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Social-emotional learning in early years education: Teaching strategies to foster positive school relationships

Educación socioemocional en educación inicial: Estrategias docentes para fortalecer la convivencia escolar

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse social-emotional learning in early years education through the design of teaching strategies aimed at strengthening school community life in the Ecuadorian context. To this end, a descriptive documentary design based on the 'feasibility study' approach was employed, reviewing twenty academic sources (2014-2026) on social-emotional learning programmes in early childhood, which were systematised in comparative matrices according to study type, context and outcomes. The findings show that the most effective programmes combine explicit teaching of emotional vocabulary, teacher modelling and guided peer practice, and that teachers' beliefs have a direct impact on the quality of the emotional support provided. Based on this analysis, a four-component strategy is proposed: emotional training for teachers, explicit teaching of skills, structuring of the classroom environment and family engagement, which is low-cost and highly feasible within the institutional context.

Descriptors: socio-emotional learning; life skills; skills development. (UNESCO Thesaurus)

RESUMEN

El presente artículo tiene como propósito analizar la educación socioemocional en Educación Inicial desde el diseño de estrategias docentes orientadas a fortalecer la convivencia escolar en el contexto ecuatoriano. Para ello, se empleó un diseño documental descriptivo apoyado en la modalidad de proyecto factible, revisando veinte fuentes académicas (2014-2026) sobre programas de aprendizaje socioemocional en primera infancia, sistematizadas en matrices comparativas según tipo de estudio, contexto y resultados. Los hallazgos evidencian que los programas más efectivos combinan enseñanza explícita del vocabulario emocional, modelado docente y práctica guiada entre pares, y que las creencias del maestro inciden directamente en la calidad del apoyo emocional brindado. A partir de este diagnóstico se propone una estrategia de cuatro componentes: formación emocional docente, enseñanza explícita de habilidades, estructuración del ambiente de aula y vinculación familiar, de bajo costo y alta viabilidad institucional.

Descriptores: aprendizaje socioemocional; competencias para la vida; desarrollo de las habilidades. (Tesauro UNESCO)

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Research Articles

INTRODUCTION

Within this framework, early years education is a key stage for laying the socio-emotional foundations that will later support children's ability to relate to others, control their impulses and resolve conflicts in the classroom; school community life is therefore not built spontaneously but depends largely on the pedagogical intervention of the teacher, who mediates the child's first experiences of social bonding outside the family nucleus. Just as the home is the first space for socialisation, the early years classroom becomes the second setting in which children learn to share, wait their turn and name what they feel, and it is worth noting that social-emotional education has become established as a field of study linking cognitive development with the management of emotions, the recognition of others and bonds of cooperation (Bierman et al., 2026).

Ecuador, however, has features that call for a contextualised approach to the problem: in the country's early years classrooms, children arrive with different levels of prior stimulation, family situations vary widely and, in many cases, community environments are economically precarious; these conditions directly influence how children express and regulate their emotions, which means that early years teachers must design strategies that convey curricular content while also modelling healthy ways of relating to others; teacher training in socio-emotional competencies therefore becomes an unavoidable requirement for quality education (Córdova-Romero et al., 2024).

Given that the international literature has consistently demonstrated the benefits of social-emotional learning programmes in early childhood, this evidence needs to be critically reviewed to establish which strategies are transferable to Ecuador and which require adaptation. Blewitt et al. (2018) showed, through a systematic review with meta-analysis, that universal curriculum-based interventions in social-emotional learning applied in early childhood education centres produce positive and sustained effects on children's emotional competencies; it is also

worth noting that Djamnezhad et al. (2021) likewise showed, through a systematic map of reviews, that most of the programmes studied in the preschool field share similar structural components: explicit teaching of emotional vocabulary; teacher modelling; and guided practice of conflict-resolution skills.

In line with this approach, Fang et al. (2026), in a programme combining play and emotional cognition, showed that children's socio-emotional competence improves when pedagogical strategies combine playful elements with guided reflection on one's own emotions and those of others; this finding can inform the design of teaching strategies in Ecuador, where play is readily available and culturally valued as a pedagogical resource.

