' experience	-0.239	0.085	0.005	0.011
	TLS self-efficacy	0.166	0.039	0.000	0.025

*Intercept: women with 4 years of teaching experience.
**Standard error.

For the gender and teaching experience variables, the β regression coefficient represents how much the mean of the dependent variable varies with regards to the intercept or reference group. The intercept is the mean of the group of women with 4 or more years of teaching experience.

In relation to the stated hypothesis, the results obtained indicate that gender is significantly associated with certain dimensions of socio-emotional competence. No significant predictive associations with gender were observed for the subscales of self-efficacy, optimism, assertiveness, emotional awareness, and autonomy. In contrast, the subscales of emotional expression (β ≈ –0.20), empathy (β ≈ –0.20), and pro-social behaviour (β ≈ –0.20) showed statistically significant differences, indicating lower scores for men relative to the reference group. The effect sizes were small for emotional expression and empathy, whereas pro-social behaviour showed an effect of a magnitude worth considering. Conversely, emotional regulation exhibited a significant increase of approximately 0.20 points among men, although with a small effect size. Overall, these results support the partial acceptance of the hypothesis, as gender is associated with differences in some, but not all, dimensions of socio-emotional competence.

Regarding the years of teaching experience, the results indicated a progressive and significant decrease in the subscales of self-efficacy and optimism in the three groups with less experience (no experience, less than one year, and between one and three years) compared with the group with four or more years of experience. The most pronounced decrease was observed in the group with one to three years of experience (β ≈ –0.30), with an effect size worth considering, whereas in the other groups the effect size was small. A significant decrease was also found in emotional expression, emotional awareness, and autonomy (β ≈ –0.25) in the one-to-three-year group, with effect sizes worth considering. In contrast, assertiveness showed an increase of approximately 0.17 points relative to the group with the highest level of experience, although with a small effect size. No significant predictive associations of teaching experience were found for empathy, emotional regulation, or pro-social behaviour. Taken together, these results support the partial acceptance of the hypothesis, as significant associations were found between years of teaching experience and some dimensions of socio-emotional competence, but not across all of them.

The self-efficacy variable for TLS showed a statistically significant positive association with all of the subscales of the socio-emotional competence, except for assertiveness, for which it was associated with a decrease. The β regression coefficient indicated that a one-point increase in TLS self-efficacy was associated with an increase of approximately 0.3 points in optimism and self-efficacy, and 0.2 points in emotional expression and emotional awareness, all with effect sizes of substantial magnitude. In addition, an increase of approximately 0.15 points was observed in emotional regulation, autonomy, and pro-social behaviour, with effect sizes worth considering. The decrease observed in assertiveness ($\beta \approx -0.16$) likewise showed an effect size of 0.16, which in this case was also considered to be of a magnitude worth noting. These results support the acceptance of the hypothesis, as they evidence a positive relationship between perceived teacher self-efficacy and socio-emotional competence.

In relation to the general hypothesis proposed, the results of the study reveal that the sociodemographic and professional characteristics considered, as well as perceived teacher self-efficacy, are significantly associated with the socio-emotional competence of prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers. Specifically, significant associations were identified between socio-emotional competence and gender, years of teaching experience, and perceived self-efficacy. These associations are not homogeneous across all dimensions, with differences observed in both the direction and magnitude of the effects depending on the dimension considered.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine whether the sociodemographic variables gender and teaching experience, together with the professional variable teacher self-efficacy, are related to the level of socio-emotional competence of prospective Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers. Teachers' capacity to perceive and comprehend, express and manage emotions is vital for their success in educational settings (Wenn et al., 2018), for effective teaching, and to maximise their students' academic performance (Fernández-Viciana & Fernández-Costales, 2019). This competence is currently one of the best predictors of success in the academic and professional spheres. Moreover, socio-emotional competence is regarded as a key element for teacher well-being (Delgado et al., 2019). Therefore, identifying which personal and professional characteristics of teachers are associated with higher levels of socio-emotional competence is essential for guiding teacher education programmes.

