Learning to Read the Heart: Nurturing Emotional Literacy

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Richmond Elementary teacher Ardine Kapteyn reads with 24 third-graders on a well-worn circle rug. It's almost lunchtime, but Ardine has no difficulty keeping the attention of the children. They are eager to find out if the hero of *The Small Person Who Had Feelings* will be able to cover up the feelings he wears on his sleeve.

“I wonder why a person would want to cover his lonely feelings with anger” says Ardine.

“Maybe he was afraid,” offers Ruby.

“Yes, isn’t that interesting? Inside he was lonely and afraid, and outside he was—what?”

“Angry,” a chorus of voices answers.

“Yet even with all the angry patches he put on his sleeve, loneliness and fear were sticking out among the patches. So what do you suppose he did? From his father, who believed it was important for boys never to show fear, he borrowed tough. Now he couldn’t find room for any other feelings. There was only room for tough and angry.”

But the story does have a happy ending, and the children add a new “feeling” word to their vocabulary: acceptance. When the small person finds a friend and feels acceptance, all of his real feelings are able to come out—proud, sad, happy, scared, lonely—“many of the feelings we have talked about,” reminds the teacher.

**Emotional competence and school success**

Although schools have traditionally separated children’s academic achievement from social and emotional development, many educators are realizing that a narrow focus on academics does not always bring results. *A Good Beginning*, a recent report from the Child Mental Health Foundation and Agencies Network, emphasizes that social and emotional school readiness is critical to successful kindergarten transition, early school success, and even later accomplishments in the workplace (Peth-Pierce 2000). However, according to the report, many children enter school without the social and emotional readiness to succeed, putting them at high risk for early school failure.

Research has shown that many children, particularly boys, go into the adolescent years with a restricted language for expressing emotions. This “emotional illiteracy,” as psychologist James Garbarino (Gilligan et al. 1999) describes it, keeps some boys locked up; they are unable to articulate their experiences and may be ashamed that they can’t. But the beginnings of...
emotional illiteracy start much earlier, Garbari-no points out, and often affect girls as well as boys. While girls are frequently encouraged to express their emotions more openly than boys, the absence of support from teachers and other significant adults can put many children of both sexes at risk for behavioral, emotional, academic, and social problems that may continue into adulthood (Peth-Pierce 2000).

Academic and emotional literacy go together

In schools that foster resiliency in all children, academic and emotional literacy go together. Resilient children, called “keepers of the dream” by Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984), are children who remain competent despite exposure to misfortune or to stressful events. Researchers have identified a number of protective factors that foster resiliency: caring and support; consistent communication of clear, positive expectations to the child; and opportunities for meaningful participation in the social environment (Benard 1993). Helping children express thoughts, feelings, and opinions verbally and in writing plays an important role in fostering resiliency in preschool and throughout the school years.

In preschool

At Helen Gordon Child Development Center in Portland, Oregon, children are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings—in letters to friends and parents, in poems, and in stories. Supported by teachers who write children’s dictated words just as they are spoken, children write about rejection, fears of abandonment, and injustice. As Steve Franzel, a teacher of three- through six-year-olds, says, “Language becomes a way to support children’s power—their ability to deal with a peer, with conflict, with sad or scary feelings. Words empower them to express themselves—to handle life.” Steve explains: “I usually use writing as a means to a goal, to validate children’s feelings about separation, to help resolve conflict—as crisis prevention. I hear someone screaming, and I go over to help them use their words to express their needs and feelings. Then I ask the child, ‘Do you want to write it down, write a letter?’ ”

The process is such an integral part of the day’s activities that the children explain it to new adults in the classroom and expect them to take dictation, just as they might expect their shoes to be tied. Frequently throughout the day, children use writing to sort out their feelings and to come to terms with their own behavior.

For example, following an altercation, four-year-old Tony wrote a letter to his classmate who went to the doctor to get stitches in his forehead. As Tony thought about what to write, his anger was replaced by a sense of responsibility:

I’m sorry Mark. I hit you with the broom. Why did you want to take my broom? I was just about to color with the chalk and you were trying to take my broom. I was coloring in five seconds. I wanted to give him a hug before he left.

