

Reflection Article

Decision-making as a pedagogical strategy for strengthening socio-emotional skills in early childhood

La toma de decisiones como estrategia pedagógica para el fortalecimiento de las habilidades socioemocionales en la primera infancia

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Abstract

Decision-making is a crucial process, as it enables individuals to maintain control over their daily lives. It also fosters the acquisition of other vital life skills whether for achieving success or simply leading a fulfilling life. In this reflective essay, I will discuss how decision-making helps strengthen social-emotional skills from childhood onwards. The analysis will take a student-centered perspective, examining what children can learn and how they can create experiences that allow them to test themselves, make decisions, solve problems, show empathy, communicate, and navigate diverse social relationships through activities that simulate real-world dilemmas. I will also explore how play-based learning activities can nurture the brain and reinforce these skills, as well as the underlying neurological processes involved in social development. Believe that encouraging decision-making serves as an excellent starting point for teaching social-emotional skills, provided this is facilitated through various learning approaches such as presenting challenges that allow students and parents to discuss these topics, debate issues, and respect one another's decisions.

Keywords: Neuroscience; Neuronal plasticity; Emotional intelligence; Social skills; Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills Model. (Fuente: DECS)

Resumen

Las decisiones pueden ser un proceso muy importante, debido a que permiten mantener el control en tu día a día. Esto también puede ayudarte a adquirir muchas otras habilidades que son importantes para la vida, ya sea tener éxito o simplemente llevar una vida satisfactoria. En este ensayo reflexivo, hablaré sobre cómo tomar decisiones ayuda a potenciar las habilidades socioemocionales desde la infancia. Se analizará desde la perspectiva del estudiante sobre lo que podrían aprender los niños y sobre cómo pueden crear experiencias que les permitan ponerse a prueba, tomar decisiones, resolver problemas, mostrar empatía hacia los demás, comunicarse y gestionar las relaciones sociales mediante diversas actividades que simulan dilemas del mundo real. También se observará cómo las actividades relacionadas con el juego y el aprendizaje pueden ayudar a nutrir el cerebro y reforzar algunas de estas habilidades, así como del proceso cerebral que subyace al desarrollo social. Se debe considerar que el fomento de la toma de decisiones puede ser un excelente punto de partida para enseñar habilidades socioemocionales, siempre que se den cuenta de ello a través de diferentes tipos de aprendizaje, como cuando se plantean retos, permitiendo que alumnos y padres hablen de estos temas, debatan cuestiones y respeten las decisiones de los demás.

Palabras clave: Neurociencia; Plasticidad neuronal; Inteligencia emocional; Habilidades sociales; Modelo de Habilidades de Información Motivación Comportamiento. (Fuente: DECS)

1. Introduction

The development of socio-emotional skills in early childhood is considered the foundation for understanding, expressing, and regulating emotions; maintaining appropriate relationships with others; behaving appropriately in different situations; and adapting to the social environment. Likewise, Presa (2021), from the perspective of early childhood education, states that these skills comprise a set of abilities, attitudes, beliefs, values, and knowledge organized according to specific theoretical and methodological models that incorporate both subjective psychological traits and objective mediating factors that influence emotions and the behavior of others. From this, it can be inferred that all skills for social coexistence are multifunctional and are developed through various methods and contexts throughout life. Pérez (2019) points out that schools should foster emotional and social competencies to better manage relationships with others

and the conflicts that inevitably arise in every social interaction. Therefore, it is important for students to learn at school how to communicate, express their feelings, and reflect on their actions.

Consequently, Olhaberry and Sieverson (2022) argue that improving socio-emotional development by learning to pay attention to other people has positive effects on well-being, inclusive classrooms, academic performance, and the formation of learning habits. It is necessary to provide children with expressive activities through which they can gradually develop the skills needed to live in society. According to Villarroel Dávila (2015), autonomous education should involve both freedom and discipline on the part of the educator, as well as self-realization on the part of the student. Children can develop a sense of responsibility if they are given a voice in matters that directly affect them. Making decisions about their own affairs transforms teaching into an active and

inclusive practice in which all students can participate by using a variety of socio-emotional skills. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze decision-making as a pedagogical strategy for strengthening socio-emotional skills in early childhood.