These results, however, do not transfer easily to the Ecuadorian classroom: Ng and Bull (2018) pointed out that situational factors in the classroom (group size, availability of curricular time, teachers' pre-service training) determine how effectively socio-emotional learning strategies are put into practice, so that any intervention proposal must start from a realistic diagnosis of institutional conditions before prescribing techniques. At this point, it should be remembered that school community life is both a means and an end of social-emotional education: a means, because the relational climate of the classroom determines learning, and an end, because living together peacefully is itself a competence that must be taught (Hernández de la O, 2023).

In other words, this study does not aim to settle the theoretical debate on children's emotional development, but rather to provide an operational bridge between international evidence and everyday teaching practice; the relevance of the study lies in the fact that pedagogical decisions made during early years education shape later school adjustment trajectories (Bierman et al., 2026), whose longitudinal follow-up showed that early intervention in socio-emotional skills persists into young adulthood.

In light of the above, the purpose of this article is to analyse social-emotional education in early years education through the design of teaching strategies aimed at strengthening school community life in the Ecuadorian context.

METHODOLOGY

In line with the stated objective, this study is structured as a descriptive documentary design supported by the feasibility-study modality; the descriptive documentary component allowed for the systematisation, description and comparison of the published scientific evidence on social-emotional education in early childhood, while the feasibility-study component guided the construction of a proposal for teaching strategies adapted to the reality of early years classrooms in Ecuador.

To this end, academic sources indexed in databases related to education and developmental psychology (2014-2026) were reviewed, including systematic reviews, meta-analyses and empirical studies on social-emotional learning programmes in early childhood and preschool education; based on this, twenty sources were selected that met the criterion of thematic relevance, demonstrated methodological rigour and corresponded to the educational level under study.

As an analytical method, documentary analysis was used, through which the following elements were extracted from each source: type of study, geographical context, population served, intervention components and main results reported; this information was organised into comparative matrices to identify common patterns and recurring strategies across programmes. The feasibility-study phase was then developed in three stages: first, a needs assessment based on the documentary review; second, the design of the proposed teaching strategies based on the systematised evidence; and third, the definition of criteria for pedagogical feasibility, taking into account the resources usually available in early years institutions in Ecuador.

RESULTS

Based on the documentary analysis carried out, three broad categories of findings were identified: those related to the structural components of social-emotional learning programmes, those related to the reported effects on school community life, and those related to the teacher's role as a mediating agent. Table 1 systematises the reviewed studies with the greatest empirical weight for the design of the proposal.

Table 1. *Documentary evidence analysed.*

Author(s) and year	Type of study	Context	Main contribution
Bierman et al. (2026)	Randomised controlled trial with longitudinal follow-up	United States	The effects of the preschool socio-emotional intervention persist into young adulthood.
Blewitt et al. (2018)	Systematic review and meta-analysis	International	Universal curriculum-based interventions produce positive and sustained effects on emotional competencies.
Córdova-Romero et al. (2024)	Documentary review	Latin America	Social-emotional education fosters holistic development when combined with contextualised practices.
Djamnezhad et al. (2021)	Systematic map of reviews	International	Programmes share structural components: emotional vocabulary, modelling and guided practice.
Fang et al. (2026)	Intervention programme (EmoCog Play)	China	The integration of play and emotional cognition improves children's socio-emotional competence.
Luo et al. (2020)	Systematic review and meta-analysis	International	Whole-classroom interventions generate moderate effects on socio-emotional competencies.
Murano et al. (2020)	Meta-analysis	International	Preschool interventions improve social skills and reduce behavioural problems.
Ng and Bull (2018)	Qualitative study	Singapore	Classroom situational factors shape teachers' social-emotional learning strategies.
Salas-Román et al. (2022)	Quasi-experimental study	Spain	Structured emotional education improves socio-emotional competencies in early years education.
Zinsser et al. (2014)	Mixed-methods study	United States	Teachers' beliefs about social-emotional learning are related to the emotional support observed.

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

As shown in Table 1, the international evidence indicates that the most effective social-emotional learning programmes share a common structure: explicit teaching of emotional vocabulary; systematic teacher modelling; and opportunities for guided practice in real situations of peer interaction (Djamnezhad et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2020). Similarly, it is clear that these effects are not confined to the school period during which they are implemented, but extend into later stages of development, as shown by Bierman et al. (2026) in their longitudinal follow-up study.