Four-year-old Heidi expressed her complex thoughts on friendship and rejection in a prose poem written about and to her friend:

Olivia is a good friend.
Sometimes she doesn’t play with me.
Today she said, “Don’t follow me.”
I was upset.
Then I was angry.

Ugly-Duckling Words Hurt

In a Seattle Public Schools Head Start classroom, teachers read aloud Hans Christian Andersen’s The Ugly Duckling, and the whole class talks about how the duckling must have felt when everyone made fun of him. When a child uses a word that hurts other people’s feelings, children are encouraged to call it an ugly-duckling word and to make it clear that such words are not acceptable. “Ugly-duckling words are those that hurt your heart. Ugly-duckling actions are those that hurt your body,” explains their teacher.
Then I said, “Bad Olivia.”
Then I walked away.
Just like Olivia.

Read this note and then you will
Find out about me
And your friend Heidi.
Love, Heidi
To Olivia

Children’s stories, poems, and letters are displayed in classrooms and hallways and kept in laminated books, which the children read to themselves and with each other. Many of the four- to five-year-olds recognize their classmates’ entries and can “read” them verbatim. Children often read their own messages to themselves after they are written, matching print to their remembered words. But the primary purpose of writing for these preschoolers is to identify and express thoughts and feelings.

In elementary school

Tying literacy to emotional development is at the core of the curriculum at Richmond Elementary School. Among Oregon’s 754 schools, Richmond ranks eighth in serving the highest number of children in poverty. Since Principal Kathy Bebe arrived 11 years ago, a primary goal has been creating a common vocabulary and language for helping children deal with their emotions and behavior.

Reading stories aloud, particularly stories that offer rich opportunities to discuss emotions, is a frequent activity. Richmond teachers use reading aloud as a springboard for discussing times when children felt frightened and lonely, proud and happy. Without interrupting the story’s narrative thread, teachers help children relate the story to their lives and to other stories they have read, and to build vocabulary and concept knowledge. Children’s author Katherine Paterson emphasizes the importance of young children exploring feelings and internal expressions—from happiness to creativity to grief and imagination—through stories (in Allen 2001).

Open-ended questions before, during, and after reading keep children involved and encourage reflection and personal interpretation. Rather than probing for discrete facts, open-ended questions often lead to other questions—“questions that hang in the air and replay themselves in our minds” (Keene & Zimmerman 1997, 109): How do you think Pisca felt when her Dad said he was proud of her? When you have courage, does it mean you are not afraid? What does it mean to feel accepted?

Teacher Ardine Kapteyn acknowledges some challenges in helping children make meaningful connections with text. “Tying emotional development to literacy is hard to do in the electronic age of TVs and computers,” she says. “Kids are used to a sitcom where everything is resolved in half an hour.”

Ardine insists oral language is the key component. She says, “Many of our children enter kindergarten with language delays of two or three years, due to lack of experience. It’s up to us to provide the experiences they need to develop strong language skills . . . I try to figure out how children are learning language.”

“Many of our kids come from families with low literacy. And in second or third grade, most children can’t articulate their feelings very well. If you ask them how they are, they usually say happy or sad. But if I ask, ‘What else?’ they can come up with other words—disappointed, angry, proud, glad, curious. It’s amazing, really, how their vocabulary and concept knowledge grows and how much of what we teach they internalize.”

Sharing good literature with children, Ardine believes, teaches important lessons that help children develop an understanding of their own and others’ feelings. The lessons also play an important role in meeting state assessment standards. “The goal is to raise the thinking level of the class,” explains Ardine. “Our job is to help children learn high-level comprehension and interpretive skills, not just literal comprehension.”

Through guided discussions of literature, children learn to make predictions and inferences, imagine a setting, identify with characters, use the context to understand new words, ask questions, and become aware of the skills they are using to make sense of text—all the earmarks of active engagement in the reading process (Pearson et al. 1992).
Inferring feelings

In Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding, Harvey and Goudvis (2000) describe inferring as the “bedrock of comprehension.” “We infer in many realms. Inferring is about reading faces, reading body language, reading expressions, and reading tone as well as reading text” (p. 105).

