

The Language of Feeling – words and pictures and...?

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Abstract

Emotional literacy, a term used frequently to describe the ability to comprehend emotion in oneself and others and to display emotions in ways that are deemed appropriate by the society in which one lives, has come to be identified as one of many literacies that are necessary to function in the 21st century world. Other literacies that have come to be seen as a necessary part of life include: computer literacy, a skill which is assisted in the education system from the onset of schooling; visual literacy, a skill which is developed to some extent within classroom contexts and to a larger extent in art classes, and social literacy, a skill often focused upon as the result of contextual events in the classroom, or in the form of special programs, such as “Roots of Empathy” that specifically target social development. In schools today, the development of emotional literacy is often left to chance, where rather than facilitate children’s emotion understanding, children are left to their own devices to come to terms with how they feel and how to show their feelings. Yet children who are emotionally literate, who manage their feelings well and recognise and respond appropriately to the feelings of others are at an advantage both within the school context in all other areas of life (Goleman, 1995), while those who experience unresolved emotions are more prone to learning and memory difficulties (McKnight & Sutton, 1994) and poor relationships with peers and adults (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995).

For deeper, more engaged learning and development to occur, emotion understanding and expression needs to be taught alongside cognitive skills such as addition and subtraction. Within an educational context, this can occur in a number of ways. Teachers can model emotion display, offer words and language for feelings, read and discuss stories where emotion issues are explored, or introduce various toys or games, such as facial expression puzzles or feelings lottos to their class. However, exploring emotion through the arts opens up many more avenues through which children can examine and learn to understand emotion.

The arts – visual art, drama, movement, music, dance and media - have enormous potential for helping children to understand and resolve emotional issues. Yet the arts are mainly used to facilitate emotion understanding within clinical settings, where art therapists work with children who had been diagnosed with problems.

A lack of curricula in emotion education, combined with teachers’ hesitance to explore this area of literacy, have meant that to date, little has been done to facilitate emotion understanding in classrooms. Few teachers acknowledge themselves, as well as their students, as emotional beings within the educational context. Besides this, a large number of teachers are not comfortable with the arts and with themselves as artists, so are unable or unwilling to use the arts as tools to facilitate emotional development.

What is Emotional Literacy and why is it so important?

In the past, the term “literacy” has been used to describe the ability to read and to write. With the move towards more functional literacies, the term grew to include the ability to communicate and function within the social context in which one lives. Literacy went hand in hand with numeracy, the ability to perform numerical tasks deemed necessary to function in society. And while all these abilities are important, the definition of literacy has expanded further.

As the 20th century drew to a close, computer literacy went from a desirable to a mandatory skill, visual literacy (the ability to recognise, understand and interact with non-verbal, visual stimuli) became recognized as a necessary component of global interactions, and social literacy (the ability to understand and interact within a social context) took its place of value as communities of

learners became a common trend in educational and occupational settings. Yet emotional literacy, the ability to recognise and understand emotion in oneself and to express that emotion in socially acceptable ways, has lagged behind other new literacies in the recognition of its value and the design and implementation of programs to teach the skills. This is evident in education systems today, where children as young as 8 are required to design web pages, art classes explore symbols and graphics, and programs such as "Roots of Empathy" and "You Can Do It" target various social skills both useful and necessary for classroom functioning. With merely a handful of schools, mainly in England and in the United States, introducing emotional literacy programs into their curricula, others assume that emotion understanding will develop through their social programs, or that emotion education will occur as incidents arise and are discussed. Still others leave the learning of emotional literacy to chance; children are expected to learn to recognise and name emotions and to learn the social rules of emotion display largely on their own. Novick (2004) suggests that "the absence of support from adults [in developing emotional literacy in children] can put many children of both sexes at risk for behavioural, emotional, academic and social problems".

Emotional literacy has been defined as the ability to recognise, appraise, express, understand and regulate emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, in Weare, 2000). It is "a way of managing your interactions with others so that you can build an understanding of your own emotions and those of others, then find a way of allowing this understanding to inform your actions" (Antidote, 2000, p3, p.18). While Maslow (1970 in Weare, 2000) showed the importance of satisfying social and emotional needs before intellectual pursuits, Gardner (1982) named Intrapersonal (or Emotional) intelligence as one of the multiple intelligences humans can possess, and recent work in psychology positioned intellectual, social and emotional sides as parallel and equal rather than hierarchical, it is only very slowly that the value of emotion education to academic achievement is being understood and accepted within education systems (Weare, 2000).

