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Beyond Discipline: Repositioning Emotional Intelligence as the Pedagogical Foundation of Responsive Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: This position paper discusses the central role of teachers' emotional competence in shaping their children's learning, engagement, classroom relationships, and developmental outcomes. Drawing on Mayer and Salovey's ability model of emotional intelligence, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and African philosophical perspectives, the paper advances the position that children's behaviour should be understood within interconnected emotional, relational, cultural, and environmental contexts rather than through discipline-centred interpretations alone. Using the African proverbs, "The fox must first be chased out into the bush before warning the hen about loitering into the bush" and "yɛnnyina nkrane mu ntete nkrane" (We do not stand in the army of ants to clear ants), the paper argues that effective classroom management requires addressing the conditions that produce children's behaviours before attempting to correct them. It proposes emotionally responsive pedagogy as a conceptual framework that repositions emotional intelligence from a supplementary interpersonal skill to a foundational professional competence for early childhood teachers. This reconceptualization has important implications for teacher education, classroom practice, educational leadership, policy development, and future research.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Early Childhood Education, Responsive Pedagogy, Teacher Education, African Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is one of the most formative stages of human development as it establishes the cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural foundations that influence children's lifelong learning and wellbeing (Howard et al., 2024). In this period, learning is by nature, relational rather than instructional. Young children learn, explore, communicate and make meaning most effectively when they are in emotionally secure relationships with teachers and peers (Blewitt et al., 2020). This suggests that the quality of classroom interactions is equally as important as the content of the curriculum in determining educational outcomes.

In this context, emotional intelligence (EI), conceived as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate and use emotions effectively (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Research has consistently shown that teachers' emotional competence is related to positive classroom climate, student engagement, socio-emotional development, behaviour regulation, and academic achievement (Aldrup et al., 2024; Gebre et al., 2025). However, the prevailing literature still tends to conceptualise EI as primarily an interpersonal disposition, leadership quality or behavioural competence that is

complementary to teaching, rather than as an integral component of pedagogy (Aldrup et al., 2024).

This conceptual orientation represents a substantial gap in the present knowledge. Although there is considerable evidence that children's emotional experiences have a significant impact on attention, motivation, and learning (Tyng et al., 2017), existing scholarship has not yet fully developed EI as a coherent pedagogical framework through which teachers interpret behaviour and make responsive instructional decisions (Aldrup et al., 2024; Blewitt et al., 2020). Thus, prevailing conceptualisations are insufficient to explain how teachers' emotional competence influences pedagogical judgement itself, particularly in early childhood settings where behaviour often signals developmental, relational or contextual needs rather than deliberate misbehaviour (Silkenbeumer et al., 2024). This omission has important practical implications. The withdrawal, aggression, inattentiveness or resistance of children is often interpreted through discipline-centred lenses that privilege behavioural correction over understanding the emotional and environmental conditions from whence such behaviours emerge (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2023). However, these kinds of behaviours may be indicative of insecurity through family stress or classroom environments that do not afford emotional safety (Blewitt et al., 2020).

This position paper advocates for a re-positioning of EI from a supplementary interpersonal competence to the pedagogical underpinning of responsive ECE. Drawing on the Mayer and Salovey Ability Model, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and African philosophical perspectives, the paper contends that children's behaviour should be interpreted within the complex web of emotional, relational, cultural and environmental contexts rather than through the lens of disciplinary frameworks alone. This paper deepens this argument by drawing on two insights from African philosophy. The first proverb is *the fox must first be chased out into the bush before warning the hen about loitering into the bush*, meaning that the source of danger must be addressed or eliminated before the vulnerable are blamed for reacting to it. The second is, *yɛnnyina nkrane mu ntete nkrane*, interpreted as - we do not stand in the army of ants to clear ants - implies that problems cannot be solved effectively from within the same conditions that breed them. When applied to early childhood classrooms, these proverbs suggest that teachers cannot successfully remediate children's behaviour while simultaneously preserving the emotional, relational and environmental conditions that produce behavioural difficulties.

