



Improving emotional intelligence and emotional self-efficacy through a teaching intervention for university students

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence continues to receive a substantial amount of attention from researchers who argue that it is an important predictor of health, wellbeing and in particular, work-related outcomes. Emotional self-efficacy, which is concerned with beliefs in one's emotional functioning capabilities, has recently been shown to be important in relation to graduate employability. However, there are very few empirical studies which demonstrate that emotional functioning ability is something that it is possible to teach and develop. This study investigates whether it is possible to improve levels of emotional intelligence and emotional self-efficacy in university students through a teaching intervention. The findings show that it is possible to increase emotional self-efficacy and some aspects of emotional intelligence ability. These findings are considered within the framework of graduate employability, as improving emotional functioning may be particularly important to young people who will shortly join the graduate working population.

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1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen a substantial amount of attention paid to the subject of emotional intelligence (EI). Much debate has centred around the different conceptualisations of EI with researchers in the field defining it as either a type of cognitive *ability* involving the ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotion (the Four Branch Model of EI; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004) or as personality *traits* related to dealing with emotions (Petrides, Furnham, & Mavroveli, 2007; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). These two views are often termed ability and trait EI respectively. A further, more recent, addition to the literature is concerned with how confident people are in relation to their emotional abilities, termed emotional self-efficacy (ESE) (Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2008). There is evidence to suggest that adaptive emotional functioning predicts important work-related outcomes (e.g. Boland & Ross, 2010; Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006; Lopes, Grewal, Kadis, Gall, & Salovey, 2006; O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2010), may have an important role to play in relation to academic achievement (MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2011) and graduate employability (Dacre-Pool & Qualter, under review).

If, as research would suggest, adaptive emotional functioning has important implications for a number of outcomes, there is a convincing argument for teaching the relevant skills in our schools, colleges

and universities and for designing theoretically based training interventions for adults. A recent meta-analysis of 213 U.S. based studies found that teaching interventions for social and emotional learning for children (age 5 to 18 years) can be effective in terms of improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Evaluation of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme in UK secondary schools did not support these findings; instead there was little impact of the SEAL programme on outcomes such as pupils' social and emotional skills, general mental health and behaviour (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2010). This may reflect the design of this particular programme and inconsistencies in its implementation and delivery.

However, there is little empirical research that demonstrates that it is possible to develop EI and ESE in young adults. This study aims to contribute to this under-researched area by investigating if it is possible to increase levels of ability EI and ESE in a student population through a theoretically based teaching intervention.

1.1. The importance of EI and ESE

The Four Branch Model of ability EI has been described as being based on theory, clearly articulated, and more narrowly defined than other models of EI (e.g. Gohm, Corser, & Dalsky, 2005). It has also been subject to development and refinement, is the basis for many EI measures and is generally accepted by most researchers (Côté, Lopes, Salovey, & Miners, 2010; MacCann et al., 2011). There is also a good deal of research that points to ability EI as an important predictor in relation to health and wellbeing (e.g. Bastian, Burns, &

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Nettelbeck, 2005; Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010; Trinidad & Johnson, 2002), academic achievement (e.g. Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2009; MacCann et al., 2011; Qualter, Gardner, Hutchinson, Pope & Whiteley, 2012) and a number of other important outcomes that specifically relate to the workplace (Boland & Ross, 2010; Kerr et al., 2006; Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011; Lopes et al., 2006; Mueller & Curhan, 2006; O'Boyle et al., 2010; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005; Vitello-Cicciu, 2001).

Trait EI has also been positively associated with good health and wellbeing (Martins et al., 2010) and workplace relevant outcomes (e.g. O'Boyle et al., 2010; Petrides & Furnham, 2006). However, some measures of trait EI have been criticised for including aspects such as self-control, happiness and assertiveness which may be important constructs in their own right, but should not be included in instruments purporting to measure EI (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).

Emotional Self-Efficacy (ESE) is defined as beliefs in one's emotional functioning capabilities (Dacre Pool & Qualter, *in press*). From a developmental point of view, Saarni (1999) discusses the importance of self-efficacy in dealing with emotional experiences. A capacity for emotional self-efficacy should result in a person utilising their ability to deal with negative emotional experiences by being able to manage their intensity, frequency and duration. They are able to do this because they believe they have the capability to do so effectively and, therefore, do not become overwhelmed by negative emotions (Saarni, 1999).

