

ENTRE LA PROTECCIÓN Y LA AUTONOMÍA: DESAFÍOS EDUCATIVOS ANTE LA CRECIENTE FRAGILIDAD EMOCIONAL DE NIÑOS Y ADOLESCENTES

BETWEEN PROTECTION AND AUTONOMY: EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE FACE OF GROWING CONCERNS ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Yolanda Cava González

Orientadora educativa

Murcia

ORCID: 0009-0000-3746-0965

Resumen

Las profundas transformaciones sociales, culturales y tecnológicas experimentadas en las últimas décadas han situado el bienestar emocional de niños y adolescentes en el centro del debate educativo. La creciente preocupación por la salud mental y el desarrollo socioemocional ha favorecido la incorporación de nuevas funciones y responsabilidades a los centros educativos, impulsando modelos de intervención orientados a la promoción del bienestar. Sin embargo, esta evolución también plantea importantes desafíos relacionados con el equilibrio entre la protección de la infancia y el desarrollo progresivo de la autonomía personal. El presente artículo reflexiona sobre esta tensión educativa a partir del análisis de los cambios sociales contemporáneos y de sus repercusiones en la escuela. Asimismo, se examina el papel de la orientación educativa como elemento clave para promover entornos emocionalmente saludables sin renunciar al desarrollo de competencias como la resiliencia, la responsabilidad, la capacidad de afrontamiento y la autonomía. Finalmente, se defiende la necesidad de construir una concepción del bienestar emocional que integre acompañamiento y exigencia, protección y crecimiento personal, contribuyendo a la formación de personas capaces de afrontar de manera equilibrada los desafíos del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: *bienestar emocional; orientación educativa; autonomía personal; resiliencia; educación emocional; salud mental.*

Abstract

The profound social, cultural and technological transformations experienced in recent decades have placed the emotional well-being of children and adolescents at the centre of educational debate. Growing concern for mental health and socio-emotional development has encouraged schools to adopt new responsibilities aimed at promoting student well-being. However, this evolution also raises important challenges related to balancing the protection of childhood with the progressive development of personal autonomy. This article reflects on this educational tension through an analysis of contemporary social changes and

their impact on schools. It also examines the role of educational guidance and counselling as a key element in promoting emotionally healthy environments while fostering resilience, responsibility, coping skills and autonomy. Finally, the paper argues for a conception of emotional well-being that integrates support and challenge, protection and personal growth, contributing to the development of individuals capable of facing the challenges of the twenty-first century in a balanced and responsible way.

Keywords: *emotional well-being, educational guidance, personal autonomy, resilience, emotional education, mental health.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the emotional well-being of children and adolescents has become an increasingly important concern within the field of education. Growing awareness of child and adolescent mental health has been reflected in both public discourse and educational policy, leading to the development of programmes, strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting students' holistic development (García, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). This growing interest has been driven, in part, by the increasing prevalence of emotional difficulties among children and young people, as well as by a broader societal recognition of the importance of strengthening protective factors that support psychological well-being from an early age.

Schools have not remained unaffected by these developments. Over recent decades, the development of emotional competencies has gradually become embedded in educational debate and practice, establishing itself as an essential dimension of students' holistic education. From this perspective, emotional education is understood as a continuous educational process designed to foster emotional awareness and regulation, the development of social skills, and the acquisition of personal resources that enable individuals to cope adaptively with life's challenges (Pérez & Filella, 2019; Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023). Likewise, several authors have argued that schools should promote not only academic learning but also competencies related to well-being, positive coexistence and personal development (Escobar et al., 2020).

However, the growing emphasis on emotional well-being cannot be understood without considering the profound social, cultural and technological transformations that characterise contemporary societies. The expansion of digital environments, increasingly fast-paced lifestyles, changing family dynamics and the emergence of new forms of social interaction have created an unprecedented context for childhood and adolescence. As Fundación Santillana (2021) points out, educating young people in the twenty-first century requires addressing complex

challenges arising from a context characterised by hyperconnectivity, information overload and the need to develop personal competencies that enable individuals to adapt to increasingly dynamic and uncertain environments. Along similar lines, UNESCO (2024) highlights the need for education systems to promote students' well-being and holistic development in response to the emerging challenges of contemporary societies.