From the discourse, the simple but central argument is that Emotional Intelligence should be re-conceptualised as the foundation for responsive pedagogy in ECE. This re-positioning requires a shift from discipline-centred classroom management to emotionally intelligent teaching; from blaming children to understanding children's context; from compliance to connection; from punitive correction to relational, reflective and developmentally appropriate practice.

CONCEPTUALIZING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Emotional intelligence is commonly defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions in ways that facilitate adaptive thinking, effective relationships, and sound decision-making (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer et al., 2008). Within ECE, however, EI should not be understood merely as an individual psychological attribute. Rather, it

constitutes a professional pedagogical competence that shapes how teachers interpret children's behaviour, establish emotionally secure learning environments, and make responsive instructional decisions (Aldrup et al., 2024). Viewed from this perspective, the four-branch ability model proposed by Mayer and Salovey provides not only a framework for understanding emotional functioning but also a practical foundation for responsive teaching.

First, emotion perception allows teachers to see the emotional cues of children. Teachers must interpret behaviour as meaningful developmental communication rather than as isolated acts requiring correction (Kostøl et al., 2024; Silkenbeumer et al., 2024). Consequently, emotionally intelligent teachers respond not simply to observable behaviour but also to the underlying emotional messages that behaviour conveys, thereby enabling more developmentally appropriate pedagogical responses (Silkenbeumer et al., 2024).

Second, teachers can recognize the impact of emotion on attention, memory, motivation and participation and create conditions in which emotions support rather than obstruct thinking (Tyng et al., 2017). Contemporary neuroscience demonstrates that emotion and cognition function as mutually reinforcing processes rather than independent domains of development (Housman, 2017). Children's capacity to attend, remember, solve problems, and persist with learning tasks is significantly influenced by their emotional experiences (Tyng et al., 2017). Therefore, teaching cannot be conceptualised solely as the transmission of knowledge. Instead, effective pedagogy requires teachers to create emotional conditions that support cognitive engagement. This makes EI an essential component of instructional practice rather than an optional interpersonal attribute.

Third, teachers who understand emotions are able to interpret behaviour more accurately. Aggression or withdrawal may reflect underlying emotional, relational, communicative or situational difficulties. Withdrawal may be an indicator of fear, low confidence, exclusion, difficulty with language or emotional distress (Kostøl et al., 2024). In this regard, EI transforms the teacher’s role from judgment to interpretation, enabling the teacher to ask: What is this child trying to tell us through this behaviour?

Fourth, emotional management is also important for teachers and learners. Teachers who are unable to regulate their own feelings of frustrations, anger, disappointment, or stress may respond to children in ways that intensify classroom difficulties (Aldrup et al., 2024). This implies that teacher emotional regulation is not only a private characteristic in ECE but a professional responsibility for developmentally appropriate instructional delivery.

Responsive Pedagogy as an Emotional Practice

Responsive pedagogy recognises that meaningful learning emerges through continuous interaction between children's emotional experiences, developmental readiness, social relationships, and cultural contexts (Kostøl & Mänty, 2024). Consequently, teaching becomes an adaptive process in which instructional decisions are informed not only by curriculum objectives but also by learners' emotional and relational needs (Kostøl & Mänty, 2024; Marttila et al., 2024). Responsive pedagogy differs from narrowly compliance-oriented strategies that evaluate successful classroom and behaviour management basically through obedience and behavioural uniformity. Instead, it gives greater attention to meaningful participation and developmental appropriateness.

While classroom management has traditionally emphasised behavioural compliance, procedural order, and instructional efficiency, responsive pedagogy broadens this perspective by recognising children's behaviour as embedded within emotional, developmental, and contextual realities. Rather than asking only how undesirable behaviour can be reduced, emotionally responsive teaching considers why the behaviour occurs and what environmental, relational, or developmental factors may be contributing to it (Kostøl & Mänty, 2024). This shift represents not the abandonment of classroom discipline but its reconceptualization within a broader understanding of child development.

