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Promoting Emotional and Social Learning in Primary School Children

Ong Ai Choo

Abstract
This paper describes a pilot study that was undertaken with the aim of promoting the emotional self-regulation of children. The study was undertaken with 29 primary 4 and 5 pupils who were identified as having problem behaviours. The paper outlines briefly the background and content of the programme, describes the teaching strategies used, and highlights the importance of creating an appropriate context for emotional and social learning. An evaluation of the programme based on informal feedback from the pupils indicates the usefulness of the programme and suggests the need for further training in other aspects of emotional social competence.

Introduction
More than ever before, young people today are facing enormous demands in their everyday lives from parents and educators to excel academically, to be effective team players, to be flexible yet resist negative media and peer influences, and to think globally and at the same time be responsible and contribute to their peer group, family, school, community and country. All these are worthy aspirations, many of which are articulated in the Ministry of Education’s document (1998) “The Desired Outcomes of Education”. Many children, however, are not adequately prepared to face the challenges of growing up in an ever-changing and increasingly complex global environment, as evidenced by the alarming increase in the incidence of violence among school-aged children. For example, the number of juveniles arrested for crime steadily increased from 983 in 1984 to 2574 in 1995 (Choi & Lo, 2002; pp 26–32). Figures from the Criminal Investigation Department further indicate that juveniles are involved in more violent crimes such as murder, rioting and extortion (The Strait Times, January 27, 1999). As children experience mounting societal pressures and expectations, many are in fact getting less support from parents as the family structure moves away from the traditional extended family to that of a nuclear dual-income family. The attendant social and emotional issues that children grapple with are at the heart of problem
behaviours that plague many schools and families, sapping the energy of teachers as well as robbing children of their learning time and opportunities.

It is therefore not surprising that there is a growing recognition among educators in Singapore of the need to build an adaptable and resilient society to prepare them for the challenges of the 21st century. As Director of Education Programmes Division, Mrs Mok Choon Hoe (1997) noted, “We need to develop our social infrastructure and heartware to its fullest, for people are our only resource”. This realisation that children need to be taught life-skills and be equipped with social and emotional strategies and skills so that they can make an appropriate response to their environments is seen in the offering of a life-skills curriculum by schools.

This paper describes a preliminary effort to help children develop self-management of cognitive and behavioural processes. It first describes how the facilitator attempted to create a context that enabled her to interact with the children and influence their relationships with her, with one another and with the learning process. The paper then describes the instructional strategies used to engage children in the learning of emotional and social skills and includes two learning tasks to illustrate the active learning approach used. Finally, it concludes with an evaluation of the school experience and the lessons learned from this preliminary investigation.

**Background**

The project was initiated as a school experience with the objectives of helping children identified as having problem behaviours in learning of skills in emotional and social management. The National Institute of Education facilitator chose the particular primary school because of its school culture and philosophy which endorsed a strong commitment to the care and nurture of children in their emotional and social development. Altogether 29 pupils from two primary levels participated in the programme: 16 primary 4 pupils and 13 primary 5 pupils. With the exception of two girls from primary 5, all the pupils were boys. Selection for inclusion in the skills instruction programme was based on teachers' observations of the pupils' behaviours in class. Those identified for participation in the programme were described as exhibiting impulsive, disruptive, aggressive behaviours and as having negative peer relationships. Parental consent was obtained, and the pupils were informed of the objectives of the course, which was to help them develop intelligent behaviours in their everyday life.

**Aim of the Project**

As indicated earlier, a major goal of the project was to enable pupils to develop emotional self-management skills that would promote greater self-awareness, self-control and self-regulation. It is hoped that they would be able to use these skills in their everyday life. Another major goal was to enable the author/facilitator to gain a better understanding of the instructional approach and strategies that
would best engage children in the learning process and thereby increase their motivation for learning of emotional and social skills.

