

Attachment Patterns, Emotional Development and the Psychological Mechanisms of Emotional Intelligence in Future Educators

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Abstract

Teaching is not only a cognitive or technical activity but a deeply emotional profession in which educators constantly interpret and respond to complex interpersonal and affective dynamics. Emotional intelligence plays a central role in effective teaching, influencing classroom climate, teacher well-being and students' learning experiences. However, the developmental foundations that shape individual differences in teachers' emotional competence are often insufficiently addressed in educational research. This article explores how attachment theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding the origins of emotional awareness, emotion regulation and relational responsiveness in future educators. Drawing on theoretical and empirical research on attachment and socio-emotional development, the study analyses how different attachment patterns formed in early caregiver relationships influence emotional perception, coping strategies and interpersonal engagement in professional contexts. The findings indicate that secure attachment is associated with greater emotional awareness, flexible regulation of emotions and empathic interaction, while insecure attachment patterns are linked to either emotional suppression, heightened emotional reactivity or inconsistent emotional responses. The article argues that teacher education programmes should consider these developmental mechanisms when cultivating emotional intelligence. Reflective practices, emotionally supportive mentoring and relationally responsive learning environments are highlighted as key conditions that can strengthen emotional competence and resilience among future teachers.

Keywords: *emotional intelligence; attachment theory; teacher education; teacher emotional competence; professional development*

Вплив стилів прив'язаності на емоційний розвиток та формування емоційного інтелекту майбутніх педагогів

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Анотація

Викладання є не лише когнітивною або технічною діяльністю, а глибоко емоційною професією, у якій педагоги постійно взаємодіють зі складною міжособистісною та афективною динамікою освітнього середовища. Емоційний інтелект відіграє ключову роль у забезпеченні ефективного навчального процесу, впливаючи на атмосферу в класі, психологічне благополуччя вчителя та навчальні результати учнів. Водночас розвиткові передумови, що формують індивідуальні відмінності в емоційній компетентності педагогів, залишаються недостатньо дослідженими у педагогічній науці. У статті розглядається теорія прив'язаності як концептуальна основа для пояснення походження емоційної усвідомленості, регуляції емоцій і реляційної чутливості майбутніх педагогів. На основі аналізу теоретичних та емпіричних досліджень соціально-емоційного розвитку показано, що стилі прив'язаності, сформовані у ранніх взаємодіях із опікунами, впливають на сприйняття емоційних сигналів, стратегії емоційної регуляції та характер міжособистісної взаємодії у професійній діяльності. Результати свідчать, що безпечна прив'язаність сприяє більшій емоційній усвідомленості, гнучким стратегіям регуляції емоцій та емпатійній взаємодії, тоді як небезпечні стилі прив'язаності можуть бути пов'язані з емоційним уникненням, підвищеною реактивністю або труднощами у підтриманні стабільної емоційної взаємодії. Обґрунтовується важливість урахування цих розвиткових механізмів у програмах підготовки педагогів. Рефлексивні практики, підтримувальне наставництво та реляційно чутливе освітнє середовище розглядаються як важливі умови формування емоційної компетентності та професійної стійкості майбутніх учителів.

Ключові слова: *емоційний інтелект; теорія прив'язаності; підготовка педагогів; емоційна компетентність учителів; професійний розвиток*

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Introduction

Teaching is increasingly recognized as a profession grounded not only in cognitive and methodological expertise but in complex emotional awareness, responsiveness, and regulation. In daily classroom interactions, teachers must manage their own emotional states while simultaneously attuning to the nuanced emotional needs of students, responding to interpersonal tensions, and interpreting behaviours that often reflect the internal experiences of young learners. These emotional demands position teachers as emotional leaders within the classroom, requiring sensitivity, flexibility, reflective capacity, and an ability to maintain psychological balance in situations of stress. Emotional intelligence, conceptualized in the ability-based framework of Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2004) as the set of capacities for perceiving, using, understanding, and regulating emotions, has therefore become a fundamental construct in contemporary discussions about teacher effectiveness, teacher well-being, and classroom climate.