In practice, emotionally responsive pedagogy is reflected in classroom environments characterised by respectful teacher-learner relationships, flexible instructional strategies, and developmentally appropriate opportunities for play, communication, and emotional expression (Early et al., 2017; Marttila et al., 2024). These practices are pedagogically significant because they create the relational conditions under which children feel sufficiently safe, valued, and motivated to engage fully in learning (Early et al., 2017; Gasser et al., 2018).

Emotional intelligence therefore represents a pivotal enabling condition for responsive pedagogy. Teachers may possess strong curricular knowledge and well-designed lesson plans, yet they could remain unable to recognise children's emotional distress, adapt instruction to learners' needs, or prevent minor behavioural difficulties from escalating into significant classroom challenges (Marttila et al., 2024). By contrast, emotionally responsive teachers integrate contextual and relational understanding into their instructional decisions (Kostøl & Mänty, 2024) thereby creating learning environments that support both academic engagement and socio-emotional development (Gasser et al., 2018).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Mayer and Salovey’s Ability Model of Emotional Intelligence

Mayer and Salovey's Ability Model provides the strongest theoretical foundation for the present argument. The model conceptualises EI as a set of learnable cognitive-emotional abilities rather than as a fixed personality disposition (Mayer et al., 2016). The model supports the central proposition of this paper that emotionally responsive pedagogy should become an integral component of teacher education rather than an optional personal attribute.

Within the Ability Model, teacher EI can be understood through four interconnected professional capacities: perceiving emotions, using emotion to support thought, understanding emotional processes and managing emotions in oneself and others. Emotional perception helps teachers to recognise their own emotional responses and notice children’s verbal and non-verbal cues. Using emotion to facilitate thought supports attention to the emotional conditions affecting participation and learning. Emotional understanding enables teachers to interpret how feelings may develop or change within particular relational and classroom situations. Emotional management supports deliberate responses during challenging interactions and constructive co-regulation with children (Aldrup et al., 2024; Howard et al., 2024; Mayer et al., 2016). This paper interprets these branches as mutually reinforcing dimensions of responsive teaching in early childhood classrooms.

The Ability Model also clarifies an important conceptual misunderstanding. Emotional intelligence should not be equated with kindness or emotional warmth alone (Mayer et al., 2016). Emotional intelligence therefore represents a professional capability grounded in informed judgement, reflective decision-making, and pedagogical expertise rather than simply positive personal characteristics.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory offers an important lens for understanding children's behaviour as the product of continuous interaction between individual characteristics and multiple environmental systems (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Rather than interpreting behaviour as an isolated characteristic of the child, the theory highlights the dynamic influence of family relationships, classroom experiences, school structures, community conditions and broader policy environments (Tong & An, 2024). Applied to classroom behaviour, this ecological perspective redirects attention from the child's observable actions alone towards the interacting personal and contextual conditions that shape development.

From a bioecological perspective, children's behaviour cannot be attributed solely to individual choice because it develops through recurring interactions among personal characteristics, relationships, environments and time (Tong & An, 2024; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Consequently, classroom practices that focus exclusively on correcting observable behaviour risk overlooking the broader emotional, relational, and structural conditions that give rise to it. Emotionally responsive pedagogy therefore requires teachers to interpret behaviour within its ecological context before deciding upon appropriate educational responses.

The bioecological perspective also provides a compelling theoretical bridge to the African proverb concerning the fox and the hen. Whereas the bioecological model explains development through interactions among personal and contextual influences over time (Tong & An, 2024), the proverb communicates a comparable principle through culturally grounded moral reasoning. Their convergence strengthens the paper's central claim that effective pedagogy requires addressing the emotional and environmental circumstances underlying children's behaviour before relying on disciplinary responses.