Children who are emotionally literate, who manage their feelings well, as well as recognise and respond well to others' feelings are at an advantage in all areas of life. (Goleman, 1995). Conversely, unresolved emotion has been proven to negatively affect our recall ability, judgement, and general learning skills. (McKnight and Sutton, 1994). As early as the pre-school years, children who have trouble regulating their negative feelings are more prone to displays of anger, frustration and irritation towards others and to poor relationships with both children and adults. (Eisenberg and Fabes in Berk, 1997).

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For deeper, more engaged learning and development to occur, emotion understanding and expression needs to be taught alongside cognitive skills such as addition and subtraction. It is an ongoing process that involves a connection between teacher, support staff, students and parents are all valued participants who are encouraged to bring their personal as well as professional selves to the learning experience. Often taking a whole-school approach, these programs aim to transform the school climate, so that staff and students feel safe, clear about what they are doing, accepted, included, listened to and competent (Antidote, 2003; Weare, 2000). Goals of Emotional Literacy programs might include: taking ownership of one's behaviour, negotiating conflict, valuing oneself and others, empathising with others, collaborating with and supporting others, reading and responding to social situations in ways that lead to satisfactory outcomes for all (Antidote, 2003).

The main tenet of emotional literacy programs is that all emotions are accepted as a natural part of life that come from interactions with others; and that we can learn different ways of responding to situations (Antidote, 2003). As Weare (2000) notes: "It is neither necessary nor wise to be afraid of any of our emotions, to deny their importance, or to be unable or unwilling to feel and express them. All the emotions, including the negative ones, are not only a part of life, but are at root healthy and useful, even if we need to be able to limit some of their manifestations in some circumstances" (p.71).

Following this is the necessity of recognising and understanding our own emotions and emotions in others. "To be well-integrated people, content in ourselves, able to build fulfilling relationships, and help others with their problems, we all need an ongoing, introspective awareness of our own inner emotional states, and to be aware of what we really feel. This is the most basic action competence of all, and few of us ever really quite master it" (Weare, 2000, p.68).

Along with recognition and understanding of emotions in oneself and others, it is necessary to learn how to express them. Schools need to allow students to express negative as well as positive emotions and to help them find effective and non-destructive ways of expressing them. "When encouraging children to express themselves creatively, through dance, art, writing and role play, we need to allow them to express the dark as well as the light side of their natures" (Weare, 2000, p.73).

Emotional literacy programs develop awareness of affective states and displays in a number of ways. Besides modelling emotion display, teachers can use a variety of language-based processes to teach their students about emotion. These are activities mediated by verbal ability, where words are used to help define and understand emotional states, their antecedents and consequences (Weare, 2000). Bruner (in Bearison & Zimiles, 1986) and White (1995) advocate discourse as a way of enhancing emotion understanding. Negotiation with others helps children to acquire the implicit knowledge of the culture, as they learn about emotions and their management. Engaging children in conversations provides them with the opportunity to master the pragmatics of language while building knowledge and understanding that contribute to their sense of self (Kuebli, 1994; White, 1995).

Teachers can offer words and language for feelings and thus expanding students' emotion vocabularies (Gardner in Weare, 2000), read and discuss stories about emotional issues, or introducing various toys or games, such as facial expression puzzles or feelings lottos to their class. Remembering that not all cultures, ages and genders are equally at ease talking about feelings, teachers can use feelings boxes, where students post expressions of feelings anonymously, or do role plays where students can hide behind a character, or write dialogue for other people to say (Weare, 2000). Storytelling is a good medium for developing emotional literacy, with stories not only come from books, the media or real life situations (Weare, 2000). Students can be encouraged to retell a story from the points of view of different characters, look at reasons for characters' actions, and think of alternative ways forward for the characters. This can begin a discussion of feelings.

Students can be encouraged to write personal narratives, knowing that they have a story worth telling and that they are developing their identity and personal understanding through telling their story (White and Epsom in Antidote, 2003). Peer support, philosophy for children, cooperative learning and problem solving are other, largely verbal strategies that can be used in emotion education.

While verbal strategies certainly have their place in emotion education, particularly with upper elementary and secondary students, they are often unsuitable for young children as they require a fairly good command of oral and written language and cognitive reasoning ability (Santrock, 1994). Yet often it is only through language-based activities that emotional literacy programs are conceptualized for young children. For example, Novick (2004) suggests: "In their preschool years, you can help children express thoughts and feelings by writing their words for them. In stories, poems, or letters, their language can become a way to support their ability to deal with a peer, with conflict, with sad or scary feelings. The words can help your children sort out their feelings, and come to terms with their own behaviour."