With regard to school community life specifically, Hernández de la O (2023) documented that the development of socio-emotional skills in preschool children is directly related to a decrease in aggressive behaviour and an increase in prosocial behaviour in the classroom. Guzmán-Jordan et al. (2025) likewise stated that socio-emotional development strategies in early education require sustained pedagogical intentionality: isolated or occasional interventions are not sufficient to change the group's relational patterns.

Regarding the teacher's role, Ng and Bull (2018) found that curricular time, group size and the training received are the main situational factors that facilitate or hinder the implementation of socio-emotional strategies in the classroom; Zinsser et al. (2014) showed that teachers' beliefs about the importance of social-emotional learning are directly related to the quality of the emotional support actually observed in practice (that is, teachers who value the emotional dimension of learning provide more sensitive and timely support to children).

As for the assessment instruments used in the reviewed studies, heterogeneity is evident; it is worth noting the position of Hughes (2026), who developed and validated the Social Emotional Assets scale, which was culturally sensitive in capturing socio-emotional competencies in diverse populations, although standardised instruments are not always appropriate for contexts other than those in which they were originally constructed. Similarly, Sheel et al. (2026), drawing on the perceptions of parents and teachers in India, showed that there

are notable discrepancies in the assessment of the socio-emotional competencies of the same group of children, and that triangulating sources of information is a desirable condition for any assessment process in this field.

With regard to the specific teaching strategies documented in the literature, Table 2 systematises the categories identified together with their corresponding empirical basis.

Table 2. *Documentary categories of study.*

Category	Teaching strategy	Basis
Explicit teaching of emotions	Use of everyday emotional vocabulary, cards and stories that name affective states	Djamnezhad et al. (2021); Fang et al. (2026)
Teacher modelling	The teacher verbalises and regulates their own emotions in front of the group as an example of self-regulation	Zinsser et al. (2014)
Guided peer practice	Structured activities of cooperative interaction and joint conflict resolution	Ji et al. (2025)
Narrative and symbolic play	Use of stories, dramatisation and role play for emotional understanding	Nemet et al. (2026)
Emotional regulation routines	Fixed spaces and moments within the school day for calm and self-regulation	Ștefan et al. (2022)
Family involvement	Shared responsibility between teacher and family to reinforce emotional learning at home	Ibáñez-Martínez and Romero-Pérez (2019); Sheel et al. (2026)

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

As Table 2 shows, the strategies with the strongest empirical support have both a cognitive component (understanding and naming emotions) and a relational component (practising skills in real interaction situations). Ji et al. (2025) showed, through a scoping review in two-year-olds, that even from a very early age peer interaction is a legitimate context for social-emotional learning when the teacher intentionally structures these spaces.

In addition, Ibáñez-Martínez and Romero-Pérez (2019) showed, through a case study, that socio-emotional competence in early childhood is significantly strengthened when there is shared responsibility between the school and family environments; teaching strategies that lack the active involvement of families tend to lose sustainability over time. It should be borne in mind that social-emotional education in early childhood is a field with sufficient international empirical support, but this support does not exempt Ecuador from the need to adapt the strategies identified to its own institutional, cultural and teacher-training conditions.

PROPOSED TEACHING STRATEGIES

Based on the diagnosis documented above, we propose below teaching strategies for promoting school community life in early years classrooms in Ecuador under a feasibility-study approach, with the proposal structured around four interrelated components: emotional training for teachers; explicit teaching of socio-emotional skills; structuring of the classroom environment; and family engagement.

In addition to the above, the first component (teachers' emotional training) starts from the premise that "what cannot be taught cannot be developed in the educator". For this reason, we propose periodic emotional self-regulation workshops for early years teaching staff, working on breathing techniques, identification of personal triggers and assertive communication strategies for conflict situations in the classroom. This measure responds directly to what

Zinsser et al. (2014) demonstrated: teachers' beliefs and emotional competencies determine the quality of the emotional support provided to children.