African Philosophical Views on Emotional Intelligence and Pedagogy

A distinctive contribution of this paper lies in its integration of African philosophical perspectives into contemporary discussions of emotional intelligence and responsive pedagogy. Although contemporary EI theory is generally located within Western psychological traditions (Mayer et al., 2016), many of its underlying values like empathy and emotional self-regulation have longstanding parallels within African philosophies of education centred on personhood, relationality and communal responsibility (Balogun, 2023; Oviawe, 2016). Recognising these intellectual traditions broadens the conceptual foundations of EI while demonstrating its relevance beyond its conventional psychological origins.

Several African philosophies of education, particularly those associated with *Ubuntu* and relational accounts of personhood, emphasise communal responsibility, moral development and mutual care as essential conditions of human flourishing (Balogun, 2023). The well-known *Ubuntu principle,* commonly associated with a relational understanding of personhood in which individual humanity is realised through relationships and responsibilities toward others (Balogun, 2023; Oviawe, 2016), provides an important educational perspective in which children's emotional, social, and moral development are inseparable from learning itself. This paper extends that insight to children's emotional development in ECE.

The proverb "The fox must first be chased out into the bush before warning the hen about loitering into the bush" provides a culturally grounded critique of discipline that focuses solely on children's observable behaviour. Within the context of ECE, the "fox" symbolises the emotional, relational, or environmental conditions that contribute to behavioural difficulties, while the "hen" represents the child responding to those conditions. The proverb therefore challenges educators to address underlying causes before imposing behavioural sanctions, reinforcing the central proposition that emotionally responsive pedagogy requires understanding context before correcting conduct. Likewise, *yɛnnyina nkrane mu ntete nkrane* means one cannot solve a problem staying within the conditions that sustain the same problem. Applied pedagogically, practices that rely on fear or humiliation may secure immediate behavioural compliance while undermining emotional safety and voluntary classroom participation. Sustainable behavioural change may require attention to the relational and environmental conditions that repeatedly shape children's responses (Tong & An, 2024).

Collectively, these African philosophical perspectives demonstrate that emotionally responsive pedagogy is not an externally imposed educational innovation but one that resonates with enduring African traditions of relational responsibility and communal care (Balogun, 2023; Oviawe, 2016). At the same time, recognising these philosophical foundations does not require uncritical acceptance of all inherited disciplinary practices. Rather, it encourages teachers to reclaim those traditions that promote children's dignity, emotional wellbeing, and holistic development while critically reconsidering practices that undermine these goals.

From Punitive Discipline to Emotionally Responsive Classroom Management

Classroom management commonly encompasses the practices teachers use to organise classroom activity, support learning and guide children's behaviour. In narrowly compliance-oriented approaches, successful classroom management may be judged primarily through visible indicators like obedience, silence and orderly conduct. Visible compliance and orderly conduct do not necessarily demonstrate emotional safety or meaningful engagement (Gasser et al., 2018). A classroom may appear calm while children remain anxious, disengaged, or reluctant to participate.

Emotionally responsive classroom management therefore broadens the purpose of classroom management by recognising that effective learning depends not only on behavioural regulation but also on children's emotional experiences and relationships within the classroom (Tilbe & Gai, 2024). It shifts the emphasis from control alone towards teacher-

learner co-regulation (Kurki et al., 2016; Silkenbeumer et al., 2024). This co-regulation does not imply permissiveness or the absence of behavioural expectations. Rather, it combines clear, consistent boundaries with developmentally appropriate emotional guidance.

The paper therefore proposes that behaviour should first be interpreted as potentially meaningful communication before it is classified as misconduct. Consequently, disciplinary responses that focus solely on correcting observable behaviour may overlook the factors that sustain that behaviour. Emotionally responsive classroom management therefore involves interpretation before intervention: teachers should consider the child, relationship and immediate situation before selecting an appropriate educational response (Kostøl & Mänty, 2024). The implication is that classroom management cannot be reduced to rules and sanctions. The quality of teacher-learner relationships is itself a central dimension of effective classroom management (Tilbe & Gai, 2024).

