

Academic Success and Emotional Competence in the Higher Education Nursing Students

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Abstract

To analyse the influences of emotional competence in academic performance of higher education nursing students. Emotional intelligence has an increasingly important role not only in people's well-being but also as a fundamental factor in personal, professional and social development and success.

Method: The data collection was carried out in September 2014, with a sample of 119 students and the type of study is characterized as a quantitative non-experimental, descriptive-correlational study of cross-section. For the collection of data we used socio demographic, academic results and an emotional competence questionnaire adapted to the Portuguese context by Lima Santos & Faria (2001). After data collection, its analysis proceeded to the SPSS program, version 19.0 for Windows.

Results: The emotional perception factor is statistically higher on the students under the age of 25, with low socio-economic income and those who live in rural areas. Globally, the ability to deal with emotions is the factor that has more influence on academic success.

Conclusion: The relationship between academic performance and emotional competence highlights the ability to deal with emotions. The results found in this study calls for a reflection on the implementation of strategies to develop in nursing students, and their emotional competence, taking into account their economic context.

Keywords: emotional competences, nursing education, social development

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Introduction

Specialized literature has dedicated and highlighted the role of appropriate self-concept and emotional competence in the well-being and psychosocial adjustment of individuals, most particularly in youths. In addition to the scientific knowledge, the development of other skills is ever more privileged, particularly that of emotional intelligence.

Academic performance is an area of concern to all those involved in the training process. The idea of academic success is closely linked to student performance. Those who achieve the norms of academic excellence and progress in the course are those who have a good academic performance taking overall into account, grades and acquisition of skills.

There are many factors that can help academic performance, such as, the school, the teacher and teaching methods, the organization of activities, socio-economic and family background, and the cognitive and non-cognitive factors of the student. In this context and inserted into personal variables, the emotional component is included (Benson et al., 2010). Sakolofske et al. (2011) adds that emotional intelligence brings together a number of significant capabilities to the success and well-being of people, giving it particular emphasis compared to those of intellectual, logic-mathematical and linguistic capabilities.

Assuming that there is a relationship between emotions and thought, we have to stress the importance of this construct in different life circumstances of individuals, namely at home and at school, contributing to a better development of social and job skills, still managing more adaptive and effective behaviour (Lima Santos & Faria, 2005). Thus resulting in different conceptualizations and explanatory models of emotional intelligence highlighting, mainly two models: capability models, in which emotional intelligence is defined as a set of capabilities or cognitive entities that allow emotional functioning (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and mixed models which, in turn, comprise a wide range of personality characteristics (Barrett, 2011; Goleman, 2006).

According to this authors emotional intelligence comprises a range of skills which includes perception and emotional expression, the emotional facilitation of thought, emotional regulation and understanding. Moreover, since emotional intelligence has similar characteristics to other types of intelligence, it should reflect a type of ability or capability being related to other capabilities and developing with age and with experience (Mayer et al., 2004).

Some authors consider that the mixed models are relevant as they recognize that emotion is affected by multiple aspects of personality, such as optimism and motivation (Goldenberg et al., 2006). However, this type of model does not present a new conceptualization of emotional functioning, regarding the concept of emotion or of intelligence (Matthews et al., 2004), limiting its use.

With this in mind, this study followed the model of Mayer and Salovey (1997) organizing skills in four main areas: i) perception, evaluation and emotional expression; ii) emotion as a thought facilitator; iii) understanding and analyzing emotions and the use of emotional knowledge (understanding emotions); iv)

regulation of emotions as a way of promoting emotional and intellectual growth (managing emotions). According to these authors there is a hierarchical organization within each component, according to the complexity of psychological processes involved, and it is expected that more emotionally intelligent individuals have a faster progress through the more complex capabilities. The higher components concern conscience and emotional regulation, whereas the lower components correspond to more simple capabilities, such as understanding and expressing emotions.