The second component is the explicit teaching of socio-emotional skills within daily curricular planning; accordingly, a fixed period (no less than fifteen minutes) should be set aside each day for activities aimed at recognising and naming emotions (illustrated cards, children's stories, themed songs). We also propose the systematic use of dramatisation and symbolic play as vehicles for children to act out conflict situations and practise, under guidance, alternative ways of resolving them (Nemet et al., 2026), since narrative participation provides a context for building emotional understanding in the early school years.

Similarly, the third component is the intentional structuring of the classroom's physical and relational environment: here we propose creating a calm corner in each classroom (that is, a space the child goes to voluntarily when feeling very angry, containing simple sensory elements and visual support material for self-regulation), as well as end-of-day group routines in which children share, with the teacher's help, how they felt during the day. This proposal is based on the work of Ștefan et al. (2022): preschool programmes with the strongest evidence of effectiveness include structured emotional-regulation routines as part of the classroom's daily functioning.

Specific activities that can be incorporated into daily life include, for example: the morning emotional assembly (each child chooses a card representing how they feel on arriving at school); the anger thermometer (a visual resource that helps the child identify the intensity of their emotion before acting); and the reconciliation corner (a specific space where two children in conflict are accompanied by the teacher so that they can express what happened and jointly propose a solution). This is similar to the experiences described by Portes-Júnior et al. (2026) in Chilean early childhood institutions, where this type of visual and spatial resource allowed children to autonomously appropriate self-regulation strategies.

Finally, the fourth component is active engagement with families as a condition for the sustainability of the proposal; to this end, we suggest holding brief bimonthly meetings in which the teacher informs parents/guardians about what has been worked on in class and how to replicate it at home (simple replication), together with an emotional travel notebook in which the family and the school jointly record the child's progress in recognising emotions. This line of action is supported by the work of Ibáñez-Martínez and Romero-Pérez (2019), who showed that shared responsibility between family and school strengthens socio-emotional competence in early childhood. In order to clarify the feasibility of implementation, Table 3 organises the proposal into sequential phases, indicating activities, those responsible and the estimated timeframe.

Table 3. *Sequential phases of the proposal.*

Phase	Main activity	Responsible party	Estimated duration
Diagnosis	Identification of the group's socio-emotional needs through structured observation	Classroom teacher	2 weeks
Awareness-raising	Initial workshop on teachers' emotional self-regulation	Pedagogical coordination	1 week
Implementation	Development of the four strategy lines within the daily classroom routine	Classroom teacher	1 academic term
Family engagement	Bimonthly meetings and emotional travel notebook	Teacher and parents/guardians	Entire term
Monitoring and adjustment	Qualitative evaluation of school community life and adjustment of strategies	Pedagogical coordination	At the end of each two-month period

Source: Own elaboration (2026).

In light of the foregoing, the proposal described above does not require substantial financial resources or specialised infrastructure, which makes it more feasible for early years institutions with limited resources (as is often the case in Ecuador); the feasibility of the proposal therefore depends mainly on the institution's willingness to dedicate protected curricular time to the socio-emotional dimension rather than on the availability of material resources. We therefore recommend that the evaluation of the proposal include quantitative and qualitative indicators (frequency of aggressive behaviours recorded by the

teacher; number of conflicts resolved autonomously by children; families' perceptions of the changes observed at home) within a monitoring system, so that the strategies can be adjusted progressively (a flexible approach characteristic of a feasibility study).

DISCUSSION

The systematised findings of this study allow us to discuss, first, that the teacher is the central agent mediating school community life in early years education; while the international literature supports the effectiveness of social-emotional learning programmes (Blewitt et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2020; Murano et al., 2020), it is not only the curricular design of the programme that is effective, but also how the teacher translates it into concrete daily practices; Ng and Bull (2018) documented that classroom situational factors strongly condition how these strategies are implemented.

Second, we need to address the relationship between teachers' beliefs and the emotional support provided to children. Zinsser et al. (2014) confirmed that this relationship is direct: the greater teachers' appreciation of the emotional dimension of learning, the higher the quality of the support observed. This relationship is particularly important for Ecuador, where the pre-service training of early years teachers does not always include content related to children's socio-emotional development, and which therefore needs to be strengthened both in undergraduate training and in ongoing institutional professional development.