Emotional Intelligence as a Professional Competence for Early Childhood Teachers

The effective implementation of emotionally responsive pedagogy depends partly on teachers' emotional competence (Aldrup et al., 2024; Xu, 2026). Therefore, their capacity to understand and regulate their own emotions directly influences the quality of classroom relationships, children's emotional security, and opportunities for meaningful engagement (Aldrup et al., 2024). Emotional intelligence should therefore be recognised as a core dimension of professional competence rather than as an individual personal attribute.

Teacher EI comprises a mutually reinforcing set of professional capabilities. Self-awareness enables teachers to recognise their emotional responses and implicit assumptions. Self-regulation allows them to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively during challenging situations. Empathy supports accurate interpretation of children's perspectives, while intrinsic motivation sustains commitment to responsive teaching despite daily challenges. Social competence strengthens communication, collaboration, and relationship building with children, families, and colleagues (Xu, 2026; Aldrup et al., 2024; Mayer et al., 2016). Collectively, these competencies underpin the relational work that characterises high-quality ECE.

Recognising EI as a professional competence should not imply that responsibility rests solely with individual teachers. Heavy workloads, inadequate staffing, limited professional support and persistent occupational stress may constrain teachers' capacity to sustain emotionally responsive interactions (Orman et al., 2026; Zhou et al., 2024)

Evidence from Social and Emotional Learning and Classroom Climate Research

Research on school-based social and emotional learning indicates that strengthening children's social-emotional competencies can support classroom behaviour, involvement and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). When considered alongside evidence linking teachers' emotion regulation and emotional well-being with classroom interaction quality, SEL research supports the broader proposition that emotional processes are pedagogically consequential rather than peripheral to teaching (Aldrup et al., 2024)

The pedagogical role of teachers' emotional and relational competence also warrants particular attention in resource-constrained educational contexts. Although EI

cannot compensate for structural inequalities, emotionally supportive and relationally responsive teaching may nevertheless help teachers to sustain participation within challenging classroom conditions (Gasser et al., 2018).

The application of SEL frameworks across educational settings requires deliberate cultural interpretation and adaptation rather than uncritical transfer (McCallops et al., 2019). By integrating African philosophical perspectives with contemporary EI perspectives, this paper demonstrates that emotionally responsive pedagogy can be both internationally informed and locally grounded.

Critique of Current Teacher Education and ECE Systems

One possible explanation for the uneven application of emotionally responsive practice is that social-emotional competence is not always addressed explicitly or consistently within initial teacher preparation (Kyriazopoulou et al., 2024; Siraj et al., 2026). Although emotional and relational competencies are increasingly recognised as dimensions of teachers' professional practice, they may remain implicit or inconsistently represented within teacher-preparation curricula (Geraci et al., 2026; Siraj et al., 2026). Where emotional and relational competencies remain implicit, prospective teachers may have limited structured opportunities to practise emotional interpretation, regulation and relational decision-making.

The consequences of this omission become evident when teachers encounter emotionally complex classroom situations for which they have received little explicit preparation (Stahnke & Blömeke, 2021). They may struggle to respond constructively to children's emotional distress, peer conflict or family-related challenges (Wolff et al., 2017). Without opportunities to examine their emotional responses and assumptions about discipline, teachers may reproduce familiar classroom-management practices rather than adopting more reflective and developmentally responsive approaches (Kurki et al., 2016; Silkenbeumer et al., 2024)."

Repositioning EI as a foundational pedagogical competence requires changes that extend beyond individual classrooms. An integrated support system should combine explicit pre-service preparation and continuing professional development with mentoring, reflective professional support, enabling leadership, manageable working conditions and attention to teacher well-being (Berger et al., 2022; Geraci et al., 2026). Without such alignment, emotionally responsive practice is likely to remain uneven and dependent on individual teachers' knowledge, commitment and working conditions rather than becoming an established feature of the education system.