Within this context, alongside the undeniable progress represented by the incorporation of emotional well-being as an educational objective, an important issue calls for deeper reflection. The legitimate concern to protect children and adolescents from emotional distress coexists with the need to foster the gradual development of personal autonomy, resilience and the capacity to cope with the inevitable challenges of life. As Tercero (2012) argues, the development of these competencies is essential if young people are to build meaningful life projects in societies characterised by uncertainty and constant change. Similarly, Bisquerra and Hernández Paniello (2023) emphasise that emotional education should contribute to the development of personal resources that enable individuals to respond adaptively to the challenges they encounter throughout life.

Against this background, this article reflects on the tension between protection and autonomy in contemporary education. To this end, it examines some of the social changes that have placed emotional well-being at the centre of educational debate, as well as the challenges this situation poses for schools in their mission to educate individuals capable of responding responsibly and in a balanced manner to the demands of the twenty-first century.

2. SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE EMERGING FOCUS ON EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

The growing concern for the emotional well-being of children and adolescents cannot be understood without considering the profound social

transformations that have taken place over recent decades. Changes in family structures, technology, culture and education have significantly altered the conditions under which childhood and adolescence develop, as well as society's expectations of schools.

Traditionally, education focused primarily on the transmission of knowledge and preparation for adult life. In recent decades, however, the role of schools has gradually expanded to encompass objectives related to personal development, positive coexistence, emotional education and the promotion of well-being. Within this context, emotional education has evolved from playing a secondary role to becoming an essential dimension of students' holistic education (Pérez & Filella, 2019). This development reflects the growing recognition that emotional and social competencies play a fundamental role in personal well-being, the quality of interpersonal relationships, school climate and the academic development of children and adolescents (Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023; OECD, 2021).

At the same time, the increasing visibility of mental health problems among children and adolescents has brought emotional well-being to the forefront of educational debate. García (2023) argues that child and adolescent mental health constitutes one of the major educational and social challenges of the twenty-first century, owing both to the growing prevalence of certain emotional difficulties and to the need to develop effective preventive strategies from an early age (Fundación ANAR & Fundación Mutua Madrileña, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

These developments have been accompanied by the transformations brought about by the expansion of digital technologies and new forms of social interaction. Today's children and adolescents are growing up in contexts characterised by hyperconnectivity, immediate access to information and constant exposure to social and emotional stimuli. According to Fundación Santillana (2021), these changes have created new opportunities for learning and communication, while also giving rise to new challenges related to emotional regulation, identity

formation and the development of healthy interpersonal relationships. These issues have likewise been highlighted in recent international reports on education and well-being (UNESCO, 2024).

Furthermore, several authors have observed that contemporary societies display an increasing commitment to the protection and well-being of children. This undoubtedly represents a significant social achievement. At the same time, however, it has prompted new debates concerning the balance between protection and autonomy, particularly within educational settings. In this regard, Tercero (2012) emphasises the importance of fostering resilience and the personal competencies required to cope with uncertainty, adversity and the challenges associated with adult life.

From this perspective, schools face a particularly complex task. On the one hand, they must respond to the emotional needs of students growing up in increasingly demanding and rapidly changing environments. On the other hand, they must avoid allowing the legitimate concern for well-being to lead to educational approaches that seek to eliminate every experience of discomfort or frustration. As a process aimed at fostering the holistic development of the individual, education must not only provide support and protection but also encourage the gradual development of the personal resources required to face difficulties in an autonomous and responsible manner (Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023; Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023).

3. BETWEEN PROTECTION AND AUTONOMY: A NECESSARY EDUCATIONAL TENSION

The growing concern for the emotional well-being of children and adolescents represents one of the most significant advances in the contemporary understanding of education. The recognition of pupils' emotional needs, the introduction of emotional education programmes and the increasing awareness of

mental health have contributed to creating educational environments that place greater emphasis on the holistic development of the individual (Pérez & Filella, 2019; Escobar et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2024). However, this development also raises important questions regarding how schools should balance the necessary protection of childhood with the progressive development of personal autonomy.