Some have argued that emotional self-efficacy (ESE) is an appropriate alternative label for trait EI (Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Petrides, Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007). However, Kirk et al. (2008) argue that trait EI encompasses other aspects of self-perception and dispositions that are not related to ESE and as such the two concepts should not be viewed as identical. They developed a measure solely concerned with self-efficacy in relation to emotional functioning as operationalised by the four branch model of ability EI (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), called the Emotional Self-Efficacy Scale or ESES. As ESE is still a relatively new concept, there are currently few empirical studies that provide strong evidence of its validity as a predictor of important outcomes. However, a recent study found that ESE predicted employability in a graduate population, suggesting it may have an important role to play in terms of how graduates feel about their ability to choose, secure and retain satisfying occupations (Dacre Pool & Qualter, *under review*). Further, it has been shown to be important in predicting academic success even when ability EI is controlled (Qualter et al., 2012). It would appear therefore that both ability EI and ESE are important predictors of various outcomes. However measures of the two do not correlate, suggesting they should be viewed as separate constructs (Dacre Pool & Qualter, *in press*).

Both ability EI and ESE appear to be important predictors of academic success and graduate employability; theoretically, it should also be possible to improve them. As such, there is a need for interventions that help students to develop both of these areas. Previous research has also shown that trait EI predicts various important outcomes, but personality traits are relatively stable beyond a certain age and designing interventions with a view to making positive changes would be questionable. As undergraduate students are gaining qualifications, knowledge and skills to prepare them for future lives in the world of work, it would make sense to ensure they are also equipped with knowledge and skills in relation to emotional functioning and with the confidence to enable them to act on these abilities. Surveys of employers over the last two decades consistently report employability skills predicted by EI, such as communication and team-working, as highly desirable in graduate recruits (e.g. Confederation of British Industry [CBI], 2009; Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006). Some models of graduate employability include EI as a key element (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) so there

appears to be a good argument for designing and delivering EI courses for students in Higher Education. As ability EI and ESE are important but distinct constructs, any intervention would need to incorporate elements that address both of these aspects of emotional functioning. It could be that some students require help in developing their knowledge and skills in this area, whereas others need to build their confidence in their abilities and some may need to do both.

1.2. Designing EI/ESE teaching interventions

A tripartite model of EI that encompasses both ability and trait EI viewpoints has recently been proposed (Mikolajczak, Petrides, Coumans, & Luminet, 2009; Nelis, Quidbach, Mikolajczak, & Hansenne, 2009). It could be used as a guiding framework for the design of EI/ESE interventions. The three levels consist of (i) *knowledge* of emotions and strategies to deal with emotional situations, (ii) actual *abilities* in relation to emotional functioning and (iii) personality *traits* in dealing with emotions. We propose a further level (iv) to incorporate *self-efficacy* in relation to emotional functioning. An EI course should include activities to address levels (i), (ii) and (iv), but would be unlikely to change personality traits (iii) which are normally considered to be relatively stable (e.g. Pervin & John, 1997). However, it would be possible to teach people who, for example, score low on traits of happiness or optimism, alternative ways of dealing with situations.

It is imperative that any EI courses are based on a clear theoretically sound model of EI and do not purely consist of materials gathered from pre-existing courses that may be related to EI but are not equivalent (Gohm, 2004). In relation to specific EI interventions, there is a concern that at present very few EI training programmes have been systematically designed, implemented and evaluated (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2008). A search of the EI literature reveals very few examples of interventions aimed at increasing EI through education that have a solid theoretical underpinning. Also, one day workshops or seminars can be useful in raising awareness of EI, but in themselves are unlikely to lead to the kind of change that would be required for a person to successfully improve their EI (Zeidner et al., 2008). It may take several weeks, with periods of reflection between activities to effect longer lasting change.

To answer the call for theoretically based EI interventions, Nelis et al. (2009) designed a teaching intervention for use with an undergraduate cohort. The intervention consisted of four classes of two and a half hours each, taught each week, and was developed to include activities based on the Mayer and Salovey Four Branch Model. These activities included short lectures, role plays, group discussions and readings. The intervention was evaluated using a mixture of trait and ability type measures and significant improvements were found in the 'perceiving' and 'managing' emotions branches. 'Understanding' emotion remained unchanged and the 'using' emotion branch was not measured. It was also found that the positive changes remained significant six months later. The researchers described their results as promising, but suggested that future work would benefit from replicating the results with a larger and more heterogeneous sample. They also recommended a control group that was engaged in other group activities running concurrently with the intervention group.

1.3. The present study

Building on the work of Nelis et al. (2009) the intervention designed and delivered in respect of this study incorporated a larger sample size, with male and female students from a diverse range of subject disciplines. The study also included a control group. The intervention was based on the Salovey and Mayer Four Branch Model of ability EI with the intention of improving both ability EI and ESE. The study was evaluated using appropriate measures of both ability

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