Counterarguments and Rebuttals

Several objections may be raised against positioning emotional intelligence as foundational to ECE pedagogy. One possible objection is that allocating greater attention to EI and social-emotional development could reduce instructional time devoted to literacy, numeracy and other academic outcomes. Available evidence does not support treating social-emotional and academic development as inherently competing priorities. Rather, emotional regulation and positive classroom relationships provide the conditions through which effective

academic learning becomes possible (Durlak et al., 2011). Emotional and relational competence should therefore be treated as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, effective academic instruction.

A second concern relates to the measurement of EI. Emotional intelligence is assessed through several theoretically distinct approaches, including performance-based measures of ability EI and self-report measures of trait or competency-based EI (Mayer et al., 2008). No single instrument captures every interpretation of the construct. However, methodological complexity should not be mistaken for conceptual weakness. Yet, the constructs remain central to educational theory and practice. Their assessment should therefore be theoretically aligned and, where appropriate, draw on complementary evidence such as performance tasks, self-reports, observations and context-specific professional judgements (Mayer et al., 2016)

A third objection is that contemporary EI theory emerged largely within Western psychological scholarship and may not transfer uncritically to African educational contexts. The present paper addresses this challenge by demonstrating that although the language of EI emerged within contemporary psychology, some principles associated with EI particularly relational awareness, mutual responsibility and respectful emotional conduct have parallels within *Ubuntu*-oriented and relational African philosophies of education (Balogun, 2023; Oviawe, 2016). The paper's contribution therefore lies not in presenting EI as a culturally neutral construct for direct importation, but in placing contemporary EI theory in critical dialogue with culturally grounded African philosophies of education.

A fourth concern is that framing EI as a professional requirement could individualise responsibility and add to the expectations placed on teachers working under demanding conditions. Emotional intelligence should never be presented as a substitute for adequate educational investment or supportive policy environments. Instead, emotionally responsive pedagogy depends upon both professionally competent teachers and educational systems that provide appropriate resources, leadership, and working conditions. Sustainable implementation therefore requires responsibility to be shared across individuals, institutions, and policy makers (Berger et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2024).

A final objection is that emotionally responsive pedagogy may be interpreted as permissive or as weakening teachers' authority to establish behavioural expectations. Emotionally intelligent teaching does not abandon expectations and accountability. Rather, it strengthens them by ensuring that behavioural interventions are developmentally appropriate and are informed by an understanding of children's emotional experiences (Kurki et al., 2016; Silkenbeumer et al., 2024). Responsive pedagogy therefore reframes discipline as a process of relationship building rather than punishment alone.

Developing a Framework for Emotionally Responsive Pedagogy

The preceding discussion suggests that emotionally responsive pedagogy cannot be reduced to isolated classroom techniques or individual teacher attributes. To synthesise these interdependent elements, this paper proposes an Emotionally Responsive Pedagogy Framework comprising five mutually reinforcing dimensions through which emotional intelligence can inform ECE practice

1. Emotional Self-Awareness in Teachers

Teachers require emotional self-awareness to recognise their feelings, stress responses and habitual reactions during classroom interactions. This involves considering questions such as: *What behaviours annoy me? What do I do when the children don't listen? Do I view children's behaviour through a developmental lens or a personal lens? What was my own view of discipline shaped by schooling?* Reflective practice should also help them examine assumptions about children, behaviour and discipline (Mayer et al., 2016)

2. Children's Understanding of Emotion

Teachers should learn to interpret behaviour as potentially meaningful emotional and developmental communication rather than responding only to its observable form (Kostøl & Mänty, 2024). Interpretation should consider children's emotional cues, developmental capacities, language and communication, peer relationships, family circumstances and immediate classroom conditions (Kostøl & Mänty, 2024; Silkenbeumer et al., 2024).