2. Method

One way to promote autonomy in the early stages of development is to educate children to make decisions about matters they can understand and relate to. Villarroel Dávila (2015) states that self-education includes the child's autonomy, freedom, discipline, individuality, and biological characteristics; therefore, it is important to provide children with freedom and spontaneity when choosing and making decisions. By allowing them to decide, they are offered options from which they can draw conclusions. Decision-making involves providing opportunities for children to explore alternatives, express preferences, and participate in simple activities based on a choice. Decisions can be used as a learning strategy that emphasizes autonomy when activities are implemented in which children are required to take a position, manage conflicts, and solve problems. Furthermore, decision-making as a strategy could support an integrated approach to socio-emotional development because it allows multiple abilities to be combined within a single activity.

Moore and Gregory (2024) suggest that decision-making can be used as a strategy to promote socio-emotional learning because, when choosing among alternatives, students practice self-awareness, self-regulation, social literacy, and social skills, while also learning to make responsible decisions. Everyday situations can become learning

opportunities that help children draw conclusions about how to act according to their preferences, opinions, conflicts, and needs. In addition, a strategy could be organized to foster socio-emotional skills through decision-making, as it provides opportunities to reflect on the attitudes to adopt when facing a problem.

Richard, Baud-Bovy, Clerc-Georgy, and Gentaz (2020) conclude that “role-playing games are an excellent strategy for improving emotional literacy because they allow children between the ages of five and six to experience everyday situations and recognize the emotions of others.”

This method could complement the previously mentioned strategy, as it would recreate situations in which students would need to reflect on how they made a decision, managed a conflict, solved a problem, or completed a task. This could encourage them to adopt different attitudes depending on the situation and to analyze the emotions that arise from those circumstances. Thus, games could be used as a strategy to facilitate decision-making because they enable children to recreate interactions and reflect upon them.

García (2015) defines Neuroeducation as a discipline that uses neuroscientific, psychological, and multicultural models to understand the brain, the mind, behavior, and learning styles in order to transform education. It refers to the idea that understanding the learning process can provide valuable neurological, psychological, and conceptual insights.

Furthermore, Verdugo-Coronel and Campoverde-Asitimbay (2021) add that a neuroeducational practice model includes learning theories and practices that emphasize cognition and the brain-based nature underlying human abilities and

behaviors, as well as the development of emotional and intuitive intelligence. Practices referred to as “decision-making” can be applied to foster socio-emotional development because they provide an appropriate environment for children to interact, make choices, manage conflicts, solve problems, and carry out tasks.

Ugas (2024) notes that when we learn something new, our neurons form networks to communicate with one another; furthermore, the capacity to learn is enhanced when we are exposed to sudden and unexpected stimuli. Meanwhile, León A. (2025) adds that this process takes place in synapses but also at other levels, ranging from neural networks to entire systems. He argues that the ability to learn something new can be strengthened through repeated exposure and experience, especially when knowledge is gradually accumulated over time. Decision-making could be implemented as a strategy to help both students and educational institutions achieve meaningful experiences and better outcomes. This process could lead to success because it involves exposing students to decision-making, real-life situations, and the analysis of those situations. As a result, they would gain experiences that allow them to learn and develop useful decision-making skills for future situations and choices.

It is essential to recognize that interaction with others plays a key role in helping children develop socio-emotional skills such as conflict management and communication. Sigcha Ante (2024) states that effective social interaction requires learning how to express, interpret, and manage emotions appropriately, as well as sharing thoughts and feelings with others in a sincere and confident manner. Every day situations can become valuable

learning opportunities for acquiring knowledge about social interaction while fostering values such as honesty and trust. Furthermore, regarding decision-making, allowing students to choose among alternatives gives them the opportunity to explain their choices and listen to those of their peers. This can facilitate discussion and create better conditions for social interaction. Indeed, classrooms can serve as safe spaces where students make decisions, speak openly, and listen to one another with honesty and confidence.

Barrios (2016) highlights the importance of mirror neurons, explaining that they generate the functioning of the secondary motor system, which enables individuals to imitate specific facial and bodily movements. He further emphasizes that it is essential to strengthen the capacity of the mirror neuron system to receive the information necessary for students to develop social and civic competencies. Decision-making practices can be applied to promote social interaction, coexistence, and critical thinking through observation, imitation, and the analysis of the consequences that arise from adapting to the behavioral styles of others.