Language skills and reasoning ability are still formative in young children, but emotions are not. By exploring ways of developing emotion understanding that do not required advance language skills, young children can benefit from emotion education programs and older children and adults

can expand their repertoires of emotion expression. These include non-verbal approaches, such as modelling behaviour or taking action to address a concern, and using the arts as a medium through which to explore emotion.

The arts – visual art, drama, music and dance – hold great potential as sources of emotion exploration and expression. Yet to date, the arts have been under-used in most of the emotion education programs currently implemented within education systems, relegated mainly to therapy rooms where art therapists, social workers or counsellors work with students identified with emotional problems. “The arts can give us powerful direct experience of a wide range of emotions...such experience can uplift us, expand and refine our emotional range” (Weare, 2000, p. 125). Music can be used as a mood enhancer; dance can free us of the constraints of language, to express our feelings non-verbally; and visual arts allows direct expression through form, shape, texture and colour (Weare, 2000).

A combination of language based, non-verbal and arts activities sensitively used can provide a broad range of experiences in emotion education. Table 1 below lists ways of responding to emotions to develop emotional literacy in young children. But these approaches are all the more effective if partnerships are developed between the home and school, to share information and to work together on ways of responding to and teaching emotion, and if the teachers themselves are emotionally literate. Weare (2000) notes that to be able to effectively teach emotion education, it is important for teachers to be educated in emotion competences. Yet “teachers may well not be much further on than their students...it is a basic tenet of psychotherapy that many adults are simply larger versions of the child they once were, dominated by the same feelings and needs, perhaps better disguised, but no more resolved...Teachers will not be able to make the necessary changes without active help” (p.131).

• **Table 1 – Ways of responding to emotion and developing emotional literacy**

Acknowledgement	I understand that you're feeling angry, and it's okay to feel angry.
Empathy	Everyone feels angry at times. I felt angry yesterday because I had to wait an hour at the doctor's office.
Questioning/ Discussion	Can you tell me how you are feeling? What is making you feel that way? Let's talk about it.
Offering words	Are you feeling sad? Sleepy? Frustrated? Afraid?
Explanation	That loud noise comes from the building site across the street. Big machines are digging into the ground.
Exploration	Encourage children to explore the situation –eg. Offer to take them to the building site to see the machinery. Guide at first and then scaffold to independent exploration (eg. Can you find pictures of spiders in this insect book?)
Taking action	Get rid of the spider.
Modelling	Lead by example – if you feel angry, then say so using your words
Stories and Pictures	As ways into talking about emotions. These can be stories already written or the adult or child writes a story about their emotion.
Drawing and Painting	Draw a bad dream. Paint your happiness. What colours could you use to show your anger?
Sculpture	Clay, playdough, plasticene – both for manipulating as a way of releasing emotion and also as a way of representing and emotion. Box and found object sculpture to represent emotions (eg. Make a big scary monster like the one you're afraid of).
Movement and Dance	Play music that evokes different emotions and get children to move or dance to the music, to show that emotion. Dance

	together in celebration of happiness. Move like the scary spider.
Drama	Use props and re-enact a scenario that provoked an emotion. Give children figures or symbols to use to express their emotions (In a sand tray if possible). Use or write scripted plays. Role play a situation and reverse roles.
Music	Use music and get children to draw the feeling they get from the music, or move or sculpt their bodies into the feeling they get when they hear the music. Find or rewrite songs about emotion (eg. If You're Happy and You know it). Chant (call and response) as a way of expressing an emotion or responding to an emotional situation (eg. "Monster, monster, go away. Don't come back any day.")
Partnerships	With parents, family members, community members and other children's services professionals. Discuss and document emotions, how they are expressed, situations that evoke different emotions. Neither teachers, nor parents have all the answers, but together with the children themselves, a much deeper understanding can be developed.

Conclusion

Emotional literacy, that is the ability to recognise emotions in oneself and in others, and to express emotions in appropriate ways, is an important skill that needs to develop alongside traditional literacy skills such as reading and writing, and the "new literacies" of the 21st century, such as computer, visual and social literacy. Yet the importance of emotional literacy is still not widely recognized, and where it is, skills are taught largely through language-mediated processes such as discussion and journaling. These require fairly advanced reading and writing skills, but these skills are still formative in young children. While emotion education should begin in the early childhood years, it needs to be as effective as possible. This includes using other, non language-based approaches, creating partnerships with families, and ensuring that teachers who teach emotion education are emotionally literate themselves.

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