Historically, the purpose of education has been to prepare younger generations to function effectively in their personal, social and professional lives. This preparation involves not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of personal resources that enable individuals to cope with uncertainty, manage difficulties and adapt to changing contexts. In this regard, resilience becomes a key competence, understood as the capacity to face adversity, learn from it and continue developing in a positive way (Tercero, 2012). Likewise, international educational organisations emphasise the importance of promoting personal and socio-emotional competences that enable children and adolescents to function effectively in increasingly complex and rapidly changing environments (OECD, 2021).

From this perspective, it is important to distinguish between emotional well-being and the absence of discomfort. Unpleasant emotions, interpersonal conflicts, mistakes and frustrations are inherent aspects of the human experience and play an important role in learning and personal development. Emotional education does not seek to eliminate these experiences but rather to provide individuals with the tools to understand, regulate and cope with them appropriately. Consequently, the development of emotional and social competences is now regarded as a fundamental element in promoting personal well-being, positive school relationships and pupils' academic development (Pérez & Filella, 2019; Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023).

Contemporary societies show an increasing tendency to protect children from a wide range of risks and threats. This development has undoubtedly

contributed to significant improvements in children's living conditions and rights. However, some authors warn that excessive protection may reduce opportunities for learning through experience, limiting the development of autonomy, responsibility and tolerance of frustration (Tercero, 2012). Consequently, the current educational challenge is not merely to prevent suffering but also to help young people develop the personal resources required to cope with it in a constructive manner.

This issue is particularly relevant within schools. Educational institutions are expected to provide safe, inclusive and emotionally supportive environments, in line with current educational guidance on emotional well-being (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023). At the same time, they must also offer learning experiences that require effort, perseverance, responsibility and the capacity to overcome challenges. Schools cannot eliminate every difficulty that pupils encounter in their lives, nor should they seek to do so. A fundamental aspect of their educational mission is to support pupils in developing the competences needed to face such challenges with increasing autonomy.

Within this framework, emotional education represents a particularly valuable means of integrating protection and autonomy. Rather than encouraging the systematic avoidance of discomfort, high-quality emotional education should promote self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, responsible decision-making and the ability to deal effectively with everyday challenges (Pérez & Filella, 2019; Escobar et al., 2020; Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023). From this perspective, emotional well-being should not be understood as a permanent state of satisfaction but as the capacity to adapt healthily to the changing circumstances of life.

Therefore, the contemporary educational challenge should not be framed as a choice between protection and autonomy. Both dimensions form part of the same developmental process and should be understood as complementary.

Protecting children means creating safe conditions for learning and personal growth, whereas educating for autonomy involves providing opportunities to assume responsibility, face difficulties and develop personal resources. The school's task is precisely to strike a balance between these two dimensions, thereby contributing to the development of individuals who are capable of building their own well-being without depending solely on the elimination of every experience of discomfort or adversity.

4. SCHOOLS IN THE FACE OF EMERGING EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

The social transformations described above are directly reflected in the everyday reality of schools. In recent years, many education professionals have reported an increase in demands related to emotional well-being from both pupils and their families. This trend is reflected in the growing number of consultations concerning emotional difficulties, adjustment problems, interpersonal conflicts, anxiety related to academic situations, and difficulties in coping with frustration and failure. Similar trends have also been highlighted in recent national and international reports on childhood and adolescence (Fundación ANAR & Fundación Mutua Madrileña, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

From the perspective of educational guidance and counselling, it is evident that many of these situations do not necessarily correspond to psychological disorders but rather to difficulties associated with normal processes of personal and social development. Adolescence remains a developmental stage characterised by physical, emotional and interpersonal changes that generate uncertainty and require ongoing adaptation. Nevertheless, the growing social concern for emotional well-being has, in some cases, contributed to interpreting typical developmental experiences as problematic situations requiring immediate intervention (Tercero, 2012).

This reality poses significant challenges for schools. On the one hand, it is essential to recognise and respond to pupils' emotional needs by promoting safe environments and educational relationships based on trust, respect and support. Research evidence indicates that emotional well-being is closely associated with learning, school climate and pupils' overall development (Pérez & Filella, 2019; Herrera, 2025; OECD, 2021).