Mondragón (2022) adds that the development of emotional intelligence enables students to apply their emotional and social skills in different contexts, which are important aspects for cultivating reflection, initiative, empathy, and social responsibility. Gungordu (2025), in turn, indicates that prosocial decision-making consists of making choices that favor the common good and is closely related to prosocial behavior, empathy, and morality. Azimzade (2024) states that in early childhood, a child’s psychological maturation involves the development of basic forms of emotional self-regulation, including the ability to solve problems—

that is, to find appropriate solutions to challenges. Decision-making can therefore be used as a tool to foster socio-emotional and ethical development by emphasizing qualities such as reflection, initiative, empathy, prosocial behavior, and morality. This process may contribute to the development of students' emotional intelligence by helping them understand that not only they themselves, but also

others, may be affected by their decisions and by the way they act in general.

The following synthesized information is presented through the organizer shown in Figure 1.

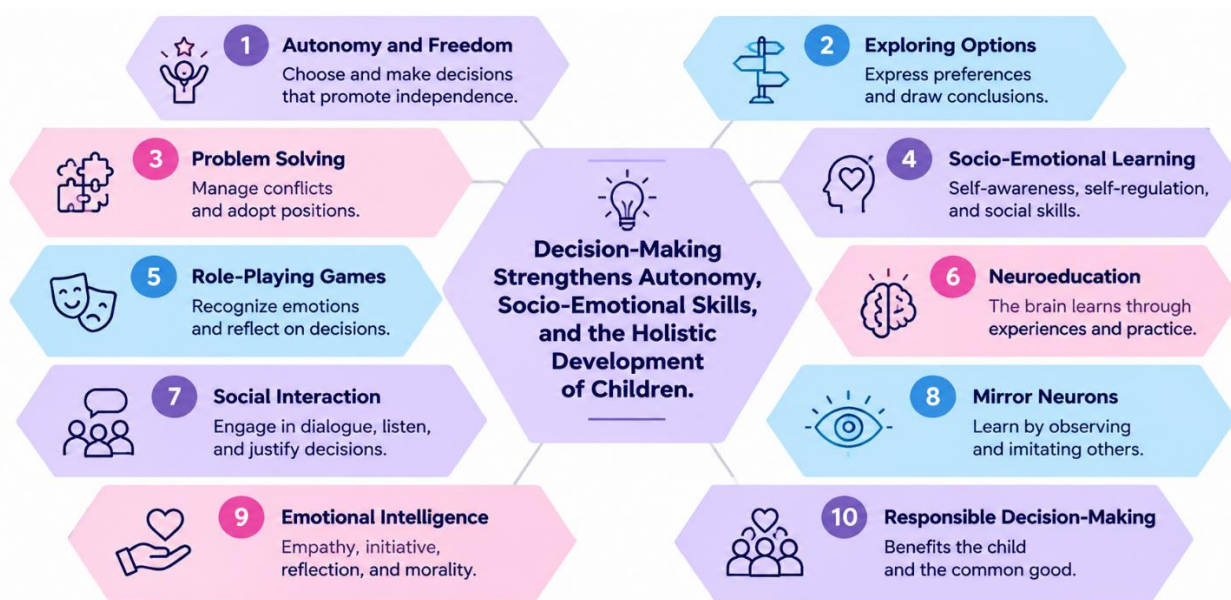


Figure 1. Decision-Making Strengthens Autonomy, Socio-Emotional Skills, and the Holistic Development of Children (Source: Authors' Own Work).

3. Conclusions and Practical Application

I consider it extremely important to recognize from the outset that making decisions in familiar situations contributes to the strengthening of social and emotional skills in many children during their early stages of interaction. In this way, the school becomes a motivational agent for students because it provides them with opportunities to learn while engaging in activities they already enjoy, encourages them to express themselves and think beyond their own needs, and helps them develop greater independence

in their actions. Through this approach, topics such as emotional regulation, problem-solving, communication, empathy, autonomy, and social coexistence can be addressed. Therefore, these elements form the foundation for effective decision-making.

Consequently, this technique is considered to encompass several important components, among which reflection, discussion, participation, and interactivity are the most significant. For example, if I were to draw upon my own experience, I believe that such an approach would only be effective for my child, as well as for any

other child taught in this way, if I first take the time to analyze possible solutions, explain why those solutions are appropriate, and then implement the options that appear most promising.

Ultimately, it is essential to consider the child's perspective, not just my own, when selecting and applying an appropriate solution. I am convinced that these activities can teach us many valuable lessons if we are given the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon them, while actively engaging in every stage of the thinking process and in the development of future social and emotional skills.

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