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Teachers' emotional competence in multicultural schools: Discourses and perceived training needs

La competencia emocional del profesorado en centros
multiculturales. Discursos y necesidades percibidas sobre su
formación

María Luisa Melero Valdés*, María Jesús Perales Montolío** and Rosa M. Rodríguez-Izquierdo***¹

*Loyola University of Andalusia

**University of Valencia

***Pablo de Olavide University

Abstract

Multiculturalism in contemporary European societies poses significant challenges for schools and teachers, as it adds new layers of complexity while also exposing pre-existing gaps. Scientific literature emphasizes the need for a shift in educational approaches, placing emotional competence (EC) at the core to address intercultural education more comprehensively and effectively. However, little is known about the level of acquisition of this competence in teacher training. This study aims to analyze the discourses of teachers working in multicultural schools, exploring their perspectives on the importance of EC in their educational practice and identifying their perceived training needs. To this end, using a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 teachers from nine schools with a high proportion of students

¹ **Correspondence:** María Luisa Melero Valdés, mlmelero@uloyola.es, Loyola University Andalusia.

from immigrant backgrounds. The data were subjected to thematic analysis using mixed coding of an inductive-deductive nature. The results reveal three discourse profiles: competent, over-involved, and burned-out. The three discourses agree on the need to improve teacher training in EC in general, and urgently for those who work in multicultural contexts. Furthermore, relevant elements for enhancing communicative competence are identified. The convergence between the competent discourse and the theoretical framework validates the proposed model and its applicability in real contexts, providing a solid basis for the design of effective training programs that can be applied to the reality of schools.

Keywords: Emotional competence, emotional education, intercultural education, teacher training.

Resumen

La multiculturalidad en las sociedades europeas contemporáneas plantea retos significativos para los centros educativos y para el profesorado, al añadir factores de complejidad y alumbrar numerosas brechas previamente existentes. La literatura científica destaca la necesidad de un cambio de enfoque educativo, que ponga en el centro la competencia emocional (CE) docente para abordar la educación intercultural de forma más integral y efectiva. No obstante, se sabe muy poco sobre el nivel de adquisición de esta competencia en la formación del profesorado. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar los discursos del profesorado que trabaja en centros multiculturales, explorando la importancia que otorgan a la CE en su práctica educativa e identificando sus necesidades percibidas respecto a su formación. Para ello, bajo una metodología cualitativa, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a 21 docentes de nueve centros educativos con una alta presencia de alumnado de origen migrante. Los datos se sometieron a un análisis temático mediante un procedimiento de codificación mixto, de carácter inductivo-deductivo. Los resultados muestran tres perfiles discursivos: competente, sobreimplicado y burned-out. Los tres discursos coinciden en la necesidad de mejorar la formación del profesorado en CE, en general, y de manera urgente, para quienes ejercen en contextos multiculturales. Asimismo, se identifican elementos relevantes para la mejora de la CE. La convergencia entre el discurso competente y el marco teórico valida el modelo propuesto y su aplicabilidad en contextos reales, ofreciendo una base sólida para el diseño de programas formativos eficaces y aplicables a la realidad escolar.

Palabras clave: Competencia emocional, educación emocional, educación intercultural, formación del profesorado.

Introduction

Multiculturalism, or more precisely, the cultural diversity associated with contemporary migration, is a structural reality that highlights significant pre-existing social and educational challenges. In Spain, over the last two decades, numerous schools with a high proportion of pupils from migrant backgrounds have promoted intercultural teacher training. Although this training has had a positive impact on schools, it has failed to fully integrate the emotional dimension required by educational change in

multicultural contexts. This has been reflected, amongst other things, in the confusion between difference and inequality, as well as in the persistence of discriminatory practices under seemingly intercultural discourses (Olmos, 2016; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022). Various studies warn of the risk of excessively theoretical training that alters discourse but has no impact on changing actual attitudes and educational practices (Hadar et al., 2020; Kardel et al., 2025).

The scientific literature identifies critical factors that act as triggers for emotional tension amongst teachers, such as language barriers, discrepancies in family expectations regarding the schooling process, and conflicts arising from divergent codes of conduct or communication styles. These challenges do not operate in isolation, but are exacerbated by structural conditions. In this regard, recent studies in the Andalusian context (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2026) highlight how the management of multilingualism in the classroom generates specific tensions that test teachers' capacity for emotional responsiveness, making linguistic diversity one of the main sources of occupational stress.

This problem is compounded by the lack of theoretical and methodological consensus regarding emotional competence (EC), as well as by the wide variety of assessment tools and measurement systems. All of this makes it difficult to draw robust conclusions about teacher training in this area. Various systematic reviews and meta-analyses have highlighted this gap in the research and called for it to be addressed (Lozano-Peña et al., 2022; Martínez-Saura et al., 2024; Oliveira et al., 2021). Collie et al. (2025) demonstrated in another literature review that little attention has been paid to teachers' EC, to the predictors that might foster these beliefs, and to the consequences of these beliefs.

