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Emotion-Focused Therapy as a Humanistic Framework for Semi-Military Vocational Education

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ABSTRACT

Semi-military vocational education is increasingly questioned due to concerns about its impact on students' autonomy, emotional well-being, and personal development, despite its effectiveness in fostering discipline and order. This conceptual article aims to propose Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) as a humanistic framework to humanize semi-military vocational education without diminishing its disciplinary strengths. Using a critical literature review approach, this study synthesizes theoretical and empirical insights from militaristic education models, humanistic education perspectives, and EFT principles to construct an integrative conceptual framework. The analysis reveals that semi-military educational environments tend to prioritize obedience and control, often at the expense of emotional expression, creativity, and student agency. The findings suggest that integrating EFT principles, such as emotional awareness, empathetic teacher, student relationships, emotional regulation, and supportive authority, can create a more balanced educational climate. This framework positions educators as caring mentors while maintaining structured discipline, thereby promoting resilience, self-awareness, and emotional competence among vocational students. The article concludes that EFT-informed humanistic practices offer a viable and ethical pathway to reform semi-military vocational education, with practical implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and institutional policy.

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Introduction

In vocational education systems that adopt semi-military models blending standard curricula with military-style discipline an inherent tension exists between maintaining strict order and fostering a supportive learning environment (Syarifah et al., 2025). Such programs have gained popularity in various contexts (e.g.

specialized vocational high schools, academies) for their success in instilling discipline, hierarchy, and obedience among students (Syarifah et al., 2025;Mohammad Wildan Habibi & Rijanto, 2022). Proponents argue that a regimented environment builds character and work readiness, citing improvements in student punctuality, respect, and rule compliance Mohammad Wildan Habibi & Rijanto, (2022). For instance, Habibi and Rijanto (2022) found that a semi-military program at a naval vocational school in Indonesia played a positive role in enforcing student discipline and respect for school rules (e.g., students consistently followed regulations and respected school authorities) Mohammad Wildan Habibi & Rijanto, (2022). Moreover, brief periods of military-style training have been shown to improve certain psychological outcomes a Chinese study reported increased resilience and reduced depression in college freshmen after a 3-week military training Guo et al., (2021). These outcomes suggest that structure and rigor can provide students with a sense of purpose, resilience, and communal identity.

However, mounting criticism from educators and psychologists suggests that an overemphasis on militaristic discipline may dehumanize the educational experience (Freire, 1970). Authoritarian school climates, particularly "no-excuses" or highly regimented charter schools, have drawn concern for suppressing students' autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking (Lack, 2009). In a critical case study of Indonesian semi-military schooling, Syarifah et al. (2025) argue that strict hierarchical models ultimately undermine learners' agency and democratic values, contradicting the ideals of education as a space for critical awareness and freedom (Syarifah et al., 2025) . Students in such environments may comply out of fear of punishment, rather than internalizing positive values. Overly punitive approaches risk engendering stress, anxiety, or rebellion, especially in adolescents who are developmentally sensitive to issues of autonomy and identity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Indeed, accounts from semi-military boarding schools note challenges like homesickness and emotional maladjustment; for example, a case study reported by Zamhariri, Putri, and Rabbani (2025) described a first-year student's intense homesickness and emotional instability in a semi-military maritime academy, which impaired her academic focus and social integration. Such issues highlight the emotional toll that a rigid, punitive environment can exact on learners.

This article explores Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) as a humanistic framework to "humanize" semi-military vocational education that is, to infuse these programs with empathy, emotional support, and student-centered practices without entirely sacrificing structure. Emotion-Focused Therapy, developed by Leslie Greenberg and colleagues, is a humanistic, evidence-based psychotherapy approach that helps individuals become aware of and transform maladaptive emotions through a supportive, empathetic therapeutic relationship. We posit that the principles underlying EFT (empathy, genuine understanding, and emotional processing) can be translated into educational strategies to better support students' socio-emotional needs in highly disciplined settings. The goal is not to diminish the positive aspects of semi-military education (such as resilience, teamwork, and discipline), but to balance them with practices that honor students' emotional lives and dignity. This aligns with broader trends in education calling for humanistic approaches that educate "the whole person" cognitively, socially, and emotionally as emphasized by Rogers (1969) and Maslow (1971).

The remainder of this article is structured as a conceptual analysis. First, we review the characteristics of semi-military vocational education and its critiques, juxtaposing them with core ideas from humanistic education theory. We then provide an overview of Emotion-Focused Therapy and its relevance as a humanistic, emotion-centered approach. Next, we synthesize these domains, illustrating how EFT-informed principles (like empathic communication, emotional coaching, and collaborative dialogue) can be applied in semi-military educational contexts. Throughout, we integrate findings from prior literature, including studies on militaristic schooling, social-emotional learning, and humanistic pedagogy, to ground our arguments in evidence. Finally, we conclude with recommendations and implications for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to transform vocational training into a more humane, emotionally intelligent endeavor. Our overarching thesis is that EFT's humanistic lens can help semi-military programs evolve from authoritarian training grounds to holistic learning communities that produce disciplined *and* self-actualizing graduates prepared for both the workforce and civic life.

This article proposes EFT as a humanistic framework capable of bridging this gap. Originally developed within psychotherapy, EFT emphasizes emotional awareness, empathy, emotion regulation, and supportive relationships as pathways to personal transformation. This study argues that EFT principles can be translated into educational practices to humanize semi-military vocational education without undermining its disciplinary foundations. Accordingly, this conceptual article aims to (1) critically examine the tension between discipline and humanization in semi-military vocational education, (2) articulate the relevance of humanistic education and EFT to this context, and (3) propose an EFT-informed framework for creating a balanced, emotionally supportive, and disciplined vocational education environment.