Although the field increasingly recognizes the importance of emotional intelligence for teachers, an issue persists: the dominant research tends to focus on immediate, situational, or skill-based contributors to teacher emotional functioning. These include factors such as job stress, emotional labour, self-efficacy, work engagement, or instructional demands. What remains largely underexplored is the developmental foundation of these emotional competencies, particularly the deeper emotional and relational templates formed during early childhood. Attachment theory, beginning with Bowlby's seminal work (1969) and advanced through Ainsworth's empirical contributions (2015), offers a well-established developmental framework explaining how early interactions with caregivers guide the formation of internal working models that shape emotion regulation, relational expectations, empathy, and interpersonal style throughout life.

The relative absence of attachment theory from teacher emotional intelligence research leaves a critical conceptual gap. If teachers' emotional competencies are essential for creating safe, inclusive, and emotionally responsive learning environments, then understanding the developmental origins of these competencies becomes essential. Without acknowledging the influence of early attachment patterns, teacher education risks addressing emotional regulation and interpersonal skills only at the surface level, without recognizing the deeper structures that support or hinder their development. This article therefore argues that integrating attachment theory with emotional intelligence research offers a more comprehensive understanding of emotional development in future educators, with implications for teacher preparation, emotional support mechanisms within teacher-training institutions, and the broader design of emotionally informed pedagogical practices.

Methods and materials

Recent scholarship reflects a growing interest in teachers' emotional competence, particularly through attempts to develop models specifically tailored to the emotional demands of the teaching profession. Contemporary research on teacher emotional competencies highlights multidimensional constructs that include emotion regulation, emotional communication, empathy, emotional creativity, and the capacity to transform emotions into educationally constructive actions. For example, research validating teacher-focused competency models, such as that developed by Rodríguez (2025), demonstrates a movement toward understanding emotional competence not merely as a general psychological capacity but as a profession-specific set of abilities shaped by the relational and communicative nature of teaching. These models suggest that the field is shifting beyond broad emotional intelligence constructs toward frameworks capturing the emotional complexity inherent in educational practice.

Further empirical studies underscore the significance of emotional intelligence for teacher functioning. Su, Zhang, Xie, and Zhao (2022) found that teachers' emotional intelligence is positively associated with work engagement, and that work engagement mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and teachers' capacity for creative instruction. Similarly, Wang (2023) demonstrated that teacher mindfulness predicts higher-quality teacher-student relationships, with emotional intelligence operating as a mediating variable. These studies illustrate that emotional

intelligence contributes meaningfully to essential aspects of teacher well-being and instructional quality. Additionally, recent research such as that by Ayako (2024), which examines teacher competencies in supporting emotional intelligence development among students with special needs, including deaf students, highlights the socially relational dimension of emotional competence and the importance of teachers' ability to interpret, support, and respond to diverse emotional expressions.

Despite these advances, contemporary literature continues to focus on adult emotional competencies as though they emerge solely from professional training or situational factors, rather than from developmental processes that shape emotional functioning over the life course. The absence of attachment theory from most teacher emotional intelligence models is conspicuous, given that attachment research has consistently shown that internal working models established in childhood influence emotion regulation, social understanding, coping strategies, and interpersonal relationships well into adulthood. Yildiz and Eldeleklioglu's (2025) research, for instance, demonstrates that secure attachment is positively associated with social intelligence in adolescents, indicating that attachment-related patterns of emotional and social functioning persist beyond early childhood and continue to shape relational capacities in later developmental stages. Although this study does not focus on teachers, the findings reinforce the broader argument that attachment patterns contribute to emotional and interpersonal competencies relevant to educational contexts.

