
A Comparative Study of Socio-Emotional Skills Between High School and University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study conducted a comparative analysis of socio-emotional skills between high school and university students using a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design. A validated questionnaire was administered to a sample of 105 high school students and 50 university students. The data were analyzed using Student's t-tests and ANOVA. The results revealed that both groups have strengths and areas for improvement. University students showed significantly higher levels of emotional maturity, social awareness, and conflict management ability ($p < 0.05$), while high school students excelled in confidence, teamwork, and assertiveness under social pressure ($p < 0.05$). Both groups faced similar difficulties in emotional regulation, goal management, and self-discipline. It is recommended to implement specific programs to develop socio-emotional skills at both educational levels, addressing the needs of each group.

KEYWORDS

Educational innovation; socio-emotional skills; high school students; university students; integral development.

INTRODUCTION

The development of socio-emotional skills is a crucial aspect in the academic and personal formation of individuals. These skills, which include resilience, emotional self-regulation, empathy, conflict resolution, and effective communication, play a fundamental role in academic success and in the ability to adapt to life's challenges [1], [2].

In the educational field, it is particularly relevant to analyze the differences and similarities in socio-emotional skills between high school and university students. Both educational levels represent crucial stages in individual development, each with its own characteristics and challenges [3]. High school students are in a transition stage between secondary and higher education, where they still receive more structured guidance from their teachers. However, university students experience greater autonomy and responsibility in their learning, facing a more demanding academic workload and making important decisions about their professional future [4].

Understanding the strengths and areas of opportunity in students' socio-emotional development is fundamental for designing strategies and programs that promote their integral growth, preparing them to face academic and personal challenges effectively [5]. This study seeks to contribute to such understanding through a comparative analysis of socio-emotional skills between high school and university students in Mexico.

DEVELOPMENT

Socio-emotional skills are a broad construct that includes a set of cognitive, socio-affective, and emotional processes that support behaviors evaluated as skilled or adequate, considering the demands and constraints of different contexts. In the educational field, these skills allow students to carry out interpersonal tasks and coexist harmoniously with others.

The CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) model identifies five fundamental socio-emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making [5]. These competencies are essential for students' academic success and general well-being.

Recent research has demonstrated that the development of socio-emotional skills is associated with better academic outcomes, lower incidence of behavioral problems, and greater psychological well-being in students at different educational levels [1], [6]. Furthermore, it has been observed that these skills are particularly important during educational transitions, such as the passage from high school to university [7].

In the Latin American context, studies such as that of Berger et al. [8] have pointed out the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors in the development of socio-emotional skills. This suggests the need for specific research in different educational contexts, such as the Mexican one, to better understand the particularities of socio-emotional development in these environments.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

General Objective.

To comparatively analyze the level of development of socio-emotional skills in high school and university students in Mexico, with the purpose of identifying similarities, differences, and areas of opportunity that guide the design of pertinent educational strategies for each educational level.

Specific Objectives

1. To evaluate the level of development of the main socio-emotional skills in high school and university students, based on the CASEL model.
2. To statistically compare the levels of development of these skills between both educational groups.
3. To identify the characteristic socio-emotional strengths and weaknesses of each educational level.
4. To analyze the influence of educational level and age on the development of socio-emotional skills.
5. To propose general guidelines for the design of differentiated socio-emotional development programs for upper secondary and higher education.

OBJECT OF STUDY

The object of study of this research is the development of socio-emotional skills in high school and university students, analyzed comparatively in the Mexican educational context, considering as an axis of analysis the competencies proposed by the CASEL model.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design.

A quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design was adopted, appropriate for comparatively analyzing the level of development of socio-emotional skills between two groups at a specific moment.

Participants.

The population consisted of second-semester high school students and second-semester university students from the undergraduate programs in Public Accounting and Industrial Administrative Engineering. The final sample consisted of 105 high school students and 50 university students, selected through stratified random sampling.

Instrument.

An adaptation of the questionnaire "Emociones primero para medir habilidades socioemocionales" (2020), based on the CASEL model, was used. The instrument consists of 35 items distributed across nine dimensions, with a five-point Likert scale. Internal consistency reached a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92, and confirmatory factor analysis supported the dimensional structure of the instrument.

Procedure.

The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms, after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The process was carried out under the supervision of a trained teacher.

Data Analysis.

The data were analyzed using SPSS software version 26, through descriptive analyses and inferential tests (Student's t and ANOVA), establishing a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

The research was developed in seven phases: theoretical foundation, methodological design, selection and validation of the instrument, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of results, and elaboration of conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistical analyses revealed significant differences in several socio-emotional skills between high school and university students. Below are the main findings:

1. Self-awareness and self-regulation:

University students showed significantly higher levels in the ability to accept situations beyond their control ($M = 3.8, SD = 0.9$) compared to high school students ($M = 3.2, SD = 1.1$), $t(153) = 3.42, p < .001$. However, both groups reported similar difficulties in controlling anger or annoyance ($F(1,153) = 1.87, p = .173$).