Recent research highlights that a high level of emotional intelligence (EI) amongst teaching staff is associated with a greater ability to manage diversity effectively (Llorent et al., 2020), this emotional dimension being key to any truly intercultural educational approach (Nielsen et al., 2019). Specifically, the meta-analysis by Gómez-Leal et al. (2021) identifies self-awareness, self-regulation and empathy as essential components of emotional intelligence that must be addressed in effective teacher training. Furthermore, EC has been recognised as a preventive factor against teacher *burnout* and as an indicator of subjective well-being, which reinforces the need to include it in teacher training from the outset of their professional career (Iglesias-Díaz & Romero-Pérez, 2021; Molina-Moreno et al., 2024).

In short, the various elements mentioned in the literature highlight the need to incorporate EI into initial and continuing teacher training, particularly in multicultural contexts with a high proportion of pupils from migrant backgrounds. Within this framework, the present study aims to identify the discourses of teachers working in multicultural schools regarding the importance of EI in their day-to-day teaching practice, as well as to identify their perceived training needs in relation to this competence.

Theoretical framework

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, Walsh (2014) argues that a culturally relevant pedagogy must avoid the homogenising role of culture. This implies recognising the internal diversity within any human group—be it linguistic, religious, in terms of sexual orientation, gender or background—and, even more so, the diversity inherent in each individual. *Critical interculturalism* would thus entail a personal and institutional stance which, based on the recognition of existing social inequalities, pursues social justice. Within this framework, authors such as Jokikokko and Uitto (2017) highlight the importance of emotions in intercultural learning, going so far as to define such learning as an eminently emotional process that takes place throughout one's entire life. Given the often unconscious nature of the emotions we experience, increasing teachers' awareness of what they themselves experience can be an effective means of bridging the gap between discourse and practice; for being in touch with one's own vulnerability and questioning one's own implicit assumptions fosters greater empathy and better regulation in the exercise of power relations (Jokikokko, 2016).

Previously, authors such as Chen and Starosta (2000) argued that the emotional dimension of intercultural competence is its predictive variable (which they termed '*intercultural sensitivity*'). Similarly, Boler (1999) and Zembylas and Chubbuck (2011) had already regarded teachers' intercultural learning as an emotional process that requires, firstly, recognising the role of one's own emotions in thoughts and practices, and, secondly, channelling those emotions into actions in order to break with unjust practices. Zembylas and Chubbuck (2011) refer to *critical emotional praxis* as the ability to emotionally question beliefs about what is considered the 'other' and power relations. In doing so, they aim to explain how emotions are key to changing the processes of injustice that perpetuate inequality in schools and society.

It is now widely accepted that the sociocultural context influences the construction of emotional experience (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018). Among the theoretical models of emotional competence, that of Bisquerra (2003, 2010) is consistent with this approach, as it links his proposal for emotional education to the specific characteristics of the context, to interpersonal relationships and to subjective well-being. His model comprises five factors or competencies (Bisquerra & Pérez-Escoda, 2007): emotional awareness, emotional regulation, emotional autonomy, interpersonal intelligence, and life and wellbeing skills. These last two components, in particular, reflect sensitivity to the social and interpersonal context. As Bisquerra (2010) points out, emotional education is aimed not only at pupils, but especially at teachers and families. Both must be its main promoters, given that they are key figures in supporting young people to find their own place in the world, building on their own diversity.

Methodology

Method

To address the objectives set out, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted, grounded in a systemic, contextualist and constructivist perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which emphasises the influence of the social and relational context, placing particular importance on processes of intersubjectivity in the construction of individual and group reality. Furthermore, a stance consistent with the theoretical-critical approach (Walsh, 2014) was adopted, centred on raising the visibility of minorities and bringing about a shift in the perceptions of those who work with them; in this case, teachers.

The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with teaching staff from various schools located in the two districts of the city of Seville with the highest proportion of residents of immigrant origin, according to the municipal register as at 1 January 2024: Macarena and Cerro-Amate. In each area, it was decided to select two primary schools and two lower secondary schools, as well as one state-subsidised private school. However, the inclusion of a state-subsidised private school was only possible in Cerro-Amate, which explains why there is only one school offering both levels (primary and lower secondary). Consequently, a total of nine schools took part.

Participants

Twenty-one teachers from the nine schools mentioned took part in the study: 13 women and 8 men; 11 from primary schools and 10 from lower secondary schools (one of these 10 was from a PCPI school). Of these, 14 had been at the school for three academic years or more, and seven had been there for fewer than three academic years (see also Table 2).

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, with a script validated using inter-rater criteria (two psychology lecturers not involved in the study but with knowledge of emotional intelligence). The protocol was structured around 15 questions organised into the following thematic areas: 1. The importance teachers attach to the emotional dimension in their day-to-day teaching practice; 2. The link they establish between their own emotional regulation and their interpersonal relationship with pupils; 3. Their understanding of diversity and their perception of it within the school; 4. Their background in relation to emotional intelligence or related topics; and 5. The perceived need for training in emotional intelligence.