The gap between research traditions focusing on teacher emotional competence and those examining developmental determinants of emotional functioning suggests the need for a more integrative approach. To address this gap, the aim of the article is to examine how attachment patterns influence emotional development and emotional intelligence in future educators, drawing on theoretical perspectives and recent empirical research to develop a conceptual framework that situates teacher emotional competence within its developmental foundations. By synthesizing research across these domains, the article seeks to illuminate the psychological mechanisms through which early relationships shape teacher emotional functioning and to propose ways teacher education programs can more effectively support the emotional development of future educators.

Results

Attachment theory offers a robust framework for understanding how early relational experiences shape emotional development across the lifespan. Bowlby's (1969) concept of internal working models emphasizes that early caregiver – child interactions establish foundational expectations regarding the self's worthiness of care and others' availability and responsiveness. These internal models influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to emotional cues, shaping both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of emotional functioning.

Ainsworth's Strange Situation research further categorizes attachment into secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized patterns, each reflecting distinct emotional strategies that emerge from specific caregiving environments. Secure attachment develops when caregivers respond consistently and sensitively to a child's needs, fostering a sense of trust, emotional safety, and confidence in exploring the environment. This pattern was originally documented in Ainsworth's observational studies (Ainsworth et al., 2015) and has since been widely confirmed in research linking caregiver sensitivity to secure bonding (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997).

Anxious-ambivalent attachment arises when caregiving is unpredictable or inconsistent leading to heightened emotional vigilance, worry about caregiver availability, and fear of abandonment. These behavioural strategies, characterized by hyperactivation of the attachment system, were first described by Ainsworth and later elaborated by Cassidy and Berlin (1994). Avoidant attachment develops when caregivers are emotionally distant, dismissive, or rejecting, prompting the child to suppress emotional displays, minimize bids for comfort, and rely excessively on self-regulation. Ainsworth's original descriptions were further supported by research on deactivating strategies in avoidantly attached individuals (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Disorganized attachment, associated with frightening, unpredictable, or chaotic caregiving, is marked by contradictory, confused, or incoherent behavioral strategies during stress.

This pattern was identified by Main and Solomon (1990) and expanded upon in later research highlighting its links to caregiver fear or unintegrated trauma (Lyons-Ruth, Jacobvitz, 2008).

These attachment patterns have long-term implications for emotional perception, emotional understanding, emotion regulation, and interpersonal relationships – all of which are core components of emotional intelligence and essential competencies in the teaching profession. Securely attached individuals typically exhibit greater emotional awareness, reflective capacity, and adaptive emotion-regulation strategies, a pattern supported in decades of research demonstrating that attachment security predicts better emotional monitoring, flexibility, and resilience (Thompson, 1994; Mikulincer, Shaver, 2007). Individuals with secure attachment are generally more capable of identifying the nuances of their own emotions, interpreting the emotional signals of others, and employing constructive coping mechanisms, including seeking social support or using cognitive reappraisal.

In contrast, insecurely attached individuals often display emotional difficulties that correspond to their characteristic attachment strategies. Research shows that those with avoidant attachment tendencies frequently suppress or deactivate emotional responses, minimize the significance of emotional cues, and demonstrate difficulties with empathic engagement, reflecting their defensive strategy of emotional distancing (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Gross & John, 2003). Individuals with anxious attachment commonly experience heightened emotional reactivity, difficulty soothing themselves and persistent preoccupation with social approval or rejection, patterns described in numerous studies linking anxious attachment with hyperactivation of affective systems (Cassidy, Berlin, 1994; Mikulincer, Shaver & Pereg, 2003). Disorganized attachment, associated with conflicting or frightened caregiving experiences, has been shown to correlate with inconsistent or chaotic emotional responses and reduced regulatory coherence, particularly under stress or role strain (Main & Solomon, 1990; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008).

These developmental patterns are especially meaningful in the context of teacher emotional intelligence. Teaching requires finely tuned abilities to perceive and interpret students' emotional expressions, understand the emotional dynamics that influence learning, manage personal stress, and cultivate relational trust. Research on teacher emotions and emotional labour has long emphasized that teaching activates emotionally demanding processes, including classroom management, behavioural disruptions, and ongoing interpersonal negotiation (Hargreaves, 1998; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). These demands draw directly on the systems of emotional regulation and relational expectation shaped by early attachment experiences.