Methods

This study employed a conceptual research design using a critical literature review approach. Conceptual research is appropriate for developing theoretical frameworks, synthesizing existing knowledge, and generating integrative models without empirical data collection. The literature review focused on three primary domains:

1. Semi-military and militaristic education models,
2. Humanistic education theories, and
3. Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) and emotion-centered interventions in educational and psychological contexts.

Academic sources were identified through peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, and reputable international publications in education and psychology. The selection criteria included relevance to vocational education, disciplinary practices, emotional well-being, and humanistic or emotion-focused approaches. Both empirical studies and theoretical works were included to ensure conceptual depth and contextual grounding. The analysis followed a thematic synthesis procedure, consisting of:

1. Empathic Leadership and Teacher-Student Relationships
2. Emotionally Enriched Curriculum and Classroom Climate
3. Emotional Regulation and Coping Skills Training
4. Restorative and Supportive Discipline
5. Fostering a Democratic, Participatory School Culture

Rather than testing hypotheses, this study aimed to develop an explanatory and normative framework that can inform educational practice, policy development, and future empirical research. The validity of the framework is supported through theoretical coherence, consistency with existing empirical findings, and alignment with contemporary educational and workforce demands.

Result and Discussion

Semi-Military Vocational Education: Discipline, Challenges, and Humanization Imperatives

Semi-military vocational education refers to schooling programs (often at the secondary or post-secondary level) that incorporate military-inspired structure and discipline into a traditional educational curriculum. These may include daily drill routines, uniform inspections, strict hierarchies between instructors (often addressed by rank) and students, rigorous physical training, and a strong emphasis on obedience and order. The rationale is typically to instill traits like punctuality, discipline, teamwork, and patriotism in students, thereby enhancing their employability and character. In countries like Indonesia, for example, certain vocational high schools and academies implement quasi-military boarding programs to curb indiscipline and juvenile delinquency, aiming to "create a good personality in children through kindness, discipline, and guidance" (Mahartika, as cited in Syukri, 2020). Such initiatives are often supported by stakeholders who view youth discipline and moral education as national priorities.

Positive outcomes and appeal: Advocates of the semi-military model point to tangible improvements in student behavior and school climate. A qualitative study by Habibi and Rijanto (2022) at a naval-affiliated vocational school reported that students under semi-military education showed greater respect for authority, better adherence to school regulations, and enhanced self-regulation (e.g., the ability to complete tasks on time and maintain orderly conduct) Mohammad Wildan Habibi & Rijanto, (2022). Teachers in such programs often note reduced truancy and a clearer sense of structure that can be especially beneficial for students who previously struggled in less-structured environments. There is also an argument that exposure to adversity and regimentation can build resilience. Supporting this, a study of Chinese college freshmen undergoing mandatory military training found significant increases in psychological resilience scores post-training, along with a decrease in depressive symptoms Guo et al., (2021). The proportion of freshmen meeting clinical criteria for depression dropped from 10.5% to 7.2% after the training (Guo et al., 2021), suggesting that, for some students, the experience of overcoming challenges in a controlled, team-based military exercise can bolster mental fortitude (Guo et al., 2021). Such findings echo the notion of "character education" through hardship: the idea that strict discipline, when coupled with support, can help young people develop grit and perseverance.

Critiques and challenges: Despite these advantages, a growing body of literature critiques militaristic education models for their potentially deleterious effects on student development. One core criticism is that an overemphasis on obedience and conformity can suppress important skills and qualities such as creativity, critical thinking, and self-efficacy. Syarifah et al. (2025) describe the semi-military schooling model as inherently authoritarian, noting that it "ultimately suppresses learners' autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking" by

enforcing absolute obedience Syarifah et al., (2025). The authors frame this in terms of critical pedagogy: a militaristic approach contradicts principles of dialogue, participation, and empowerment that are central to emancipatory education Syarifah et al., (2025). In effect, students become passive recipients of orders rather than active co-constructors of knowledge, which can undermine their ability to question, innovate, or take initiative, skills highly valued in the 21st-century workforce (Chen & Schmidtke, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2020).

Furthermore, extreme disciplinary environments risk crossing into psychological harm. Reports of anxiety, stress, and alienation are not uncommon. Zamhariri et al. (2025) presented a case study of a student in a semi-military polytechnic who experienced severe homesickness, emotional instability, and withdrawal. Despite being cognitively capable and disciplined in following rules, the student's emotional distress (stemming from family separation and the academy's harsh environment) led to procrastination and loss of concentration. This example underlines that meeting students' emotional needs is as important as enforcing behavioral standards. Without support mechanisms, the regimented setting can exacerbate feelings of isolation or helplessness, potentially leading to mental health issues. Human rights observers have also raised alarms: for instance, Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) in 2025 questioned a local "military-style boot camp" for schoolchildren, worrying that such practices might violate children's rights and wellbeing (Komnas HAM, 2025). While structure is beneficial, excessive regimentation without empathy can devolve into cruelty a concern famously echoed by Freire (1970), who warned that oppressive educational practices "dehumanize" learners by treating them as subordinates rather than equal participants in learning.