The results showed that the three variables studied –gender, teaching experience and self-efficacy– exert statistically significant effects on socio-emotional competence and on most of the subscales that constitute it.

Regarding the gender variable, we found significant associations with several of the subscales of socio-emotional competence, including empathy, pro-social behaviour, emotional expression, and emotional regulation. Specifically, women were found to demonstrate higher levels of empathy, pro-social behaviour and expressive communication, whereas men showed higher levels of emotional regulation. A gender difference in favour of women is therefore evident in certain socio-emotional skills, as reported in the study by Piovano et al. (2020), who found higher levels of expressive communication

and pro-social behaviour among women. Similarly, Llorente et al. (2020) observed higher overall levels of socio-emotional competence in women than in men, particularly with regard to emotional self-awareness and pro-social behaviour. Our results also agree with those of Arteaga-Cerdeño et al. (2022) and Domínguez et al. (2022), who note that men exhibit higher levels of emotional regulation, but they contradict the results of Suárez and Martín (2019), who attributed higher levels of emotional regulation to women. However, it is worth noting that, among the three variables examined, gender showed the weakest statistical association with socio-emotional competence. Previous studies have likewise reported no statistically significant differences in mean socio-emotional competence scores between men and women (Barrientos-Fernández et al., 2020; Cejudo & López-Delgado, 2017; García-Domingo, 2021), although García-Domingo (2021) observed slightly lower scores among women. Nevertheless, it has traditionally been assumed that women are more capable of recognising and expressing their emotions (Llorente et al., 2020), which contrasts with the limited influence of gender observed in the present study.

Years of teaching experience were significantly related to the level of socio-emotional competence among pre-service teachers. The results suggest a non-linear relationship between teaching experience and socio-emotional competence: a progressive decrease was observed in most subscales during the initial stages of professional experience, with the greatest decline occurring among teachers with one to three years of experience, followed by an increase among those with four or more years of experience. In contrast, assertiveness showed an increase already in the group of teachers with one to three years of experience, suggesting an earlier development of this skill compared with other socio-emotional dimensions.

This pattern is consistent with previous research examining the developmental dynamics of socio-emotional competence across different stages of the teaching career. Barrientos-Fernández et al. (2020), in a study conducted with novice teachers, propose that the early years of professional practice are characterised by high exposure to stress, stemming from the lack of consolidated methodological strategies and lower perceived self-efficacy, which negatively affects their emotional competence. Similarly, Arteaga-Cedeño et al. (2022), in a sample of pre-service teachers, found that those with less pedagogical training and limited experience tend to show lower levels of emotional skills, particularly in dimensions related to affective regulation and empathy. Nevertheless, our results show that, from three years of experience onwards, emotional competencies begin to improve progressively. This aligns with the findings of Wenn et al. (2018), who reported a positive and sustained relationship between teaching experience and the development of emotional competence among secondary teachers, arguing that professional stability and mastery of pedagogical routines strengthen emotional management. in a similar manner, Sanmartín López et al. (2018), in a longitudinal study with in-service teachers, concluded that the experience accumulated throughout the teaching process contributes to the consolidation of emotional skills, especially those related to adaptation and coping with stress.

The discrepancy between our results and part of the existing literature may be explained by the following hypothesis. During the first years of teaching, teachers undergo an adaptation phase characterised by high levels of stress, professional insecurity, and substantial cognitive load, which leads to a temporary decline in certain emotional skills.

However, as their professional identity becomes consolidated and their self-efficacy increases, these competencies begin to improve. This hypothesis offers a coherent explanation that reconciles the results presented here with the findings reported by the afore mentioned authors. Regarding this hypothesis, the literature is not unanimous. García-Domingo (2021) and Valente et al. (2020) suggest that work overload and prolonged exposure to stressful situations may erode emotional competences at later stages of the teaching career. These findings point to the possible influence of additional contextual and organizational factors that may shape the non-linear relationship between teaching experience and socio-emotional competence observed in the present study.