The “understanding emotions” component relates to the capability or judgement that an individual recognizes emotions in themselves and in others. It also includes the individual’s ability to express feelings and underlying needs as well as assessing the expression of their emotions. It involves the perception of emotional cues in facial expressions, in tone of voice, and in artistic expressions. This component considers that emotions are a kind of mode of transport of important information in social relationships.

In turn, the component “facilitation of thought” reveals, at what level the thoughts and other cognitive functions of individuals are influenced by their emotional experiences. It refers to the use of emotions as a way to facilitate thought and action, so that they cover the assimilation of basic emotional experiences in their mental life, creating a field where afterwards memory would act. It takes into consideration the fact that the individuals may summon emotions in order to improve their action and interaction dynamics, as well as cognitive processes. The third component, “understanding emotions” refers to the capability of labelling emotions, of recognizing the existence of differences between emotions, as well as understanding the possibility of complex feelings.

It assumes that emotions develop according to a set of predictable patterns that are linked to the development towards complex social situations. In this area, it is important to acquire the skills that appear to be essential in the proper solution of social problems. Finally, the fourth component, “managing emotions”, focuses on the importance of using emotions, rather than repressing them or “acting without thinking”, as these have the advantage of helping to make correct decisions. It therefore refers to the capability (ego manipulation) of regulating emotions in themselves and in others, thus the most relevant component having also a higher level in the established hierarchy in the mental facilitation model. It presupposes the existence of a chance to put into action the emotional knowledge in order to solve problems more effectively, adequately and satisfactory, being inherent to this process, a progressive understanding of emotions in oneself, in others and in relationships between oneself and others.

From the analysis of components, it appears that emotional intelligence is simultaneously intrapersonal and interpersonal. Intrapersonal in relation to oneself, or be it, the way it recognizes and processes emotional information, as well as the degree to which it affects thoughts and behaviour. Interpersonal, when it refers to the interactions between individuals, the perception of emotions in others, and the management of emotions of others in social interaction (Joseph & Newman, 2010).

So this study aimed to analyze the emotional skills of students in the undergraduate nursing degree and its relationship to socio-demographic characteristics and academic performance.

Method

A cross sectional study took place in September 2014, with a sample of 119 students. The following inclusion criteria were applied: (a) to be enrolled in the higher education nursing school of Dr. José Timóteo Montalvão Machado in Chaves-Portugal, (b) to be above 18 years of age, and (c) must be able to answer the questions. The principles of the Helsinki Declaration were taken into account, namely, the non-exploitation of participants, equality and fair treatment, a fair selection of the population in study, beneficence, non-malice, autonomy of individuals, respect for their values, and a favorable risk-benefit relation. All of these assumptions have been secured in the form of free and informed consent.

After obtaining authorization for the use of the questionnaire, we proceeded to its implementation in which the sample consisted of 119 eligible students, 33 of which in the first clinical practices and 86 on the final level of the degree, that fully completed the questionnaire. Academic performance was evaluated by the grades obtained in the 3 previous assessments, in a scale of 0 to 20. The *Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire* was adapted to the Portuguese context by Lima Santos & Faria (2005), where there was an alpha value of 0.84 for an $n= 347$. It is characterized by being a self-report measure used in an academic and job context. It is based on the model of Mayer and Salovey (1997), consisting of 45 items according to a Likert scale of 6 points. It assess emotional skills and self-concept in 3 dimensions of emotional competence: Emotional Perception (EP) (15 items), Emotional Expression (EE) (14 items) and Ability to cope with emotions (ACE) (16 items).

After the data-collection, we proceeded to their analysis, with the statistical software used for the analysis and processing of data, the “Statistical Package for Social Sciences” (SPSS) version 19 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, EE.UU.). It included the descriptive analysis of the variables for gender, age, and place of residence; and the descriptive analysis for the dimensions of the emotional competence questionnaire and academic results. The level of significance for all analysis was set at 0.05.