Research in vocational and technical education supports the need for a more humanistic balance. Chen and Schmidtke (2017) found that even within a U.S. technical college (traditionally more utilitarian in approach), incorporating humanistic elements – such as contextual, student-centered teaching and an ethic of care – enabled instructors to more effectively develop students' teamwork, problem-solving, and lifelong learning skills Chen & Schmidtke, (2017). The authors note that humanism had long struggled to find footing in technical education, but is now resurging as student-centered approaches prove their worth in producing well-rounded graduates Chen & Schmidtke, (2017). This suggests that humanistic and militaristic approaches need not be mutually exclusive; rather, a hybrid model could leverage the strengths of both. Indeed, even military organizations have begun to acknowledge this. The U.S. Army's leadership doctrine now explicitly lists empathy as a key leadership skill, recognizing that leaders "must be able to identify with their subordinates' situations, motives or feelings" and anticipate the impact of decisions on them S. & Page, (2023). As Command Sgt. Maj. Tilghman and Capt. Page (2023) write, leaders without empathy "fail to see the humanity in their organization," whereas empathy-informed leadership humanizes interactions by honoring individuals' dignity and showing respect S. & Page, (2023). This perspective from within the military itself provides a powerful model: empathy and discipline can coexist. An overly rigid stance is not even optimal for military effectiveness, let alone education a sphere where the primary mission is to nurture and develop young people.

In summary, semi-military vocational education stands at a crossroads. On one hand, its structured approach can cultivate discipline, resilience, and unity; on the other, it can stifle personal growth and emotional well-being if not moderated. The imperative is to humanize these programs – to transform them from potentially dehumanizing systems into environments that still value discipline but equally value empathy, understanding, and the holistic development of students. Doing so requires drawing on the rich insights of humanistic education theory and related fields of psychology. In the next section, we delve into humanistic educational principles and how they contrast with (and can complement) militaristic paradigms.

Humanistic Education: Philosophical Foundations and Relevance to Vocational Training

Humanistic education is a philosophical and pedagogical approach that emphasizes the whole person and prioritizes personal growth, intrinsic motivation, and the development of individual potential. Arising from humanistic psychology in the mid-20th century, it represents a reaction against authoritarian, didactic forms of schooling (the "banking model" critiqued by Freire) and against overly behaviorist or purely cognitive approaches that neglect the emotional and social dimensions of learning. Key figures like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow laid the groundwork by arguing that education should facilitate self-actualization and address students' emotional needs, not just transmit facts.

Carl Rogers (1969), in *Freedom to Learn*, argued that significant learning only occurs in an atmosphere of genuineness, acceptance, and empathy – the same core conditions he identified for effective psychotherapy (Rogers, 1957). In a Rogers-inspired classroom, the teacher acts more as a facilitator than a drill sergeant, fostering a climate of unconditional positive regard for students. This means accepting and valuing students for who they are, so that they feel safe to express themselves and take intellectual risks. Rogers believed that learners have a natural desire to learn (when topics are relevant to them) and that coercive or fear-based tactics only undermine this natural motivation. Thus, he advocated for learner-centered instruction, where students' interests and feelings are taken into account in the learning process, and where students are encouraged to take

responsibility for their own learning. Such an environment is the antithesis of an authoritarian classroom; it requires mutual respect and open communication.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs further supports the humanistic approach. Maslow (1971) noted that for a person to reach the level of self-actualization (fulfilling one's potential), their more basic needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, self-esteem) must be met. In educational terms, a student struggling with fear or a lack of belonging will find it hard to focus on learning. Humanistic education addresses both cognitive and emotional needs of students, aiming to provide a secure, supportive environment where students feel valued and confident. In practice, this could involve advisory programs, counseling, mentoring, or classroom practices that build a sense of community and trust. It also means encouraging student voice and choice, which boosts their sense of autonomy and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research shows that when students feel their autonomy is supported by teachers (rather than feeling controlled), they display greater motivation, better academic performance, and higher well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy support is a core facet of humanistic learning theory and a direct counter to militaristic regimentation.

Evidence of effectiveness: Over the decades, numerous studies have affirmed the benefits of humanistic, student-centered approaches across educational levels and contexts. For example, Khatib, Sarem, and Hamidi (2013) demonstrated that applying humanistic education principles in language teaching led to greater learner autonomy, motivation, and engagement compared to traditional methods. Their work highlighted that shifting from teacher-led instruction to student-centered learning environments improved outcomes as students became active participants in their learning process, taking more initiative and showing more interest. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) on school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, which align with humanistic principles by fostering emotional skills and a caring climate, found significant improvements in students' social skills, behavior, and academic achievement. Notably, students in SEL interventions performed ~11 percentile points higher on achievement tests than controls, on average, and showed reductions in problem behaviors and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011). These findings underscore that attending to students' emotional and social development enhances, rather than detracts from, academic success.

In vocational and technical education, where curricula often focus on practical skills and industry standards, humanistic approaches have sometimes been sidelined. Yet, as the modern workplace increasingly values "soft skills" such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, the humanistic model becomes highly relevant. Chen and Schmidtke (2017) note that humanistic elements (like collaborative learning, mentorship, and authentic problem-solving) help students develop skills "in relation to team work, problem-solving, systems improvement, lifelong learning and other areas" essential for workplace success Chen & Schmidtke, (2017). They observed that instructors who adopted a more humanistic, constructivist approach, using real-world contexts, dialogue, and supportive feedback – were more effective in preparing students for employment in a fast-changing economy Chen & Schmidtke, (2017). This resonates with the World Economic Forum's identification of empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence as top skills for 2025 (WEF, 2020). In short, humanistic education is not a "luxury" or purely philosophical stance; it has practical implications for producing competent, adaptable professionals. Humanistic vs. militaristic: finding a balance: The humanistic model starkly contrasts with the militaristic approach on many dimensions:

- *View of the learner:* Humanism sees learners as inherently capable, self-determining individuals with unique needs and potentials. Militaristic models may view learners more as raw recruits to be molded, assuming they must be broken down and conditioned to behave properly.
- *Teacher's role:* In humanistic settings, teachers are facilitators or guides; they show empathy and care, and they encourage student input. In militaristic settings, instructors are authority figures enforcing rules and delivering commands, with little tolerance for deviation or dialogue.
- *Motivation and discipline:* Humanistic educators prefer intrinsic motivation, helping students find personal meaning and interest in learning tasks. Discipline is achieved through mutual respect and democratic class management (e.g., shared rule-setting), with an emphasis on internalizing values. In contrast, militaristic education relies on extrinsic motivation (rewards, punishments, strict consequences) and a top-down discipline where compliance is expected regardless of personal interest or understanding.
- *Emotional climate:* A humanistic classroom seeks to be emotionally warm, safe, and accepting of feelings. Students can express worries, excitement, frustration, etc., and these are addressed constructively. A militaristic classroom often promotes an emotionally neutral or even intimidating climate, displays of emotion (especially vulnerability) might be discouraged as "weakness," and authority figures rarely openly empathize or discuss emotions.

It's important to note that these are ideal types; real classrooms may not be fully one or the other. The challenge and opportunity are to blend these approaches to get the best of both. For instance, could a vocational school maintain high expectations and codes of conduct (a positive aspect of militaristic style) while also

cultivating a caring community where students' voices are heard (a humanistic imperative)? Increasingly, educators and scholars suggest that yes, this integration is not only possible but desirable (Omodan & Mtshatsha, 2022; Schapiro, 2009). Omodan and Mtshatsha (2022) argue for humanistic pedagogy specifically to "reinvent students' self-esteem" in classrooms, noting that when students are treated with respect and given a supportive environment, their self-esteem and participation rise, which in turn improves overall classroom dynamics and achievement. They highlight cases where previously disengaged students became more confident and involved after teachers shifted to a more empathetic, student-centered approach.

For semi-military institutions, embracing humanistic strategies might involve relatively straightforward changes: allowing students some degree of choice in certain activities or projects, implementing mentorship programs where instructors get to know students personally, integrating reflective discussions about students' experiences (even within a disciplinary framework), and explicitly teaching emotional and social skills as part of the curriculum. In fact, integrating structured social-emotional learning (SEL) or character education programs can be a powerful way to humanize a strict environment. SEL programs teach skills like emotional regulation, empathy, conflict resolution, and goal-setting, all of which align with both humanistic values and the aims of building resilient, responsible individuals. Semi-military schools, by virtue of their emphasis on character, are actually well-positioned to include such content, reframing "character" not just as obedience and patriotism, but also emotional intelligence and ethical reasoning.

In sum, humanistic education provides the theoretical and practical toolkit to address the gaps in semi-military models. It reminds us that education is fundamentally a human encounter – a relationship between teacher and student and among students. No matter how rigorous the training, if that human bond and respect is absent, the education will be deficient. As we turn our focus to Emotion-Focused Therapy in the next section, we bring along these humanistic principles and see how a framework from psychotherapy can translate into pedagogical practice, especially to nurture the emotional well-being of students in demanding educational settings.

Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT): A Humanistic, Emotion-Centered Approach

Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) is a form of psychotherapy that emerged from the humanistic psychology tradition, specifically from client-centered, Gestalt, and constructivist approaches, integrated with contemporary emotion theory. Developed principally by Leslie S. Greenberg (along with colleagues like Robert Elliott, Jeanne Watson, and Sue Johnson in various domains), EFT is founded on the premise that emotion is central to human experience and change. It posits that helping individuals access, process, and transform their emotional experiences in an empathic therapeutic relationship leads to profound personal change (Greenberg, 2015). Although originally designed for counseling settings – including individual therapy for depression or trauma (Greenberg & Watson, 2006) and couples therapy for relationship issues (Johnson, 2008), the principles of EFT have broad applicability to any context involving personal growth and emotional learning.

Core principles of EFT:

- Emotion as fundamental: EFT views emotions as fundamentally adaptive sources of information. Emotions tell us about our needs and goals (Greenberg, 2002). Rather than dismissing or suppressing emotions, EFT seeks to use emotions to guide constructive action. In the context of therapy, this means exploring feelings to understand what they signify (e.g., hurt might signify a need for acceptance; anger might signify a boundary violation). This principle aligns with humanistic education's call to acknowledge students' feelings rather than enforce emotional stoicism.

- Empathic attunement: The EFT therapist provides a warm, genuine, empathic presence, much like Rogers' ideal facilitator. The therapist "follows and guides" the client's experiential process in a delicate balance. Empathy is not just a nicety; it's seen as essential for change, as it creates a safe space for clients to experience and reflect on their emotions. This echoes what a humanistic teacher would do: listen to students, try to see the learning experience through their eyes, and respond with understanding. In an educational setting, an empathically attuned teacher can similarly create a safe space for students to express concerns or struggles, which is especially valuable in a high-pressure, disciplined environment.
- Emotional awareness and expression: EFT involves helping clients become aware of and label their emotions, to "experience, explore, make sense of, transform and flexibly manage their emotions". Techniques like focusing ("How do you feel in your body when you recall that event?"), imagery, or the two-chair dialogue (a Gestalt-derived technique to work through internal conflicts) are used to facilitate deeper emotional processing. The goal is often to transform maladaptive emotions (like unresolved shame, fear, or hurt) into more adaptive ones (like empowered grief, assertive anger, or self-compassion). In educational terms, we can think of this as building emotional literacy and regulation

skills in students – teaching them to recognize and name what they feel, understand it, and cope with it constructively. Many adolescents have difficulty articulating emotions or dealing with frustration and anxiety; an EFT-informed approach in school would treat those moments as opportunities for learning rather than simply disciplining them for any outburst.