**Description of the Programme**

In deciding on the specific social behaviours and skills to be included in the course, an extensive literature review of relevant research was made (e.g., Campbell & Siperstein, 1994; Cartledge & Milburn, 1986; Elias et al., 1997; Gajewski, Hirn, & Mayo, 1998; Kelly, 1982; Van Hasselt & Hersen, 1992; Warger & Rutherford, 1996). One useful framework was provided by Sylwester (1995), who identified six areas in which social and emotional learning must come together for the benefit of children and schools:

- accepting and controlling our emotions
- using metacognitive activities
- using activities that promote social interaction
- using activities that provide an emotional context
- avoiding intense emotional stress
- recognising the relationship between emotions and health

Elias et al. (1997; pp 27–30) have also identified key skills in the emotional, cognitive and behavioural areas that are basic to human functioning. These include emotional awareness and regulation, self-monitoring and performance, empathy and perspective taking, and social skills in handling relationships.

In addition, consultation was made with the pastoral care coordinator to gain a better understanding of the specific needs of the pupils. A decision was made to include skills that would help the children make wise decisions, develop positive values, deal with aggression, develop a better understanding of emotions and perspectives of others and in this way be more effective in conflict resolution and social problem solving. The entire programme was to comprise nine sessions over 13 weeks.

1. **Identifying feelings**
   - Discuss different types of feelings
   - Recognise feelings
2. **Identifying anger triggers**
   - Discuss what makes you angry (triggers)
   - Recognising anger clues
3. **Self-control strategies, especially coping with arousals by using anger reducers**
   - Deep breathing
   - Counting
   - Pleasant imagery
   - Self-talk
4. Alternate solutions and consequential thinking
   - Explore alternative solutions to anger triggers
   - Discuss short- and long-term consequences of solutions
5. Hot thoughts versus cool thoughts
   - Identify your own anger-producing thoughts
   - Changing angry thinking
   - Talking to yourself to manage provocations
6. Empathy
   - Identify the feelings of others
   - Perspective taking
7. Respect for self and others
   - Ways we show respect to ourselves
   - Ways we demonstrate respect to those in authority
8. Dealing with aggressive behaviours
   - Asserting personal rights
   - Conflict strategies
9. Integration
   - Rehearsal of skills in different case scenarios

**Creating the Context for Emotional and Social Learning**

Recent brain research has shown that feelings are an integral part of learning. It is recognised that learning is facilitated or hampered by emotions (Goleman, 1995), that emotions drive learning and memory (Sylwester, 1995) and that depressed mood states are often correlated with decreased motivation in the classroom (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). Emotions are clearly a significant factor in learner motivation. Positive emotional attachment to teacher and peers is a vital link to academic success that cannot be ignored, especially in the emotional and social development of children. One of the most effective ways of engendering positive emotions in learning is to build strong caring relationships with children. Children can sense whether or not the adults in their lives think they are important and accept and respect them regardless of their talents and behaviours. Unfortunately, at-risk children are most vulnerable for growing up without care. Quite often they come from homes where there is little adult support or help. A common experience they have is that of being reprimanded or punished by adults for their misconduct. In seeking to nurture the emotional and social development of children, it is essential to build positive relationships as this will foster their motivation and cooperation and thereby facilitate their learning. There are many ways to do that including the following used in this study:

**Get to Know Them**

When children are disruptive, it is likely that teachers may become so distressed that they scream or yell at them or punish them for their misbehaviours. This can
cause them to become more negative and distrustful towards the teacher. Instead, it is more productive for teachers to try to understand them and to engage them in a meaningful and positive relationship.

The following section narrates the facilitator’s first classroom encounter with the children at the start of the training programme, and her subsequent efforts to engage disruptive children in a dialogue that served as a basis for establishing a more positive relationship.

“The first lesson at both primary levels will always remain imprinted in my mind as the most discouraging and bewildering teaching experience I had ever had. Contrary to my naïve expectations that my main challenge in working with ‘problem’ kids was simply to engage them in interesting activities, I promptly realised that my agenda was altogether different from that of the pupils. From the moment they sauntered into the classroom, boisterous and high-spirited, it seemed to me that they were more intent on creating havoc and overturning the session. They were yelling, jostling, throwing objects at each other. It soon became apparent that, as they were from different classes, there was quite a great amount of mutual animosity and distrust amongst them. A few pupils refused to be seated at the same table. Shortly after the lesson commenced, a fist fight erupted at a table, which created considerable commotion. Amidst the din and confusion, I managed to settle the mini-crisis, restore some order and establish classroom rules. The class began to settle down a little but a few boys stubbornly persisted in their disruptive behaviours, making it virtually impossible to deliver the lesson as planned. Totally discouraged and overwhelmed, I ended the first lesson by requesting the most disruptive pupils to stay behind for a personal session with me.”