Results

In general, this sample of 119 students of the nursing degree are female, having 26 years of age, and it was basically characterized by subjects who were single and living with parents. The majority, were exclusively students, having an income lower than 500 euros.

Table 1. Sample characterization (%)

| | 2 nd year (n=) | 4 th year (n=86) |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Sex: | | |
| female | 69.7 | 70.6 |
| male | 27.3 | 29.4 |
| Age (mean) | 26.0±7.6 | 26.3±7.5 |
| Marital status: | | |
| single | 78.8 | 85.5 |
| married | 12.1 | 10.8 |
| divorced | 0 | 1.2 |
| widowed | 6.1 | 2.4 |
| Family life: | | |
| alone | 9.1 | 7.0 |
| parents | 60.6 | 65.1 |
| friends | 15.2 | 9.3 |
| partner | 15.2 | 14.4 |
| Professional situation: | | |
| student | 87.9 | 98.7 |
| unemployed | 3.0 | 1.3 |
| self-employed | 0 | 4.7 |
| worker-employed | 27.3 | 26.7 |
| Income: | | |
| less than 500€ | 44.4 | 15.2 |
| 500-1000€ | 22.1 | 30.3 |
| more than 1000€ | 16.3 | 21.2 |

In the comparison of emotional competence and academic results (table 2), we can observe that the ability to deal with emotions is significantly higher on the final year of degree students.

Table 2. Comparison of emotional competence and academic results

| | Before CP 2 nd year students | After CP 2 nd year students | 4 th year students |
|--|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| Emotional perception (EP) | 45.0±3.3 | 45.5±4.9 | 45.5±3.9 |
| Emotional expression (EE) | 44.1±5.4 | 46.5±3.5 | 44.1±5.5 |
| Ability to cope with emotions (ACE) | 43.5±3.4* | 43.2±4.5 | 46.2±2.9* |
| Academic results | 15.4±3.1 | 16.1±4.2 | 14.6±3.3 |

* p value MW test =0.05

The emotional perception factor is statistically higher on the students under the age of 25, with low socio-economical income, and on those who live in rural areas (table 3). Globally, the ability to deal with emotions is the factor that has more influence on academic success.

Table 3. Analysis of the emotional competence dimensions (%)

| | ACE | EE | EP |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Gender | | | |
| Male | 40.27 | 36.37 | 38.37 |
| Female | 33.86 | 38.45 | 33.82 |
| p value MW test | 0.256 | 0.700 | 0.399 |
| Reidencial area | | | |
| Rural | 43.10 | 39.55 | 48.48 |
| Urban | 36.38 | 35.90 | 32.05 |
| p value MW test | 0.216 | 0.500 | 0.002 |
| Age | | | |
| Less than 25 | 39.71 | 38.15 | 43.07 |
| More than 25 | 37.69 | 36.37 | 27.80 |
| p value MW test | 0.704 | 0.732 | 0.003 |
| Income | | | |
| Less than 500€ | 36.71 | 37.55 | 46.63 |
| More than 500€ | 40.90 | 37.46 | 30.55 |
| p value MW test | 0.412 | 0.987 | 0.001 |
| Academic results - grade | | | |
| Less than 14 | 45.53 | 37.51 | 41.55 |
| More than 14.1 | 28.35 | 39.36 | 38.23 |
| | 0.049 | 0.115 | 0.201 |

Discussion

Emotional intelligence has come to occupy exponentially an important role not only in the well-being of people, but also as a key factor in personal, professional, social, and academic success as was proposed to be analyzed in the present study (Blackwell et al., 2007). This construct undergoes a multi-factorial arrangement of emotional, personal and cognitive competences that influence individual capabilities to deal

actively and effectively with the pressures and demands of the environment (Monteiro, 2009).