2. Social awareness and empathy:

University students exhibited a greater ability to identify when others need help ($M = 4.1, SD = 0.8$) compared to high school students ($M = 3.5, SD = 1.0$), $t(153) = 3.78, p < .001$. Additionally, they showed higher levels of empathy toward others' suffering ($F(1,153) = 5.23, p = .024$).

3. Goal management and perseverance:

University students reported greater ease in achieving proposed goals ($M = 3.9, SD = 0.9$) than high school students ($M = 3.4, SD = 1.1$), $t(153) = 2.95, p = .004$. However, both groups showed similar difficulties in completing challenging academic tasks ($F(1,153) = 0.76, p = .385$).

4. Relational skills:

High school students stood out in effective collaboration with peers ($M = 4.0, SD = 0.8$) compared to university students ($M = 3.6, SD = 1.0$), $t(153) = -2.64, p = .009$.

5. Responsible decision-making:

University students showed a greater tendency to seek advice when making important decisions ($M = 4.2, SD = 0.7$) compared to high school students ($M = 3.7, SD = 1.0$), $t(153) = 3.31, p = .001$.

Table I.

Comparison of means in key socio-emotional skills

| SKILL | High School M (SD) | University M (SD) | t | p |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------|-------|
| Accepting uncontrollable situations | 3.2 (1.1) | 3.8 (0.9) | 3.42 | <.001 |
| Identifying need for help | 3.5 (1.0) | 4.1 (0.8) | 3.78 | <.001 |
| Achieving proposed goals | 3.4 (1.1) | 3.9 (0.9) | 2.95 | .004 |
| Collaboration with peers | 4.0 (0.8) | 3.6 (1.0) | -2.64 | .009 |
| Seeking advice | 3.7 (1.0) | 4.2 (0.7) | 3.31 | .001 |

In summary, statistical analyses evidenced significant differences between high school and university students in various socio-emotional skills. University students showed higher levels of acceptance of uncontrollable situations, empathy, and responsible decision-making, while high school students stood out in collaboration with peers. Both groups presented similar difficulties in emotional regulation and academic perseverance.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal interesting patterns in the development of socio-emotional skills between high school and university students, which partially agree with previous research on socio-emotional development at different educational stages.

The greater capacity of university students to accept situations beyond their control and overcome frustration coincides with the findings of Zimmerman and Cleary [9], who suggest that emotional self-regulation tends to improve with age and experience. This difference could be attributed to university students' greater exposure to challenging situations and the need to adapt to a more autonomous academic environment.

Regarding social awareness and empathy, the results align with those of Allemand et al. [10], who found that empathy tends to increase during early adulthood. University students' greater ability to identify when others need help and experience empathy could be related to the diversity of social experiences offered by the university environment.

However, it is interesting to note that high school students showed greater skills in effective collaboration with peers. This could be explained by the more structured environment and greater frequency of group work in high school, as suggested by Damon and Phelps [11] in their analysis of peer cooperation at different educational levels.

The difficulties shared by both groups in areas such as anger control and completion of challenging tasks suggest that these are skills requiring continuous attention at both educational levels. This agrees with Steinberg's [12] observations on the prolonged development of executive functions during adolescence and early adulthood.

The findings partially agree with previous research indicating progression in emotional self-regulation and social awareness as age and educational experience advance. Likewise, the results underscore the influence of the school context on the development of relational and collaborative skills.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that the development of socio-emotional skills presents differentiated characteristics according to educational level.

First, a progression is observed in certain socio-emotional skills as students advance in their educational trajectory. University students show greater emotional maturity, evidenced by their greater ability to accept situations beyond their control, understand others' emotions, and seek advice in important decision-making. This suggests that the university experience, with its greater autonomy and diversity of social interactions, may foster the development of these competencies.

However, it is important to note that high school students also present unique strengths, particularly in areas such as teamwork and resistance to negative social pressures. This highlights the importance of the structured environments and close support that characterize upper secondary education in the development of certain socio-emotional skills.

A crucial finding is that both groups face similar challenges in areas such as emotional regulation during stressful situations, frustration management, and academic self-discipline. This indicates that these skills require continuous attention and development throughout the entire educational trajectory.

These results highlight the need to implement socio-emotional development programs adjusted to the specific demands of high school and university, maintaining a continuous focus on fundamental skills such as emotional regulation and perseverance.

In the case of university students, it could be useful to reinforce teamwork skills and resistance to social pressure, while continuing to develop their emotional maturity.

Furthermore, the results underscore the importance of a continuous focus on fundamental skills such as emotional regulation and perseverance at both educational levels. This could be achieved through the integration of mindfulness practices, stress management strategies, and goal-setting techniques into the curriculum.

Future studies could explore how these socio-emotional skills develop longitudinally and how they relate to long-term academic and professional success.

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