For example, the authors describe a game (p. 106), devised by a kindergarten teacher with a twofold purpose: providing an opportunity for children to explore feelings and to get a handle on the notion of inferential thinking. Every few days the teacher introduces a new emotion (mad, sad, happy, disappointed, frustrated). She writes it on a card, reviews the nature of the feeling with the children, then adds the card to those already discussed. She then chooses one of the cards and pins it on the back of a volunteer’s shirt. The volunteer stands in the middle of a circle and turns around slowly several times so that everyone has an opportunity to see the card. The children offer the volunteer clues to the word on her back, always beginning with “I felt that way when . . .” For instance, one child says, “when my dog died.” Another says, “when my dad didn’t let me go to the movies,” and so on. From the clues, the volunteer infers the feeling (Harvey & Goudvis 2000).

The Comfort Corner

At Helen Baller Elementary School in Camas, Washington, the Comfort Corner provides a safe, supportive place for children identified by parents, teachers, or other school staff as having social/emotional difficulties to “get a healthy start in school by helping to build friendship skills, communication skills, and self-esteem” (Novick 1998). The Comfort Corner is a tiny office space adjacent to the music room, overflowing with puppets, children’s art, books, a tape player, even a small space for dancing—all the things a child might need to feel comfortable.

While part of the time is spent working on social skills and basic life skills, such as what to wear in the snow or how to make and serve a snack to a friend, feelings have center stage in the Comfort Corner. A feelings chart helps children recognize and talk about their emotions. Children also sing, read aloud, write about, act out, and paint their feelings. Child development assistant Kathy Duly might ask them to draw a picture of how they feel that day or write about a time when they felt sad, angry, or happy. After showing a video of the book Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, by Judith Viorst, Kathy might ask, “What was the worst day you ever had?” and the children can talk, illustrate, or write about it.

Bookshelves spill over with stories about scary dreams, bad days, divorce, and every imaginable kind of feeling. On the Day You Were Born by Debra Frasier and Mama Do You Love Me? by Barbara Joose are favorites.

Kathy notes, “Many children hear, ‘If it weren’t for you, things would be better—I wouldn’t have to work so hard, we’d have more money.’” She says these stories not only help children imagine a happier family, but also allow them to identify with the feelings of the characters in the stories, learn about their own feelings, and empathize with classmates.

Conclusion

The study of literacy from a child’s point of view highlights the role that language plays in the everyday lives of children. Young children, obviously, learn what language is through what language does (Bruner 1983). When schools and families provide opportunities for open-ended questions before, during, and after reading keep children involved and encourage reflection and personal interpretation.
children to express their thoughts and feelings verbally and in writing/drawing, to read and discuss stories that offer rich opportunities to discuss emotions, and to understand how others think and feel, emotional development and literacy go hand in hand.

References


Suggested children’s books

Reading aloud and discussing stories is one of the best ways for children to build vocabulary and concept knowledge, and enhance memory, imagination, attention span, and listening and comprehension skills. In addition, as Washington elementary teacher Michelle McDonald says, these activities “can become a time of reflection, sharing, and empathy.” Listed below are some of the many picture books that can spur rich conversations about such themes as courage, friendship, overcoming adversity, prejudice, grief, rejection, and loneliness.


New Help in Building Early Social and Emotional Competence

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning is a new national effort to strengthen the capacity of the child care field and Head Start to improve social and emotional outcomes for young children.

Funded by the Head Start Bureau and the Child Care Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the center will develop and disseminate evidence-based, user-friendly information to help early childhood educators promote the social and emotional development of children, prevent challenging behaviors, and address the needs of the growing number of children dealing with mental health concerns. The center will advocate practices that are comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the needs of programs, families, other professionals, and communities.

NAEYC is one of four national association partners in the center’s work, along with the National Head Start Association, NACCRRA (the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies), and DEC (the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children).

For more information, visit the center’s Website http://csefel.uiuc.edu.

For further reading

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