On the other hand, schools must avoid adopting an exclusively supportive or therapeutic role that may blur their educational mission. Educational institutions cannot replace health services, nor can they single-handedly resolve the complex social issues affecting children and adolescents. Their primary contribution lies in creating educational contexts that foster the development of personal and social competences, promoting autonomy, responsibility and the ability to cope with everyday challenges (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023).

From this perspective, educational practice should focus on strengthening protective factors rather than eliminating every experience of discomfort. Learning to manage frustration, deal with interpersonal conflicts, assume responsibility and persevere in the face of difficulties constitutes an essential part of the educational process. When experienced within safe environments and supported appropriately by adults, such situations can become valuable opportunities for personal growth, the development of resilience and the acquisition of emotional competences that are essential for life (Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023; Tercero, 2012).

Furthermore, the relationship between schools and families becomes particularly important in this context. Promoting emotional well-being requires coordinated action among all educational stakeholders, avoiding contradictory messages and fostering a shared understanding of children's and adolescents' developmental processes. Shared educational responsibility is especially important when encouraging personal autonomy and the capacity to cope with the

challenges associated with each stage of development (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023).

Ultimately, the new emotional challenges facing schools require balanced educational responses. It is not sufficient merely to identify difficulties or intervene in situations of risk; rather, schools must promote an educational culture that supports the development of emotionally competent individuals who are capable of building healthy relationships, coping with uncertainty and actively contributing to the construction of their own well-being (UNESCO, 2024; Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023).

5. THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN PROMOTING WELL-BEING AND AUTONOMY

In the current educational context, educational guidance and counselling occupies a strategic position in fostering pupils' holistic development and contributing to the creation of emotionally healthy learning environments. Its role extends beyond responding to specific difficulties, positioning itself as a key element in prevention, the promotion of well-being and the support of pupils' personal development processes (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

The growing concern for mental health and emotional well-being has increased the expectations placed upon educational guidance and counselling services. However, reducing the role of guidance professionals to addressing problematic situations would provide an overly narrow view of their educational potential. Educational guidance should not be understood solely as a resource for intervention when difficulties arise, but rather as a fundamental means of promoting the personal, social and emotional competences that enable pupils to face life's challenges with autonomy and balance (Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023).

From this perspective, prevention constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of educational guidance. Promoting skills related to self-awareness, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, decision-making and positive social interaction contributes to the development of protective factors that enhance the present and future well-being of children and adolescents (Pérez & Filella, 2019; Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023). These initiatives are particularly effective when implemented systematically and embedded within the everyday life of the school, ensuring that emotional education is not reduced to isolated or occasional interventions.

From everyday practice in educational guidance and counselling, it is evident that many concerns related to emotional well-being do not necessarily stem from serious psychological difficulties but rather from the normal challenges associated with personal and social development. Consultations concerning peer conflicts, difficulties in managing frustration, insecurity when making decisions or concerns about academic performance are common features of school life. Such situations highlight the importance of providing opportunities for listening and support while also encouraging pupils to develop their own resources for coping with everyday challenges. In this regard, educational guidance should not be limited to providing immediate solutions to problems but should instead contribute to strengthening the competences that enable children and adolescents to become increasingly autonomous and confident in their own abilities.

Educational guidance and counselling also plays a vital role in supporting teachers. Teachers are key figures in pupils' lives and contribute daily to the emotional climate of the classroom. For this reason, it is essential to promote a shared understanding of emotional development, personal autonomy and the management of the challenges associated with each developmental stage. Supporting teaching staff helps ensure coherent educational responses that are appropriately tailored to pupils' needs, thereby contributing to the creation of more

inclusive and emotionally supportive educational environments (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023).

Similarly, collaboration with families represents an essential dimension of educational guidance. Promoting emotional well-being requires coordinated action between schools and families, based on shared educational responsibility and mutual recognition of their respective roles. Within a social context characterised by profound changes in family dynamics and educational practices, educational guidance can facilitate opportunities for dialogue and reflection, fostering a more balanced understanding of children's and adolescents' needs for both protection and autonomy (Fundación Santillana, 2021).