With regard to psychological variables, teacher self-efficacy showed the strongest association with socio-emotional competence. Higher levels of teacher self-efficacy were associated with significant increases across all subscales, except for assertiveness, where the relationship was negative. These results are particularly relevant given that the literature recognises both teacher self-efficacy and socio-emotional competencies as key characteristics of the teaching profession that directly influence student achievement (Holzberger & Prestele, 2021; Fernández-Viciana & Fernández-Costales, 2019). In the same vein, Burić et al. (2020) show that teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to experience more positive emotions On the other hand, several studies have demonstrated that higher levels of emotional skills are positively associated with greater teacher self-efficacy (Aparisi et al., 2020; Munir et al., 2023; Wenn et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2019). Teachers with strong socio-emotional competence tend to feel more motivated and satisfied, perceive themselves as more capable of dealing with classroom challenges, and report being better prepared to support their students' academic and emotional development (Aparisi et al., 2020; Valente et al., 2020).

Considering that the present study shows that an increase in self-efficacy leads to a significant improvement in socio-emotional competence, a bidirectional process might be hypothesised. Thus, greater self-efficacy would foster the development of socio-emotional competencies, while the strengthening of these competencies would, in turn, contribute to an enhanced perception of self-efficacy among teachers. This would give rise to a cyclical dynamic of positive feedback between the two constructs, both of which are recognised as essential indicators of educational quality due to their direct influence on teaching practices and student learning outcomes (Eriksen & Bru, 2023).

Implications, limitations, and future research

First, it is evident that the sociodemographic and professional variables—gender, teaching experience, and teacher self-efficacy—are significantly related to levels of socio-emotional competence among pre-service teachers. The study shows that gender is significantly associated with several subscales of socio-emotional competence; however, its effect is moderate and less substantial than that of the other variables examined.

Teacher self-efficacy, particularly that related to teaching and learning strategies, shows the strongest statistical association with the socio-emotional competencies of pre-service teachers. This finding highlights the relevance of teacher self-efficacy as a key variable in socio-emotional development and underscores the importance of strengthening this dimension during initial teacher education.

Regarding experience, a decline in socio-emotional competencies is observed during the first years of professional practice, followed by a progressive increase from the third year onwards. This pattern suggests that the beginning of the teaching career constitutes a critical period for teachers' emotional development.

These findings have important implications for teacher education. First, they highlight t the need to design training programmes aimed at equipping teachers with pedagogical strategies and strengthening their self-efficacy. Such reinforcement can contribute directly to the improvement of their socio-emotional competencies. These programmes could be implemented during the first years of professional practice, a period in which a decline in socio-emotional competence has been identified.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional and correlational design does not allow causal relationships to be established among the variables analyzed. Although the term *predictor* is used in the regression analysis, it should be interpreted solely in its statistical sense. Longitudinal studies would therefore be valuable for examining the development of self-efficacy and socio-emotional competencies throughout teacher education and during the early years of professional practice.

Second, the sample consisted predominantly of women, which limits the variability of the analysis. Nevertheless, this distribution reflects the reality of Early Childhood and Primary Education degree programmes (OECD, 2017). Future studies could incorporate more balanced samples or conduct stratified analyses to explore the role of gender in greater depth. Likewise, the participants belonged exclusively to the field of initial teacher education for Early Childhood and Primary Education. It would therefore be relevant to replicate this study with pre-service Secondary Education teachers or with in-service teachers to examine potential differences in the relationship between self-efficacy and socio-emotional competence.

Another limitation concerns the use of self-report instruments which, although suitable for assessing teachers' perceptions, may introduce biases such as the overestimation of competencies. Future research could incorporate complementary measures, including peer assessment, classroom observation, or socio-emotional performance instruments.

Furthermore, although this study identifies teacher self-efficacy as the variable most strongly associated with socio-emotional competence, future work could explore models that consider reciprocal relationships.

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