- Meaning making and needs: EFT holds that emotions are linked to our core needs and personal meanings. Therapy often helps clients make new meaning of their experiences by reflecting on emotions. For example, a student who repeatedly fails in a strict program might develop the narrative "I am not good enough" accompanied by despair. An EFT approach would help the student access the underlying feelings (perhaps fear and sadness), validate those emotions, and gradually reconstruct a more hopeful narrative ("Failure doesn't mean I'm worthless; I can learn from this and still be respected"). This process is akin to the restorative dialogues used in some educational settings, where teachers and students talk through conflicts or failures to find understanding and solutions, rather than just assigning blame or punishment.
- Experiential learning: EFT is sometimes called a process-experiential therapy (Elliott et al., 2004) because it relies on the client's in-session experiences (emotions felt in the here-and-now) as the engine for change. This resonates with educational theories that emphasize learning through experience (Dewey's experiential learning, Kolb's learning cycle). In a classroom applying EFT principles, one might let students actively engage in exercises that evoke reflection on feelings – for instance, role-plays, group discussions about challenges, or creative projects expressing personal values – then guide them to process those experiences.

Greenberg and colleagues have empirically validated EFT for various issues. It has strong evidence for treating depression, trauma, and couples' distress (Greenberg & Watson, 2006; Elliott et al., 2013). In fact, EFT is considered an evidence-based humanistic therapy, a notable achievement given that early humanistic approaches were often criticized for lacking empirical support. A hallmark of EFT's success is that it integrated rigorous research from the start; Greenberg and others coded therapy sessions, identified specific emotion-processing markers, and linked those to outcomes. For example, they identified when a client is in a state of unresolved pain (marker: empty-chair dialogue with an imagined significant other) and developed targeted interventions for that. The result is a therapy that is structured yet flexible, a balance of guiding and following the client. This is an interesting parallel to what we seek in semi-military education reform: keeping structure (guiding) but also allowing flexibility for student-centered experiences (following).

EFT outside therapy, bridging to education: While EFT proper is conducted by trained therapists in clinical settings, its underlying approach to emotional growth has inspired adaptations in other fields. For instance, coaching and "emotion-focused skills training" programs have been developed for parents and teachers, showing positive outcomes in how adults respond to children's emotions (Rose et al., 2019). Emotion coaching, popularized by John Gottman and others (not strictly EFT but conceptually related), trains educators to recognize children's emotional moments as opportunities for teaching and connection rather than inconvenience. Such educators learn to validate feelings ("I see you're upset because the project is challenging") and guide students in problem-solving, instead of dismissing or punishing the emotional expression. This approach has been linked to better student behavior and social adjustment. For example, a brief intervention encouraging middle school teachers to adopt an empathic mindset about discipline (very much in line with EFT's empathic stance) halved student suspension rates over a year Okonofua et al., (2016). Okonofua et al. (2016), who conducted that study, concluded that "a focus on relationships helps humanize students" and that when teachers see misbehavior through an empathic lens (as a sign of an unmet need or a teachable moment) rather than a threat to authority, student outcomes improve Okonofua et al., (2016). Such findings are highly relevant to semi-military schools, where discipline issues are often addressed punitively; an EFT-informed retraining of staff could pivot their approach from purely punitive to empathic, preserving authority but reducing antagonism.

Another domain is academic resilience building. A study by Bagherpour and Khani Poenak (2025) tested an "emotion-focused education program" (drawing on EFT principles) with adolescent girls who were struggling academically. Over eight 90-minute sessions, students were taught to understand and manage their emotions related to school stress. The results were impressive: compared to a control group, the students who received emotion-focused training showed significantly improved academic resilience and self-regulation, with sustained gains even one month later Bagherpour & Poenak, (2025). They learned to cope better with setbacks and to motivate themselves, illustrating that explicitly teaching emotional skills can enhance academic performance and persistence. While this study was not in a military-style school, one can imagine how valuable such skills would be in a high-pressure environment. Indeed, Cassidy et al. (2023) in a large-scale study of resilience in pharmacy education (a rigorous, demanding field) found that emotional support from peers and faculty was a key predictor of students' well-being and ability to handle academic challenges. These threads of

research indicate that *emotion-focused approaches are beneficial in educational contexts*, especially those involving stress and high demands.

Why EFT in particular? One might ask, why invoke a therapy framework like EFT in discussing educational reform? The reason is that EFT offers a concrete, structured way to implement humanistic principles. Humanistic education provides the ethos (respect the whole person, foster self-actualization), but EFT provides specific strategies and a theory of change grounded in emotional processes. For educators not trained in counseling, EFT concepts can be translated into practical tools: for instance, identifying when a student is "emotionally stuck" (analogous to EFT's markers of emotional processing difficulty) and responding with an appropriate intervention (perhaps a one-on-one conversation that gently probes the student's feelings and thoughts, akin to an empathic exploration in therapy). Teachers can learn to recognize common emotional patterns in students – such as anger covering sadness, or anxiety about performance masked as indifference – and respond in ways that help the student process these feelings constructively.

In addition, EFT's emphasis on therapeutic alliance (the collaborative, trusting relationship) parallels the importance of teacher-student relationships in education. Meta-analyses in education have shown that positive teacher-student relationships correlate strongly with student engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011). EFT gives insight into *how* to cultivate such relationships: through active listening, validation, and genuine empathy, which in turn foster trust. It's noteworthy that one of the five fundamental principles of EFT (Pos & Greenberg, 2007) is that people function best when they have an environment that is empathic, unconditionally accepting, and genuine. This is essentially a restatement of Rogers' core conditions, which have been found to be predictors of positive outcomes not just in therapy but in any helping relationship – including teaching, mentoring, or coaching.