Furthermore, educational guidance can play an important role in developing a school culture focused on personal strengths and individual resources. Rather than adopting exclusively reactive approaches centred on identifying problems, schools should promote models that foster resilience, participation, a sense of belonging and the ability to cope constructively with difficulties (Tercero, 2012; OECD, 2021). Such an approach does not ignore situations of vulnerability; instead, it addresses them from a preventive and educational perspective that promotes personal growth.

Ultimately, educational guidance and counselling faces the challenge of contributing to pupils' emotional well-being without losing sight of the fundamental purpose of education: to prepare individuals who are capable of acting autonomously, responsibly and with commitment within an increasingly complex and changing society. Its contribution is particularly valuable when it succeeds in integrating support with challenge, protection with autonomy, emotional care with the development of life competences (UNESCO, 2024; Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023).

6. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The increasing attention that society devotes to the emotional well-being of children and adolescents represents an opportunity to move towards more holistic educational models that are better attuned to pupils' real needs. Recognising the emotional dimension as an inseparable component of human development has enabled education to move beyond reductionist approaches focused exclusively on the transmission of knowledge, placing the individual at the centre of the educational process (UNESCO, 2024).

However, this progress also calls for reflection on the meaning we attribute to well-being and on the educational responses developed to promote it. Public debate sometimes appears to assume that emotional well-being is synonymous with the absence of discomfort, conflict or difficulty. From this perspective, any experience of frustration, uncertainty or suffering tends to be viewed as a problem that should be eliminated immediately. Educational experience, however, shows that personal growth is often closely linked to the ability to face challenges, overcome obstacles and learn from difficulties (Tercero, 2012).

Schools currently face a particularly complex reality. On the one hand, they must respond to the emotional needs of pupils growing up in a social context characterised by rapid change, constant connectivity and increasing uncertainty. On the other hand, they have a responsibility to prepare individuals who are capable of acting autonomously, assuming responsibility and actively shaping their own life projects. These two aims are not incompatible, but they do require schools to strike a delicate balance between providing support and maintaining appropriate levels of challenge, between protecting pupils and allowing them to learn through experience.

From this perspective, emotional education assumes a broader purpose than simply preventing difficulties or improving immediate well-being. Its true value lies in fostering the competences that enable children and adolescents to understand their emotions, build healthy relationships and cope with the challenges inherent

in everyday life. Educating emotionally does not mean shielding individuals from suffering; rather, it means equipping them with the tools to understand, manage and transform it into an opportunity for learning and personal growth (Bisquerra & Hernández Paniello, 2023; Pérez & Filella, 2019).

Educational guidance and counselling can play a particularly significant role in this process. Its strategic position within schools enables it to promote preventive initiatives, support teachers and families, foster inclusive school cultures and encourage a balanced understanding of emotional development. At a time when issues relating to well-being and mental health occupy an increasingly prominent place on the educational agenda, it is essential to advocate an approach to educational guidance that is committed not only to addressing difficulties but also to promoting pupils' strengths and personal capacities (Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, 2023).

One of the major educational challenges of the twenty-first century is likely to be helping younger generations develop a form of well-being that is both robust and sustainable. Such well-being should not depend solely on the absence of problems but on the ability to cope with uncertainty, adapt to change and find meaning in the experiences that form part of the human condition. Although schools cannot resolve all the social challenges of contemporary society, they can make a decisive contribution to developing individuals who are more autonomous, resilient and better prepared to live in an increasingly complex and changing world (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2024).

The reflections presented in this paper are theoretical in nature and are intended to contribute to the ongoing educational debate concerning emotional well-being and personal autonomy in childhood and adolescence. Future research could complement this analysis through empirical studies that explore the practical application of these ideas within educational settings.

Ultimately, the issue is not one of choosing between protection and autonomy, but of recognising that both form part of the same educational mission. Protecting children means accompanying them and creating safe conditions for their development, whereas educating for autonomy requires trusting in their abilities and providing meaningful opportunities to put them into practice. Achieving this balance represents one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary education.

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