Procedure

To conduct the interviews, after obtaining permission from the Regional Education Authority, the study was presented by telephone to the headteachers of the schools. Subsequently, an interview was conducted with each school to gather relevant contextual information for the design of the interviews with teaching staff. Each school was asked to select two teachers per year group, based on three criteria: gender, educational level and length of service at the school. In addition, a pilot interview was included, as no *ad hoc* modifications were required. All interviews were conducted in person at the schools during working hours, lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded following the participants' informed consent. Consequently, a total of 21 interviews were analysed.

Analysis of the data

To analyse the data collected, a thematic analysis approach was adopted (Braun et al., 2017; Smith, 2015), following a mixed coding process of an inductive-deductive nature, in which emerging patterns in the teachers' discourse were identified following the coding stage. NVIVO 11 Plus software was used for this process. The analysis process was organised into four phases.

Phase 1. Coding and creation of the thematic category tree. For the thematic analysis, a 'live' coding system was used, taking the participants' expressions quasi-literally and, where possible, using the first person to formulate each code. Following three rounds of review of the initial category system (analysis of repetitions using comparison diagrams, verification of text assignments using relational diagrams, and design of the category tree through the creation of themes and sub-themes), the result was a tree comprising six themes, four sub-themes, 275 content codes and a further 73 grouping codes.

Phase 2. Inter-rater evaluation of the category tree. Four people not involved in the study took part in this phase: two assessed the codes according to criteria of relevance, clarity and adequacy, whilst the other two focused specifically on those elements where there was no consensus. The final result was a category tree comprising six themes, four sub-themes and 316 codes (of which 244 were content codes) (Table 1).

Table 1

Sample from theme 3 of the category tree: 'Perceived difficulties surrounding CE'

Theme (level 1)	Sub-theme (level 2)	Code (level 3)	Code (level 4)
3. Difficulties	3.5. Challenges	3.5.1. Diversity and the difficulty of managing it in	a. The diversity and heterogeneity we face make it more difficult

relating to
diversity

a positive way

b. The demands of the administration and day-to-day difficulties do not help us to manage diversity in a positive way

c. We are not prepared to manage diversity. This is something we learn through experience

3.5.2. Coexistence and integration

a. There are sometimes insults, but no major problems

b. There are conflicts and issues with cohesion relating to playtime and leisure activities in the neighbourhood

c. The difficulty with integration lies with the Roma pupils. The others are just like any other pupils, regardless of their nationality

d. Children do not see the differences. When xenophobic issues arise, they stem from the families

3.5.3. Ethno-geographical diversity and economic difficulties

a. Diversity is sometimes accompanied by economic difficulties

b. Economic hardship means that many children from foreign families grow up with relatives or in a state of semi-neglect

3.5.4. Foreign population and language gap

a. The greatest challenge with foreign pupils is the language, not the relationship

b. Many families face
language difficulties and it
is
difficult to communicate
with them

3.5.5. There are often
learning gaps due to a
lack of foundational
knowledge, changes of
school during the
academic year or late
enrolment

late enrolment
3.5.6. Dilemmas
sometimes arise with
families from abroad due
to differing views and
values regarding
education

Phase 3. Identification of discourses within the category tree, and of the teaching staff associated with each discourse. The analysis of the narratives provided by the category tree enabled the inductive-deductive identification of three types of discourse regarding CE. Level 3 and 4 codes were assigned to each type of discourse, identifying the corresponding participants in each case.

Phase 4. Final cross-judge evaluation of the results report. Once the results report had been drawn up, a final cross-judge evaluation—similar to an external audit—was carried out by two individuals not involved in the study. This evaluation enabled the results obtained to be validated.

Results

Identification of themes in the category tree

The thematic analysis carried out identified six themes: 1. Conceptions of education, emotions and diversity; 2. Perceived strengths relating to EC; 3. Perceived difficulties relating to EC; 4. Opportunities and benefits of using EC; 5. Strategies developed for EC; and 6. Perceived training needs regarding EC.

Themes 1–5 correspond most closely to objective 1 (*to identify the discourses of teachers working in multicultural contexts regarding the importance of CE in their day-to-day educational practice*), whilst theme 6 is more specifically associated with objective 2 (*to identify their perceived training needs regarding CE*).

Identification of discursive profiles

The three discursive profiles identified were termed ‘competent’ (A), ‘over-involved’ (B) and ‘burned-out’ (C). Of the 21 interviews, 10 were associated with the ‘competent’ discourse, eight with the ‘over-involved’ discourse and three with the ‘burned-out’ discourse.

Of the 10 interviews assigned to the ‘competent’ discourse, seven were with primary school teachers and three with lower secondary school teachers. Eight were with women and two with men. Six of the 10 had been teaching for less than three academic years. Of the eight interviews linked to the ‘over-committed’ discourse, four were with primary school teachers and the other four with lower secondary school teachers. Five were with women and three with men, and only one of them had been teaching for less than three academic years. Three interviews were assigned to the ‘burned-out’ discourse, all of which were with lower secondary school teachers; all were men with three or more years’ service at the school (Table 2).