By bringing EFT into the conversation, we also underscore the importance of emotional well-being as an outcome of education, not just a means. If we measure a semi-military school's success only by exam scores or physical feats, we miss whether students are emerging as healthy individuals. EFT, being a therapeutic approach, inherently values mental health. In the context of semi-military education, an EFT framework would encourage administrators to track indicators of student well-being (e.g., levels of anxiety, incidence of burnout or depression, students' sense of belonging) with as much seriousness as they track disciplinary records or academic grades. It provides a lens to ask, *are we producing graduates who are not only skilled and disciplined, but also emotionally intelligent, self-aware, and capable of forming healthy relationships?* These qualities, arguably, are as important to long-term success as technical skills or obedience to protocols.

In summary, Emotion-Focused Therapy encapsulates many humanistic ideals and translates them into actionable techniques centered on emotion and empathy. It serves as a bridge between the therapeutic world and education, reminding us that educating hearts is as important as educating minds. Armed with the insights from EFT, we can now envision concrete ways to apply this framework to humanize semi-military vocational education, which we turn to in the next section.

Integrating EFT Principles to Humanize Semi-Military Vocational Education

Having examined the features of semi-military education, the tenets of humanistic pedagogy, and the core ideas of Emotion-Focused Therapy, we now synthesize these strands into a cohesive framework. The central question is: How can Emotion-Focused Therapy principles be applied in semi-military vocational schools to create a more humanistic, emotionally supportive educational environment? We address this by proposing several key domains of integration, each coupling the structure of semi-military programs with the warmth and responsiveness of EFT/humanistic approaches.

1. Empathic Leadership and Teacher-Student Relationships

One of the most impactful changes is to cultivate an empathic mindset in those who hold authority – administrators, instructors, dormitory supervisors, and student leaders. In EFT, the therapist's empathy catalyzes the client's growth; similarly, in schools, the teacher's empathy can transform a student's experience. Semi-military settings often position teachers or trainers as drill instructors. We propose retraining these staff as mentor-coaches who uphold rules *while also demonstrating care and understanding*. Empathic leadership does not mean leniency or lack of standards; it means leaders "see the humanity" in students (Tilghman & Page, 2023) and consider students' perspectives when responding to misconduct or poor performance(Okonofua et al., 2016).

For example, instead of immediately punishing a student who is late or out of uniform, an empathic approach would first involve a private conversation: *"I notice you've been late twice this week, which is unlike you. Is everything alright?"* This aligns with the EFT principle of exploring the underlying experience. Perhaps the student is dealing with a family issue or feeling demotivated. By listening, the teacher signals that the student's feelings matter. A real-world experiment in empathic discipline by Okonofua et al. (2016) showed that when teachers

adopted such an approach, suspension rates dropped by half Okonofua et al., (2016), and students, especially those previously labeled "troublemakers", felt more respected and connected to school. We would expect similar improvements in semi-military schools: fewer extreme punishments, improved morale, and better student-teacher trust.

In practice, implementing this could involve professional development workshops for staff on empathy and communication, possibly facilitated by counselors or psychologists versed in EFT or related methods. Role-playing exercises can be used, where instructors practice responding to hypothetical student issues with empathy first, correction second. Another tool is encouraging teachers to share appropriate anecdotes of their own struggles and how they overcame them, humanizing themselves to students. In a military-like culture, authority figures often maintain a stoic façade; deliberately softening this by showing "I care about you" can be powerful. The Army's own leadership training now emphasizes active listening and perspective-taking Bagherpour & Poenak, (2025), those same skills can be taught to educators. In sum, every disciplinarian should also be a counselor in the small "c" sense: someone who a student feels will listen and advise, not just scold.

2. Emotionally Enriched Curriculum and Classroom Climate

Semi-military schools typically focus on technical skills, physical training, and academics, with character education often framed in terms of values like discipline, patriotism, and teamwork. To humanize the curriculum, we advocate integrating emotional literacy and social-emotional learning (SEL) into the program. This can take many forms: a weekly class on life skills that covers topics like stress management, communication, and empathy; infusion of reflective activities in regular classes; or homeroom sessions that allow students to discuss their feelings and challenges in a structured way.

From an EFT perspective, students benefit from learning to identify and name emotions, recognize them in others, and develop strategies to cope with difficult feelings. These are teachable skills. For instance, a lesson might involve the teacher presenting common scenarios (failing a test, conflict with a peer, being far from home) and guiding students to articulate the emotions involved and brainstorm healthy ways to respond. Evidence from SEL programs shows that students who learn such skills have better outcomes both behaviorally and academically (Durlak et al., 2011). In a disciplined environment, SEL might initially seem out of place, but consider that soldiers and first responders undergo training in emotional resilience and teamwork. Similarly, vocational students heading into stressful jobs (e.g., engineering, hospitality, the military itself) will benefit from emotional skills.

The classroom climate should also be adjusted to be more emotionally supportive. In practical terms: teachers can start class with a brief check-in ("How is everyone feeling today? Any concerns before we begin?"), encourage teamwork and peer support rather than competition, and incorporate pedagogies like cooperative learning (which foster social skills and empathy). A humanistic classroom values mistakes as learning opportunities rather than grounds for shame. For example, if a student struggles with a task under pressure, an EFT-informed teacher might acknowledge the student's frustration ("I see this is frustrating, that's okay, it means you care about doing well") and perhaps have the class discuss strategies to handle frustration, normalizing the emotion. This is vastly different from berating the student for failure, which would be the old-school approach.