In addition, the evidence reviewed allows us to discuss shared family responsibility as a factor in the sustainability of teaching strategies. Ibáñez-Martínez and Romero-Pérez (2019) and Sheel et al. (2026) agree, from different geographical contexts, that the disconnect between school and family practices limits the impact of socio-emotional interventions; the proposal put forward in this study has therefore been deliberately designed to include a family-engagement

component, so that the teaching strategies are not confined solely to the classroom.

We must also, however, highlight the limitations of the reviewed evidence with regard to its direct applicability in Ecuador; most of the systematised studies were carried out in high-income contexts (United States, Spain or China) (Bierman et al., 2026; Salas-Román et al., 2022; Fang et al., 2026), whose institutional conditions, teacher-student ratios and resource availability differ considerably from those found in many Ecuadorian early years institutions, so that the uncritical transfer of these strategies without a process of contextualisation could weaken their effectiveness.

For this reason, the proposal focuses on low-cost strategies with high institutional feasibility (Portes-Júnior et al., 2026), who examined pedagogical strategies used by early childhood educators in Chile and found that practices which remain sustainable over time are those already integrated into the classroom routine without requiring additional resources. Similarly, peer interaction must be discussed as a legitimate space for social-emotional learning from a very early age; in this regard, Ji et al. (2025) showed that even two-year-olds engage in socio-emotional learning processes when the teacher deliberately structures spaces for interaction, and it was on this basis that the methodological decision was taken to include guided peer-practice activities specifically in the proposal, rather than one-to-one intervention between child and teacher.

In contrast to a purely individualistic view of emotional regulation, the evidence reviewed is relational in nature: school community life is built through daily interaction among peers, not solely through the work the child carries out internally on their own emotions. In this sense, Guamán-Pupiales et al. (2025), in their review of approaches to and outcomes of social-emotional education in early education, concluded that programmes in which development is focused exclusively on the child (without an explicit relational component) tend to have less effect on group community life.

When discussing school community life and the organisational climate of the educational institution, it is worth remembering that classroom teaching strategies do not exist in isolation but alongside the institutional culture in which they are embedded; in this respect, Guzmán-Jordan et al. (2025) documented that the most effective socio-emotional development strategies in early education require sustained pedagogical intentionality across the whole institution, and not merely individual decisions made by teachers in the classroom. The proposal formulated in this study therefore includes the active involvement of institutional pedagogical coordination in the awareness-raising and monitoring phases.

Following on from this point, it is worth mentioning the methodological contribution that the feasibility-study approach makes in relation to the purely descriptive studies reviewed; most of the systematised evidence documents only the effects of programmes already implemented, whereas the feasibility-study modality used in this study goes a step further by translating this evidence into a concrete, adapted and evaluable proposal for Ecuador (this is what distinguishes the present work from purely descriptive reviews [Guamán-Pupiales et al., 2025; Córdova-Romero et al., 2024]). Furthermore, measuring the effects of socio-emotional strategies on school community life remains a methodological challenge. Hughes (2026) developed and validated a culturally sensitive scale of socio-emotional assets, showing that measurement instruments are not always suitable for populations other than those for which they were originally designed; this instrumental limitation reinforces the need for future Ecuadorian research to develop or adapt its own assessment instruments.

CONCLUSION

The objective of analysing social-emotional education in early years education through the design of teaching strategies was met by means of a four-component proposal: teachers' emotional training, explicit teaching of skills, structuring of the classroom environment and family engagement; these components were derived

directly from the documentary analysis of twenty sources and not from general theoretical assumptions.

In other words, the proposal did not uncritically transfer programmes from high-income contexts, but rather low-cost activities that can be carried out during the school day (morning emotional assembly; anger thermometer; reconciliation corner) that require no additional infrastructure or specialised staff, so that the feasibility of the proposal depends on institutions' willingness to allocate curricular time to the socio-emotional dimension.

The study also defined the teacher's role as mediator of community life (linking their initial emotional training with the quality of the support they provide to the group) and established peer interaction, rather than the child's individual work, as the space in which school community life is effectively built. In this sense, the feasibility-study approach turned a documentary diagnosis into a proposal with phases, responsibilities and timeframes that can be evaluated through indicators such as conflicts resolved autonomously and families' perceptions of change.

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