Table 2 Allocation of participants to the identified discourses

Assigned speech	Participant code	School
A. Competent	(21) Female, secondary education (ESO), 3 years or more	Secondary education. Public
A. Competent	(2) Female, ESO, 3 years or more	Primary and ESO. State-subsidised private
A. Competent	(4) Female, Primary, less than 3 years	Primary and ESO. State-subsidised private
A. Competent	(11) Female, Primary, 3 years or more	Primary. State
A. Competent	(12) Male, Primary, fewer than 3 years	Primary. State
A. Competent	(10) Female, Primary, 3 years or more	Primary. State
A. Competent	(20) Female, Primary, fewer than 3 years’ study	Primary. State
A. Competent	(8) Male, Primary, less than 3 years’ study	Primary. State
A. Competent	(5) Female, Primary, less than 3 years’ education	Primary. State
A. Competent	(19) Female, lower secondary education, less than 3 years	Secondary education. Public
B. Over-involved	(1) Male, primary school, 3 years or more	Primary and ESO. State-subsidised private

B. Over-involved	(3) Female, ESO-PCPI, 3 years or more	Primary and ESO. State-subsidised private
B. Over-involved	(9) Female, Primary, 3 years or more	Primary. State
B. Over-involved	(7) Female, Primary, 3 years or more	Primary. State
B. Over-involved	(6) Male, Primary, 3 years or more	Primary. State
B. Over-involved	(18) Male, Secondary Education, 3 years or more	Secondary education. Public
B. Over-involved	(17) Female, lower secondary education, fewer than 3 years	Secondary education. Public
B. Over-involved	(15) Female, ESO, 3 years or more	Secondary education. Public
C. Burned out	(13) Male, secondary education, 3 years or more	Secondary education. Public
C. Burned out	(16) Male, lower secondary education, 3 years or more	Secondary education. Public
C. Burned out	(14) Male, lower secondary education, 3 years or more	Secondary education. Public

Description of the discourses

Competent discourse

Teachers who subscribe to the competent discourse have received prior training in CE and have incorporated it meaningfully into their day-to-day practice to a greater extent than the other groups. They demonstrate a clear and well-defined educational stance, sensitive to the social context and open to parental involvement. For these teachers, the relationship with pupils takes centre stage, even taking precedence over the curriculum:

We often get caught up in the rush or in wanting... to finish or complete the curriculum and perhaps fail to stop and focus on what I think is most important, which is getting closer to the pupils and really seeing what problems they are facing, what difficulties, what worries them... (8)

There is a correlation between their theoretical approach and their professional practice, and they feel equipped to manage the emotional, relational and structural difficulties associated with the diverse context in which they work:

Often: 'Child, be quiet.' No, stop and listen to them. They might give you a lead or a clue as to where the problems lie. (8)

If you behave naturally around the children and they see that, well, I don't know, that you get tired too, that you suffer too, that you laugh too, that you do the shopping too, that you cook too, that your car breaks down too, then the children start to interact more with you and let you be part of their group. (...) The children don't challenge me. No. They respect me. They see you as more approachable, more like someone who's involved in their lives, who can help them solve a problem and, if you can't solve it, at least listen to them. (2)

Teachers with competent discourse express a critical attitude towards the limitations of the education system, yet they are proactive, seeking emotional resources and tools to transform their practice. Their perception of their own emotional competence enables them to formulate more precise educational proposals and carry out a more detailed analysis of the emotional processes involved in their teaching work. They feel committed to their own process of growth and see it as part of their professional identity:

I've been working with a group of teachers for some time now, and we're developing an alternative curriculum to present to the authorities. Part of the process involves us also training as a group on the subject of emotions. And then... as a way of working on it in the classroom and with families. [...] For me, it's exciting: learning, getting to know one another... It's like another part of 'being a teacher' and I find it really cool... like a brilliant process of growth. (10)

From this perspective, educating about cultural diversity is understood as an inherent part of the teaching role, particularly in settings characterised by multiple forms of diversity: geographical, ethnic, functional and socio-economic. Diversity is conceived as a quality inherent to the human condition, regardless of cultural background or origin, and its recognition is linked to the need to transform prevailing educational frameworks:

The reality is that there is tremendous richness here – in terms of cultures and people. And yet, rather than seeing this as a source of richness today, we often – due to our own inexperience – view it as a problem, a constraint, as though they have more limitations. So what we need to do is see it as a genuine source of richness, right? But that still... (10)

Teachers with a competent discourse recognise that cultural diversity (linked to ethno-geographical origin) adds complexity to the educational context: 'It is a complex

reality that takes up a lot of our time' (11). This perception of saturation is exacerbated by an operational overload, where administrative demands and the stresses of daily life act as barriers preventing otherness from being addressed from a proactive perspective. Against this backdrop, strengthening emotional resilience becomes imperative. Alongside this, they consider the ability to set boundaries between professional and personal life, as well as the ability to move away from victim mentality, to be key protective factors:

You have to leave your personal life at the door and pick it up again when you leave, because otherwise it can all get very mixed up [pause]. Sometimes you come up against a lot of problems throughout the day. (4)

I'm telling you, even being able to step out of the classroom and say: 'Things are happening here, and I can't handle them on my own'. (...) And, above all, being able to move beyond the suffering (...) not getting stuck in that victim mentality of 'this isn't working', of 'this is a disaster'. Using your own personal tools, being able to sort it out, but in a different way – not through complaints, not through feeling ill... (10)

In conclusion, the competent discourse represents teachers who have integrated CE as an essential part of their professional identity, making it the cornerstone from which they manage their day-to-day work. They experience diversity as a source of richness, have the resources to manage it positively, and assume their responsibility as agents of educational transformation.