It's also beneficial to have visual reminders and routines that reinforce a caring ethos. Some schools use posters with affirmations ("It's okay to feel what you feel, what you do next is what counts") or have "buddy systems" where peers look out for each other. In semi military settings, students often have platoon or squad like groupings; these can be leveraged to create small peer support units. For instance, each squad could have a brief weekly meeting to discuss any issues members are facing, moderated by a peer leader who has been trained in basic listening skills. This mirrors group therapy concepts in a non-clinical way. Research on peer support in military students (e.g., veterans reintegrating into college) indicates that peer understanding can alleviate feelings of isolation (Whiteman et al., 2013). If a tough academy becomes a place where "we're all in this together, and we care," it will likely reduce dropout rates and misconduct born out of frustration or alienation.

3. Emotional Regulation and Coping Skills Training

Discipline in semi-military schools often relies on external enforcement: strict schedules, immediate consequences for infractions, etc. While structure is helpful, it's even more powerful to teach self-discipline through self-regulation. EFT's toolkit for helping clients manage overwhelming emotions can be translated into teaching students how to calm themselves and make thoughtful decisions under stress, a crucial skill both in school and in eventual workplaces (or military service).

One strategy is to incorporate mindfulness and breathing exercises into daily routines. For example, at the start or end of the day, a 5-minute guided breathing or meditation exercise can help students center themselves. This might seem at odds with a military vibe, but interestingly, the U.S. military and law enforcement have begun using mindfulness training to improve focus and stress tolerance (Jha et al., 2019).

Teaching students that taking a moment to breathe and gather themselves is not weakness, but a tactic to maintain peak performance, aligns with both EFT (grounding techniques for emotion regulation) and with elite training practices.

Another aspect is providing psychoeducation on emotions, essentially, teaching students how stress responses work (fight/flight/freeze) and how to engage coping mechanisms. This can be woven into health classes or special seminars. Students can learn about the importance of sleep, nutrition, and exercise on mood (semi-military programs often emphasize physical fitness, which is good, but tying it explicitly to mental health benefits reinforces why it matters beyond just obeying orders to exercise).

Schools could also establish a quiet room or "calm corner" where students can go, with permission, when feeling overwhelmed, a space with stress-relief tools (like stress balls, calming images, perhaps even access to a counselor or senior student mentor). Zamhariri et al. (2025) recommended "structured emotional regulation training" and peer mentoring to support first-year cadets dealing with separation distress. Taking that advice, a semi-military school might institute a peer mentoring program where senior students (perhaps those who have adapted well and shown empathy) mentor new students, checking in on their well-being regularly. This not only helps the juniors manage homesickness or anxiety (as Zamhariri's case highlighted) but also fosters leadership and empathy in the seniors – truly a humanistic twist on the typical senior-junior hierarchy.

In an EFT-informed approach, when a student does have an emotional outburst (anger, panic, tears), instead of immediately enforcing discipline for the "misbehavior," the response would involve helping the student *process* that emotion afterward. For instance, after the immediate situation is handled, a counselor or trained teacher could sit down with the student to debrief: "What were you feeling? What triggered it? What could you do next time?", akin to how a therapist would reflect on a client's emotional episode to glean insight and coping strategies. The student might, for example, realize that being yelled at in formation triggered a memory of past trauma, leading to disproportionate anger. Recognizing this, the school could adjust by communicating with that student in a different manner or by helping the student develop a personal strategy (maybe self-talk or requesting a brief timeout) to cope when they feel that trigger. This approach treats the student with dignity and helps them grow, rather than just punishing the symptom. Over time, such practices contribute to a culture where emotions are managed, not feared.

4. Restorative and Supportive Discipline

Discipline can be reframed from a purely punitive system to a restorative and supportive one. Restorative justice in schools, which involves mediated dialogues between offenders and those affected, aligns with EFT's focus on dialogue and understanding emotional impacts. In a semi-military school, if a serious infraction occurs (e.g., a fight, cheating, insubordination), instead of only a court-martial style hearing and punishment, the process could include a restorative conference where the student reflects on what led to the behavior, listens to how it affected others, and works to repair trust. This doesn't negate consequences (there may still be loss of privileges or extra duties assigned), but it *humanizes* the process by addressing the emotional and relational aspects of the incident. Offenders are less likely to recidivate when they feel heard and when they genuinely understand the impact of their actions (Latimer et al., 2005).

To support students who struggle with the strict environment, schools should bolster their counseling and mental health services. Ideally, a counselor familiar with EFT could run brief individual or group sessions for students who need more intensive support. Even a short-term emotion-focused group (say 6 sessions) for students identified as at-risk (those with repeated misconduct or signs of depression) could be beneficial. In these groups, students might share experiences and learn from each other under the guidance of a facilitator who helps them articulate feelings and find positive meanings or solutions. The existence of such support signals to all students that the school cares about their well-being, not just their performance.

Balancing empathy and discipline: Importantly, integrating EFT principles is *not* about becoming permissive. It's about understanding and internalization. A semi-military school can and should keep clear rules and high standards, those provide a sense of security and fairness when applied consistently and humanely. The difference is in the *delivery*: rather than "yelling and screaming" enforcement, rules are enforced with calm firmness and explanations. Research by Bear et al. (2015) on school discipline suggests that an authoritative style (high structure, high support) yields better student behavior and respect for authority than an authoritarian style (high structure, low support). The authoritative approach parallels what we propose: the school is firm but also warm. Students are more likely to comply when they feel rules are in their best interest and when they respect the rule-givers. By contrast, if they only fear punishment, they may comply outwardly but harbor resentment or act out covertly.