A securely attached teacher is more likely to maintain calm under stress, respond empathically to students' distress, and regulate emotional arousal in ways that support constructive classroom interaction – patterns consistent with findings linking attachment security to flexible emotion regulation, empathic attunement, and prosocial responding (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Teachers with avoidant attachment tendencies may be more likely to minimize or misinterpret students' emotional expressions, withdraw from relational engagement, or rely on emotionally distancing strategies, reflecting established associations between avoidant attachment and emotional suppression or disengagement (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Gross & John, 2003). Those with anxious attachment may react with heightened emotional intensity, fear of negative evaluation, or difficulty maintaining boundaries, consistent with research on hyperactivation strategies in anxiously attached individuals (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Mikulincer, Shaver & Pereg, 2003).

The psychological mechanisms linking attachment and emotional intelligence can be further understood by examining specific components of emotional intelligence. Emotional perception requires openness to affective cues and the capacity to detect subtle emotional signals. Studies show that secure attachment promotes greater emotional awareness, while avoidant attachment is associated with attentional avoidance of emotional content (Fraley et al., 2006). Emotional understanding depends on a rich emotional vocabulary and the ability to integrate complex emotional

information, capacities nurtured through early experiences of caregiver attunement and mental-state discourse (Thompson, 1994; Fonagy et al., 2002). Emotion regulation – perhaps the most attachment-dependent component – relies on internalized strategies first modelled and co-regulated by caregivers; secure attachment facilitates flexible regulation, while insecure patterns predict either hyperactivating or deactivating strategies (Cassidy, 1994; Gross, 2015). Interpersonal functioning, including empathy, emotional communication, and relational responsiveness, corresponds closely to expectations encoded in internal working models about the reliability and intentions of others in close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Recent research outside teacher education reinforces this developmental account. Studies linking adult attachment to leadership style, resilience, empathic accuracy, and vulnerability to burnout support the conclusion that attachment patterns fundamentally shape emotional and social competencies in professional roles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Harms, 2011). Yildiz and Eldeleklioglu's (2025) study, which found that secure attachment is associated with greater social intelligence in adolescents, highlights how emotional and relational capacities continue to develop over time. Although this study does not involve teachers, the underlying psychological processes – social perception, relational sensitivity, and emotional awareness – are directly applicable to the teaching profession. Integrating attachment theory with contemporary models of teacher emotional intelligence allows for a developmental-relational conceptualization of how emotional competencies emerge in future educators. This perspective suggests that the emotional challenges teacher candidates face during training, such as managing performance anxiety, responding to classroom behavioural issues, navigating supervisory feedback, or forming professional relationships, may activate attachment-based strategies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zins et al., 2004). Teacher education programs therefore function not only as arenas for professional development but also as relational environments where attachment patterns may be re-enacted or reshaped (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pianta, 1999). Supportive mentoring, emotionally responsive supervision, and relationally attuned teaching practices within teacher education may contribute to the development of more secure emotional functioning among pre-service teachers.

From a conceptual perspective, this integrated model has profound implications for how emotional intelligence is cultivated in teacher education programs. Emotional skills cannot be understood purely as discrete competencies to be trained in isolation; rather, they are embedded in broader developmental trajectories that reflect both early relational experiences and ongoing social interactions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment patterns formed in early childhood create internal working models that shape expectations about self and others, influencing how individuals perceive, interpret, and regulate emotional cues across the lifespan (Pianta, 1999). If teacher education programmes focus solely on surface-level emotional skills without addressing these deeper relational foundations, training may have limited impact, as habitual emotional strategies rooted in attachment history remain largely unexamined.