Over-committed discourse

Teachers associated with an over-involved discourse show a strong commitment to their environment, just like the competent group. They believe that their work should extend to the neighbourhood and families, and base their practice on emotional involvement and vocation:

You have to have it within you. And can they teach you that at university? Yes. They can teach you lots of techniques, lots of things. But the fact that you then feel them and pass them on... For something to bear fruit, to be beneficial and to have an effect, you have to feel it. (3)

Although they recognise the importance of the emotional dimension, they do not have many tools for managing it. The level of training in emotional intelligence is lower than that of the previous group, and their analysis of reality is on a more immediate level. Their high level of empathy and constant contact with pupils' experiences of difficulty lead them to prioritise relationships over the curriculum and to naturally embrace the emotional dimension of education: "They say to me: 'Miss, can you give me a hug?'

Fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls. 'Of course I'll give you a hug!' In other words, they're asking for signs of affection. They're asking for... what they don't have." (3).

However, the intensity of this emotional involvement becomes a source of overwhelm. Overly involved teachers recognise their own difficulty in emotionally regulating their work, and interpret it as part of their nature:

I always set myself that as a goal every year (...) But, no way! No way...! Then it overwhelms me, it overwhelms me, I get far too involved... emotionally, I can't help it... I think... I'm just like that, just as others are different and... well [intensity]. It's just that these are very profound things... So, you can't get them out of your head. (3)

The lack of specific tools is reflected in their limited ability to draw boundaries between the personal and the professional spheres. With regard to diversity, teachers who hold this view do not believe that geographical origin makes a difference. In their opinion, integration means that we are all equal and, therefore, they do not mention differences so as not to create them:

Problems only exist when you mention them. If there are no relationship problems until they arise, it's because there aren't any... And I'm talking about the relationship between children from different cultures and between children of different religions. Here, as the children are used to it, they don't see that so-and-so is Chinese or such-and-such... (9)

In short, the over-involved teacher's approach is characterised by a high level of empathy and a strong bond with the pupils. However, its greatest strength is also its greatest risk, given that this level of sensitivity leads to emotional overload, highlighting the need for tools to regulate emotions more effectively. It reveals a greater lack of training than the competent discourse regarding cultural education, which is reflected in greater difficulty with conscious and critical emotional management. Finally, it does not believe that geographical origin makes a difference and, for this reason, prefers not to address such issues.

'Burned-out' discourse

The third profile is characterised by a generalised sense of unease and mistrust towards the education system; it focuses on the structural failings of the education system and expresses a feeling of being undermined and questioned, particularly by the authorities: "You feel a bit... as though they're constantly undermining you in your work" (16).

With a suspicious attitude, they perceive that, just when they know how to carry out their task, the authorities go and change the criteria and create uncertainty, rather than clarifying the way forward. Faced with this, teachers with a 'burned-out' discourse justify their stance of continuing to assess as usual:

Just when you think you've... got the hang of something... the inspector comes along and says, 'No. That's not what you're supposed to be assessing (...). I don't care what the child knows, but how they learn it, whether they're capable of doing it on their own..., whether they have personal autonomy, good study habits...'. In the end, using my previous criteria – my normal criteria – I'm perfectly capable of assessing [emphasis]. When they start throwing in other variables that you don't have a handle on... the only thing I think they're trying to do is make you unsure of how you're supposed to assess. (13)

He acknowledges that the emotional dimension is important, especially in contexts of high social vulnerability:

It's an important issue, obviously, and in schools like this one, even more so... Especially when many of the pupils here come from backgrounds where [...] their father or mother is in prison, or their parents are drug addicts... So, as well as the curriculum and so on, you have to work on the emotional side. It's simply essential. (14)

He admits that a minimum level of emotional involvement is necessary, but emphasises the need to set strict boundaries to avoid misunderstandings: "The emotional aspect is something that needs to be kept under control" (16). "If you get involved in their personal lives, it can even be frowned upon" (13).