Militaristic discipline often focuses on immediate obedience, whereas humanistic discipline (aligned with EFT values) focuses on long-term values and self-discipline. For example, instead of just saying "polish your boots because I said so," an instructor might say, "We value attention to detail here; how you maintain your gear reflects your readiness and respect for the team." This kind of explanation appeals to the student's

understanding and pride, not just fear of inspection, thereby internalizing the value. Over time, the student polishes boot not just to avoid demerits, but because they appreciate the principle. This internal motivation is sturdier and more transferable to life beyond school.

5. Fostering a Democratic, Participatory School Culture

A truly humanized semi-military school would see students as partners in the educational mission. This is where Freirean and Rogersian ideas can manifest structurally. For instance, the school can establish a student council or advisory board that actually has a voice (within reason) in school policies or activities. Even military academies often have cadet leadership roles; these can be expanded to include conveying student feedback to faculty, organizing peer-led workshops on topics like stress management, etc. When students are given responsibility and heard by adults, their sense of ownership and commitment to the school's values increases. It is a way of emotional investment, they feel "this is our school" rather than "this is the school that controls us." Additionally, incorporating practices such as regular "town hall" meetings where students can respectfully air grievances or suggestions to staff can be very effective. It breaks the ice of authority while maintaining respect on both sides. In an EFT sense, this is analogous to the open, genuine dialogue between therapist and client about the process ("how are we doing, what are you feeling in this relationship?"). Likewise, teachers and school leaders showing vulnerability, admitting when something might not be working and demonstrating willingness to change, models maturity and accountability for students.

Consider a scenario: the early morning drill schedule is causing many students to be exhausted in class. In a traditional model, students would silently endure or quietly complain; in a humanized model, student representatives might bring this up, and the school could collaboratively adjust (maybe starting a bit later or improving the nighttime routine for better rest) in consultation with a health expert. Such a change could dramatically improve learning without fundamentally eroding discipline, in fact, it teaches a lesson that rules can be evaluated and optimized, a very valuable mindset for any organization.

Cultural shift and outcomes: By integrating these practices, a semi-military vocational school can evolve into something unique: a place of "firm kindness", of rigor with heart. We would anticipate multiple positive outcomes from this cultural shift. Academically, students who feel safe and supported are more engaged and perform better (as plenty of educational psychology research confirms). Behaviorally, there should be fewer serious infractions; minor infractions might still occur (young people will test boundaries anywhere), but they can be resolved more constructively. The school climate would likely improve, measured by surveys on student satisfaction, lower rates of absenteeism, and perhaps more willingness from students to pursue leadership roles (because they perceive the leadership as humane, not merely punitive).

Emotionally, students would benefit in both the short and long term. In the short term, they would likely experience less chronic stress and anxiety. Instead of walking on eggshells in fear of the next reprimand, they can devote more mental energy to learning and personal development. In the long term, graduates from such a program might enter the workforce or further education with a balanced skill set: they have the discipline, punctuality, and respect that come from the military side, and the communication, empathy, and self-regulation from the humanistic side. Such individuals are arguably ideal employees and citizens, resilient and principled, yet adaptable and emotionally intelligent.

One could argue that this approach also addresses moral and ethical development. Blind obedience is dangerous (history provides ample evidence); what we want are individuals who can discern right from wrong and stand up for core values. A humanized semi-military education would encourage reflective thinking about orders and rules. For example, a discussion could be had in a civics class: "If given an order you feel is unethical, what would you do?" This gets students to consider principles above authority, a critical thinking skill that strict systems often neglect. It aligns with EFT/humanistic ideas of personal authenticity and moral agency.

There may be challenges and resistance in implementing these changes. Traditionalists might fear that introducing "therapy-like" elements will weaken the program or that students will become too informal. However, the counterargument is that respect is earned, not demanded, a truth many military leaders acknowledge. If students respect their instructors because they feel respected by them, the authority is actually stronger and more legitimate. Moreover, the structure isn't removed; it's refined. No doubt, some experimentation and adjustment would be needed. The changes could be phased and evaluated: maybe pilot an empathy training with one cohort of teachers, or introduce an SEL module and gather data on its effect.

In conclusion of this integration section, the application of EFT as a humanistic framework in semi-military vocational education is about embedding emotional intelligence into the fabric of a disciplined environment. It is a fusion of two worlds that may seem opposite but are complementary: the order and camaraderie of military culture with the compassion and growth orientation of humanistic culture. The ultimate vision is a vocational education system that produces graduates who are competent, confident, disciplined, and compassionate, who can follow protocols and lead with empathy; who can handle stress and care for others under stress; who understand the chain of command but also the importance of each link in that chain as a human being. If achieved, this would not only benefit the students themselves, but also the organizations they

will join and the society at large, which increasingly needs individuals who can bridge divides between discipline and understanding.

Conclusion

This conceptual article demonstrates that semi-military vocational education can be humanized without undermining its core strengths in discipline and structure. By integrating principles of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT), including empathy, emotional awareness, and constructive emotional regulation, semi-military educational environments can foster both personal development and institutional order. The proposed framework highlights the importance of reframing authority figures as empathetic mentors, embedding social-emotional learning within the curriculum, and adopting restorative approaches to discipline. Such integration supports the development of emotionally intelligent, resilient, and autonomous vocational graduates. Furthermore, this study underscores that discipline and compassion are not opposing forces but mutually reinforcing elements of effective education. An educational climate grounded in understanding and respect enhances student engagement, accountability, and overall well-being. As a conceptual contribution, this article provides a foundation for future empirical research and practical implementation. Ultimately, EFT-informed humanistic practices offer a viable pathway toward a more balanced, ethical, and holistic model of semi-military vocational education aligned with contemporary educational and workforce demands.

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