In practice, integrating attachment-informed perspectives into teacher education involves creating structured opportunities for reflective practice, relational exploration, and emotional skill development. Activities such as reflective discussion groups, journaling exercises and emotion-focused supervision allow teacher candidates to examine their habitual emotional responses, identify triggers, and consider how early relational experiences may influence their reactions in the classroom (Schön, 1983; Larrivee, 2000). Engaging in guided peer interactions and collaborative problem-solving exercises provides a safe environment in which to practice emotion regulation, empathic communication, and relational responsiveness, essential components of professional teaching (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). By fostering self-awareness and reflective capacity, these activities help future educators develop adaptive coping strategies, promote constructive engagement with students, and enhance relational attunement with colleagues.

Educational institutions themselves can act as corrective relational environments. Consistent mentoring, emotionally responsive supervision, and collaborative learning experiences offer repeated opportunities for teacher candidates to experience relational safety and support (Mikulincer & Shaver,

2007; Pianta, 1999). Over time, these relational experiences can help modify internal working models and strengthen emotional strategies, increasing both personal resilience and professional effectiveness. For example, a teacher candidate with avoidant attachment tendencies may learn through sustained mentoring and peer collaboration to attend more closely to students' emotional cues, while those with anxious attachment patterns may develop skills to regulate heightened emotional responses and maintain professional boundaries. Such experiences illustrate the potential for teacher education programs to facilitate not only skill acquisition but also attachment-informed emotional growth.

Attachment-informed perspectives also highlight the importance of context in shaping emotional competence. Emotional intelligence is not a static trait but a dynamic set of capacities that emerges in interaction with relational and environmental factors. Within teacher education, this includes exposure to emotionally supportive mentors, participation in reflective pedagogical communities, and engagement with curriculum content that emphasizes relational skills alongside academic instruction (Zins et al., 2004; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These contexts provide opportunities for experiential learning, allowing pre-service teachers to integrate cognitive understanding of emotional processes with real-world application in classroom-like settings. The iterative process of reflection, practice, and feedback fosters emotional adaptability, strengthens relational awareness, and enhances the capacity to respond constructively to the emotional dynamics of teaching.

From a theoretical standpoint, viewing emotional intelligence through the lens of attachment theory offers a more holistic account of teacher emotional development. Rather than treating emotional competence as a collection of isolated skills, this perspective emphasizes that emotional and relational capacities are shaped both by early developmental experiences and by ongoing professional and social contexts. This understanding supports the design of teacher education programs that not only teach emotional knowledge and technical strategies but also cultivate reflective, relationally attuned, and emotionally secure educators. By integrating attachment theory into program design, teacher education can help future educators recognize and work through ingrained emotional tendencies, ultimately promoting classroom environments in which both teachers and students can thrive (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pianta, 1999; Schön, 1983; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Conclusion

The present article has argued that emotional intelligence, a construct central to effective teaching, is deeply rooted in developmental processes shaped by early attachment experiences. While research on teacher emotional competence has advanced significantly, current models often emphasize situational or skill-based factors, neglecting the formative influence of internal working models developed during early childhood. Attachment theory provides a powerful framework for understanding why teachers differ in their emotional awareness, regulation, empathy, and relational sensitivity, and how these differences influence their instructional practices, classroom management, and professional well-being.

Integrating attachment theory with emotional intelligence research allows for a developmental-conceptualization of teacher emotional competence that acknowledges both relational history and professional context. Such integration not only deepens theoretical understanding but also offers practical guidance for teacher education. Programmes can more effectively support the emotional development of future educators by incorporating reflective practices, attachment-informed supervision, and relationally supportive learning environments that foster secure emotional functioning. These approaches can enhance teacher resilience, reduce vulnerability to burnout, and promote emotionally responsive teaching, ultimately contributing to healthier educational environments and improved student outcomes.

The article highlights the value of a developmental-relational framework for understanding teacher emotional intelligence and calls for further empirical research exploring the links between

attachment patterns, emotional development, and emotional competence in teacher populations. Future work in this area can contribute to more comprehensive teacher preparation programs that nurture not only pedagogical skills but also the emotional foundations of effective teaching, fostering classrooms where both teachers and students can thrive.

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