In this sample it appears that most students do not work and have low monthly incomes, as well as living with their parents. In general, the academic achievements of the 2nd year students are higher, which seems to be related to the fact that the level of demand increases significantly throughout the course. Mayer and Salovey (1997) say that they result from the intersection between two fundamental constituents of personality, precisely, from the cognitive system and the emotional system, where intellectual standards arrogate to cognitive performance, as the patterns of adapting to emotional reactions. For these authors, people tend to develop internal models that include emotional functioning standards, which may be evaluated according to their logical consistency and also the associated intellectual capacities.

We gather from different works in social studies and humanities, that the person experiencing positive emotions, mobilizes a guiding motivational energy towards attention and learning, as opposed to the power of negative emotions, inhibiting attention and relation, establishing feelings of frustration and poor involvement, inducing mood frameworks that are facilitators of depression and anxiety (Goleman, 2006; Benson et al., 2010).

In the results analysis of the emotional competence questionnaire, statistically significant differences confirm that students attending the 4th year have a greater ability to deal with emotions when compared to 2nd year students. This appears to be associated to the higher amount of experiences acquired through the maturity of students, particularly in the context of clinical studies, which corroborates the results obtained by Silva (2011), even though our students had slightly lower results, which deserves our special attention, given the fact that they are preparing to be future professionals in health.

Centred on the entry of youths into higher education, this is understood as a personal challenge, through the range of changes that is involved, namely: the environment, leaving home, separation from family and peers, the confrontation with the unknown, and the sudden need for autonomy and the ability for decision making (Shan & Thingujam, 2008). Personal changes such as the transition to adulthood, the adoption of new routines, the demands of university education, the expectance that students show greater autonomy in the learning process, time management, the formulation of objectives and goals be met (Matheny et al., 2008). This student population is characterized by exposure to stressful situations, requiring an adjustment in emotional management, and relying on coping strategies.

In the emotional perception dimension statistically significant differences are observed regarding the residential area, in which students living in a rural environment show superior mean values (48.48 versus 32.05). In contrast to the study of Silva (2011), the individuals that reside in an urban environment show superior mean values in all the dimensions of the scale. In turn, this dimension (emotional perception) is significantly inferior in students with more than 25 years of age (27.80 versus 43.07), which justifies with the fact that they are worker-students, with more obligations and duties beyond the professional including family and social, as described by Silva (2011) and Cardoso (2011).

According to Saklofske et al. (2011), the emotional regulation, as students adapt, is an essential constituent in the adaptive process, helping to deal effectively with stress agents in the academic environment. The students that are unable to regulate and recognize the emotional states in themselves, or do not learn to do so, become their hostages, showing feelings of unease, helplessness and of exclusion (Cardoso, 2011). Regarding the relationship between this dimension and the monthly incomes, statistically significant differences are observed, where students with lower incomes have better results in emotional perception (46.63 versus 30.55), in a way because they seek and have greater support from parents, also because this corresponds to the younger students.

In the analysis of academic results, it appears that students with average grades below that of 14, this being a differentiating value, show better ability in dealing with emotions (45.53 versus 28.35), which seems to be related with more dedication to the relationship aspects rather than academic. Joseph & Newman (2010) state that academic results have a directly proportional relationship with those of emotional intelligence.

Reference is made to some methodological limitations that may interfere in some way on the results obtained, namely the reduced sample size, this being a school located in a predominantly rural region, comprising of students from different backgrounds and nationalities (Portuguese and Spanish).

Conclusion

According to the available literature, the development of personal skills, such as emotional intelligence can contribute significantly to the success and well-being of people, especially students. According to our results it is observed that the ability to deal with emotions is significantly higher in students in their last year of the degree. The emotional perception dimension is higher in students under the age of 25, with low socio-economic income and living in rural areas.

These results invite us to reflect on the implementation of strategies to develop the emotional skills in nursing students, given their economic context and age. We understand the need to develop more research to deepen the understanding of emotional competence that influences academic performance and the success of nursing students.

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