His view of diversity is mainly associated with international pupils and the Roma community, showing a positive assessment of the former group in terms of adaptation and a problematic view of the latter:

I think that apart from... the group of pupils... of Roma ethnicity [pause], whom we have in the first or second year [pause], it really is difficult to integrate them... I mean, I think that they... they themselves don't know how, or can't [pause] integrate into... the current system. The others... are just like everyone else. It doesn't matter whether they're Colombian, Venezuelan, Uruguayan... (13)

As a solution to the difficulties identified, he emphasises the need to reinstate academic rigour for pupils: "We need to reinstate academic rigour for pupils so that we don't continue to be a nursery" (13). He also calls for more teachers and guidance counsellors in lower secondary education, particularly in multicultural contexts, to make up for what they feel they cannot or do not know how to do:

So, more staff would always be welcome. Here we have a few teachers, two remedial teachers. But in schools like this one, for example, which is so big – and, besides, you know, must have around a thousand pupils. (...) Well, there are other schools that have two guidance counsellors, and this one doesn't. (14)

I'm sure the authorities have the resources to bring in educators, socio-cultural facilitators... teachers, who are far more qualified than those of us here. (...) Because in secondary education, the teachers are disappearing. (13)

In short, the 'burned-out' discourse is characterised by a high level of dissatisfaction with the education system, centred on criticising structural conditions without envisaging any scope for personal improvement. Their strong capacity for critical analysis does not lead them to focus on their own potential for change, as is the case with the 'competent' individual. On the contrary, their sense of discouragement leads them to dwell on complaints about what is not working. The lack of training in emotional intelligence is accompanied by a perception of an inability to cope with the change demanded of them, even though they consider it necessary, which reinforces their dependence on external support. They associate diversity mainly with foreign pupils and the Roma community, viewing the adaptation of the former group positively whilst emphasising the problems faced by the latter.

With regard to pupils from immigrant backgrounds, the three teacher profiles agree that the main difficulty is the language barrier, not the relationship. Furthermore, teachers with a competent and over-committed discourse point to the curriculum gap, mobility during the school year or late enrolments as additional difficulties. The educational approach, centred on the curriculum, examinations and results, constitutes a structural barrier for teachers that hinders their ability to cater for individual needs. This tension extends to the family sphere, where, although axiological dilemmas arise, the language gap and economic precariousness are established as the main factors leading to exclusion and parental disengagement. Furthermore, both discourses – 'competent' and 'over-involved' – emphasise how the vulnerability of the residential environment and the lack of technical resources exacerbate the complexity of the teaching role. Regarding coexistence, they generally do not perceive serious difficulties, although they acknowledge problems with cohesion and xenophobic attitudes. Finally, all three groups of discourses highlight the lack of technical and financial resources: "Integration isn't just about bringing people together. The resources are insufficient" (14).

Perceived training needs

The training needs in cultural education identified throughout the study reveal significant differences between the three discourses analysed, although there are also clear points of convergence on certain key aspects. All three groups of teachers express the need for training in cultural education that is more practical, contextualised and sustained over time, particularly in schools characterised by high levels of diversity associated with migration.

As regards specific aspects, teachers aligned with the '*competent*' discourse consider that training in emotional intelligence is essential for teaching in multicultural contexts, for the teachers' own well-being, and to be able to provide effective emotional support to pupils. They recognise that, whilst there may be good intentions or ideas, dealing with

the emotional complexity of the classroom requires specific tools. They express this when referring to situations that arise in the classroom and for which they are not always prepared:

Training is essential. I mean, because here it's very easy to say: 'I do emotional education activities in class'. But sometimes you don't... With the younger ones, not so much, but with the older ones things come up; suddenly 'Pandora's boxes' open up and then you don't have the tools to... to close them. (10)

She sees emotional education as a process that begins with self-awareness, continues with self-regulation and leads to the ability to resolve conflicts and forge constructive bonds with others:

So, I believe that the fundamental thing, first of all, is knowing how you feel – self-awareness. Then, it's about directing your behaviour based on those emotions you're experiencing. And then, it's about resolving conflicts. Furthermore, once you're able to resolve conflicts, you'll also gain social skills and life skills that enable you to lead a more independent life, experiencing fewer conflicts with both adults and peers. For me, this is essential. (12)

These teachers insist that such training should be compulsory and form part of both the start of a teaching career and ongoing professional development. Their proposals for content range from personal emotional development to the development of interpersonal skills, including empathy, resilience, conflict management, teamwork, building trust, knowledge of cultures and religions, and addressing racist attitudes. In particular, secondary school teachers who subscribe to this view highlight a greater need for training, due to their lower level of initial preparation in these areas.

In the case of the 'over-involved' discourse, teachers agree that emotional and social competence (CE) should form part of the basic professional toolkit in order to manage the growing complexity of the social and emotional situations affecting pupils. They recognise substantial differences in the initial training received by primary and lower secondary (ESO) teachers, and highlight the importance of having more preparation to deal with a rapidly changing reality:

I think we need training. I mean, we need to prepare ourselves for what we're faced with, because, unfortunately, children... It's always children – being children as they are – who are part of society and have problems, but the thing is that society now presents certain problems... which are adult problems that find their way into homes... affecting the little ones from a very early age, right? We're just scraping by, with no psychology, no pedagogy. Very little. And I think that's important. (15)