3. Classroom Relational Climate

Teachers should intentionally establish a relationally and emotionally supportive classroom climate characterised by warmth, respect, predictability and inclusive interaction (Tilbe & Gai, 2024). This includes warm greetings, predictable routines, respectful language, positive reinforcement, supportive correction, and inclusive participation. Children should have developmentally appropriate opportunities to identify, communicate and regulate feelings within supportive interactions (Silkenbeumer et al., 2024).

4. Responsive Decision Making in Instruction

Teachers should adapt the pacing, organisation and delivery of learning experiences in response to children's observed engagement, emotional state and developmental readiness. Depending on the learning objective and children's needs, responsive adaptation may include play, movement, songs, stories, visual supports, peer interaction, flexible grouping or shorter activity sequences (Arda Tuncdemir & Akman, 2025).

5. System and Policy Support

Sustainable implementation requires alignment among teacher education, continuing professional development, coaching or mentoring, school leadership, curriculum expectations, supervision and education policy. Without institutional and policy support, emotionally responsive practice is likely to remain uneven and dependent on individual teachers' preparation, commitment and working conditions (Tilbe & Gai, 2024).

The framework proposes that teachers' emotional self-awareness may strengthen their interpretation of children's emotions and behaviour; such interpretation can inform the relational climate and instructional decisions of the classroom; and the consistency of these practices is likely to depend on institutional and policy support. Collectively, the framework positions emotionally responsive pedagogy as a multilevel process operating

across teacher, child, classroom, institutional and policy contexts, with teachers' emotional intelligence functioning as one of its central professional resources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Implications for Pre-service and In-service Teacher Education Programs

If emotional intelligence is recognised as a foundational pedagogical competence, teacher education programmes must move beyond treating it as an implicit outcome of professional experience. Instead, EI should be systematically embedded throughout pre-service and in-service preparation. This should include child development, pedagogy, practicum experiences, assessment, inclusive education, and reflective practice.

Implications for School Leadership

Emotionally responsive pedagogy cannot flourish without emotionally intelligent leadership. School leaders play a critical role in shaping organisational cultures that value professional and constructive approaches to behaviour guidance. Leadership practices that mirror the emotional competencies expected of teachers strengthen the conditions necessary for sustainable pedagogical change.

Implications for Curriculum and Assessment

Curriculum and assessment should together recognise emotional and social development as essential educational outcomes rather than peripheral objectives. While assessment of children's emotional development should remain formative and developmentally appropriate, systematic observation of self-regulation and social interaction can provide valuable information for guiding responsive teaching.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, recognising EI as a foundational pedagogical competence requires its explicit incorporation into teacher standards, quality assurance frameworks, curriculum policy, and professional development systems. Such recognition would broaden prevailing definitions of quality ECE by acknowledging that emotionally supportive relationships and developmentally responsive teaching are as fundamental to educational quality as curriculum implementation, infrastructure, or academic outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This position paper has argued that EI should be repositioned from a supplementary interpersonal competence to the pedagogical foundation of responsive ECE. The African proverbs revisited throughout this paper encapsulate its central conceptual message. By reminding teachers to address the "fox" before correcting the "hen," they challenge strategies to discipline that focus exclusively on observable behaviour while neglecting its underlying emotional and environmental causes. Similarly, the proverb yɛnyina nkrane mu ntete nkrane reminds educators that classroom problems cannot be solved from within the

same emotional and relational conditions that give rise to them. Ultimately, repositioning EI as the foundation of responsive pedagogy does not diminish the importance of academic learning or classroom discipline. Rather, it recognises that sustainable learning is inseparable from children's emotional experiences, relationships, and developmental contexts. This paper offers a culturally grounded conceptual framework capable of informing future research, strengthening teacher education, and promoting more equitable and developmentally responsive ECE.

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