This group even values the limited training they have had, emphasising its practical usefulness in connecting with pupils: "I've only done a few courses on... teaching English through emotions. Yes. Two, I think I've done... but anyway, two very short courses that have been incredibly useful to me" (15). Furthermore, these teachers maintain that emotional intelligence would not only improve their relationship with pupils, but also with the rest of the teaching staff and families, which would allow the educational triangle to be completed from a more systemic and collaborative perspective:

It would be good amongst ourselves, it would be good for us in our relationships with our pupils, it would be good for us in our relationships with our pupils' families, and I think it would complete the triangle: from us to our pupils, from us to the families, and from the families to the pupils. (9)

Specifically, secondary school teachers who identify with the 'over-involved' discourse state that teaching from this alternative paradigm 'works for them', because it makes it easier for them to connect with their pupils. This becomes a major motivation for training in emotional intelligence, given that one of the main difficulties highlighted by all three discourses in their educational work is, precisely, connecting with their pupils and motivating them: "Because if you don't work on the emotional level with a child, I think that's also reflected in the way they work, in whether you achieve more or fewer objectives with them" (1).

The 'burned-out' perspective, whilst more sceptical and detached, also recognises the need for training in emotional intelligence. In this case, the priority lies with teaching methodology, as a means of making subjects more accessible to pupils and addressing the lack of connection with them. They acknowledge that primary school teachers are better prepared due to their pedagogical training, and suggest that emotional training should be compulsory, both in initial teacher training and in continuing professional development, given that "today's pupils bear almost no resemblance to those of 10 years ago" (14).

Teachers would have a wider range of options for resolving... the incidents that arise during the school year. (...) Often, it ends up... with headteachers resolving them because there is no staff prepared to do so in any other way [emphasis]. And it ends up..., as it falls outside your teaching remit, it ends up becoming a disciplinary matter. (13)

Overall, the three accounts agree in calling for more practical, useful and context-based training to improve their levels of pedagogical competence and to respond to the needs of society. They point out that it should be aimed at the entire teaching staff, and that it would be more effective if delivered during working hours, as voluntary training outside school hours places an additional burden on staff. They also agree that secondary school teachers require a specific training programme, given their lower level of initial training in civic education.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has explored the discourses of teachers working in multicultural schools regarding the importance of emotional competence (EC) in their day-to-day teaching practice, as well as their perceived training needs. Based on an inductive-deductive thematic analysis, three types of discourse have been identified: *competent*, *over-committed* and *burnt-out*.

Competent discourse is that which is most consistent with the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Specifically, the teachers who embody this approach have integrated emotional competence into their daily practice, incorporating self-regulation, empathy, teamwork, and the relational approach as fundamental elements of their educational practice. Their understanding of CE aligns with the proposals of Bisquerra (2003, 2010) and Bisquerra and Pérez-Escoda (2007), in that they consider the emotional wellbeing of teachers and pupils to be inseparable from the educational process. This group of teachers' view of training as a continuous process of personal and professional growth coincides with Jokikokko's (2016) proposal for intercultural learning, whilst their understanding of diversity as a source of richness rather than an obstacle reflects the approaches of critical intercultural pedagogy, particularly the work of Walsh (2014). Furthermore, their approach to emotions in the classroom—allowing for their open expression—is consistent with studies demonstrating the value of this approach as a driver of educational transformation (Jokikokko, 2016; Jokikokko & Uitto, 2017), and reinforces the established link between a higher level of emotional intelligence and more effective management of diverse contexts (Llorent et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2019). Finally, this group identifies specific training content, such as self-awareness, resilience, empathy, conflict resolution, knowledge of cultures and religions, and teamwork skills, which is clearly in line with the dimensions of emotional intelligence proposed by Bisquerra and Pérez-Escoda (2007) and with the latest contributions by Gómez-Leal et al. (2021) on the priority components of emotional intelligence.

For its part, the over-involved discourse shares with the previous one the importance it attaches to the emotional dimension and the relationship with pupils, but does so from a more experiential perspective, with less theoretical underpinning. This group displays a high degree of empathy and commitment to the pupils' circumstances, which is consistent with studies highlighting empathy as one of the essential elements of emotional intelligence, alongside self-awareness and emotional self-regulation (Gómez-Leal et al., 2021). However, unlike the 'competent' discourse, the 'over-involved' group shows clear difficulties in setting personal and professional boundaries, which prevents them from emotionally regulating their involvement, exposing them to a high risk of burnout. These training shortcomings also affect their understanding of diversity, where assimilationist dynamics may emerge under the guise of goodwill. An example of this is the assertion that they do not name differences so as not to create them and thus avoid generating problems, which reflects a confusion between difference and inequality—something that

had already been highlighted in previous studies (Olmos, 2016; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022).

The *'burned-out'* discourse reveals a higher level of distress. These teachers perceive the context as hostile, identify numerous structural constraints, are wary of reforms and question the usefulness of new proposals. Although they recognise the importance of the emotional component in complex contexts, they do not feel capable of integrating this dimension into their practice and display an attitude of reliance on external solutions. Their position and lower level of training are consistent with studies highlighting emotional intelligence as a protective factor against teacher *burnout* (Hadar et al., 2020; Iglesias-Díaz & Romero-Pérez, 2021; Molina-Moreno et al., 2024).

With regard to the difficulties identified, the findings align with previous literature (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2026) in highlighting the language barrier, a performance-oriented educational approach, work overload and lack of time as factors that inhibit proactive management of diversity. It is interesting to note how competent and highly committed teachers highlight the socio-economic conditions of immigrant pupils amongst the complex challenges they face in their educational work. In this way, teachers' discourse shifts the focus of the conflict from cultural difference to linguistic limitations, emphasising that administrative overload and a lack of technical resources prevent cultural diversity from being reframed as a pedagogical asset.

Despite the differences between the three identified groups, and despite the existence of numerous 'external' or contextual factors that hinder their educational work, a consensus emerges regarding the urgency of strengthening training in emotional competence. The findings suggest that teachers recognise emotional competence training as a strategic tool for managing the complexity described, enabling them to exercise greater agency in contexts of diversity. Teachers particularly value those training programmes that can be directly applied to their practice, are better adapted to the context, and take place during working hours. This assessment is consistent with previous research highlighting the limited effectiveness of training programmes that are excessively theoretical, generalist or decontextualised, and which fail to bring about real changes in attitudes and practices (Hadar et al., 2020; Kardel et al., 2025).

The well-known divide between primary and lower secondary school teachers, highlighted by the teachers themselves, is also confirmed by the results, given that the *'burned-out'* discourse consists exclusively of lower secondary school teachers with little training in inclusive education and more years of service. However, the other two discourses include teachers from both primary and lower secondary education, suggesting that context and need can drive pedagogical reflection and the search for alternatives, regardless of the educational stage or initial training.

The existence of a subgroup that already operates according to an integrated model of emotional competence—teachers with a 'competent' discourse—demonstrates that this proposal is not only theoretically valid but also transferable to real school contexts. This finding is fundamental, as it allows us to conceive of training in emotional competence not as an idealised goal, but as a tangible practice that can be extended with the support

of those who already practise it. This is the view put forward by authors such as Jokikokko (2016) and Zembylas and Chubbuck (2011), who argue for the need for a critical emotional praxis to dismantle power relations and transform education from within.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the development of emotional competence (EC) as a key element in teacher training and intervention in multicultural contexts or, more specifically, in contexts of diversity associated with migration. The study has succeeded in achieving its objective of exploring the importance that teachers in multicultural schools attach to EC in their educational work, as well as identifying their perceived training needs in this area. The identification of three discourse profiles has highlighted different levels of integration of EC into teaching practice and, consequently, different challenges and possibilities that can be incorporated into teacher training programmes.

The convergence of the competence-based discourse with the proposed theoretical framework confirms the validity of this model and its applicability in training contexts. Furthermore, it demonstrates that it is possible to promote an educational approach based on CE that includes pupils, teachers and families alike, from a community-based and relational perspective. This finding provides a solid basis for the design of tailored training programmes that address the specific needs of each teaching profile, taking as their starting point the core elements of the model developed by Bisquerra (2003, 2010) and Bisquerra and Pérez Escoda (2007).

One of the study's main contributions is to demonstrate that, although not all groups of teachers start from the same level of training or emotional awareness, and despite acknowledging numerous contextual factors that hinder their work, there is a widespread willingness to improve their own competences. Even in the discourse *on burnout*—characterised by unease and disillusionment—the need for further training is recognised, albeit with doubts about its effectiveness. This shared perception reinforces the idea that well-designed and contextually appropriate training in emotional competence can have a significant impact on both teachers' well-being and the quality of educational relationships in diverse contexts.

With regard to the study's limitations, it should be noted that the discourses were identified prior to the pandemic. Nevertheless, the existing literature suggests that teachers' deep-seated conceptions tend to remain stable over time (Collie et al., 2025), which reinforces the validity of the findings. However, future research could explore the extent to which the collective experience of the health crisis has altered or intensified these positions. Furthermore, the limitations arising from the situated nature of the context—which are inherent to the chosen qualitative approach—must be acknowledged. Complementing the present study with a quantitative or mixed-methods study would allow for the scope of the findings presented and their significance in other contexts to be tested, given that the results do not merely reflect an individual reality, but rather that this reality is constructed in a socio-historical and intersubjective manner.

Looking ahead, the study provides a solid foundation for a second phase of research focused on the design and implementation of training programmes based on the profiles identified. It would be particularly important to consider a two-phase structure: a general phase for all teaching staff and a specific phase aimed at supporting the professional development of those teachers facing the greatest difficulties. The active participation of teachers with competent discourse could be a key resource for energising this process, contributing to the design of training programmes and legitimising the proposal from within the teaching community itself.

In short, this study provides clear evidence of the need to strengthen teacher training in emotional literacy as a means of improving educational provision in contexts of high cultural diversity. It also offers concrete elements for its design and a theoretical framework that can form the basis for relevant training. The results encourage further research and educational action, championing a critical, situated and shared emotional education that contributes to building more inclusive and socially just schools.

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