The dialogue below is an example of a first initial effort to engage a disruptive pupil after the first lesson.

Me: Hi, Ernest (not his real name). Tell me about yourself. How do you find school?
Child: I enjoy it.
Me: Oh? (surprised). That’s great. Tell me more about it. What is your favourite subject?
Child: Chinese.
Me: Why do you like Chinese?
Me: Congrats. I’m so proud of you. What did you do this time that helped you to get 75 marks?
Child: It was easy. I hope it will always be easy.
Me: I’m sure you studied hard and as a result you got good results.
Child: But I don’t like English and Science. I hope I can do well there too.
Me: I’m sure you can, if you put in some effort. You can be a smart student if you try (he looked pleased).
Child: I hope so. English and Science are hard.
Me: So how did mum and dad react to your 75 marks?
Child: They were happy. But dad did not give me what I want ... he forgot about his promise.
Me: What did you like to have?
Child: A whisker fish.
Me: Whisker fish? How does it look like?
Child: It's a big fish (tried to illustrate and explain).
Me: Hmmm ... sounds interesting. Could you tell me which teacher do you like best?
Child: Mr. Tan (not his real name).
Me: Oh, why? Is he nice?
Child: No, he scolds us, but I like his teaching.
Me: Why does he scold?
Child: We made noise.
Me: But you enjoy his teaching anyway.
Child: Yes, he makes it interesting.
Me: I see. So you like him because he is interesting though strict. And you make an effort to improve your Chinese and did well there. I really hope you will make an effort to improve your behaviour in my class just as you have made efforts to improve in your Chinese. Would you like to try?
Child: Yes.
Me: Do you know how I feel when children make a lot of noise? (my attempt to link to the objective of the first lesson, which was to identify feelings).
Child: Sad.
Me: Yes, sad. You know, it’s hard for me when there is so much noise. Would you like to make me happy instead?
Child: Yes.
Me: Could you describe to me what you would do next week to improve your behaviour in my class?
Child: Keep quiet.
Me: That’s a good way. Will you really try to be quiet and quarrel not so much with the rest of the children?
Child: I will try.
Me: Thank you. That will make me feel quite happy.
Child: I will try.
Me: That’s a deal. I shall look forward to seeing you in class next week.

This initial attempt to engage the disruptive pupil in a meaningful relationship resulted in a deliberate and noticeable effort on the part of the pupil to improve his classroom behaviour in the second lesson.

Throughout the programme, similar attempts were made by the facilitator to spend time with individual children, with a priority on those with disruptive behaviours. Each of these sessions lasted 10 to 20 minutes, with the primary goal...
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of enabling the facilitator to know and understand them better. These modest efforts to engage the children at a personal level resulted in varying degrees of bonding between the facilitator and the pupils, which confirmed the research findings that children will work for attention from teachers if you give them positive attention and build a positive relationship with them (Brophy, 1981).

**Respect for the Child's Feelings**

Another important way of building caring relationship with children is by demonstrating genuine interest in and respect for their feelings. Children usually demonstrate remarkable openness in sharing about their feelings, good and bad, as well as things that are important to them. Acknowledging and accepting their feelings without attempting to evaluate the content or to force them into a particular way of feeling and thinking sends a message to the children that they could trust the teacher to understand and accept their feelings. Understanding before instructing them is a useful principle to bear in mind in developing relationships with children.

**Express Your Own Feelings**

Teachers too need to be transparent and honest about their feelings in order to help children learn to express feelings and regulate their own emotional responses. One way is to use the language of feelings. For example, in class, the facilitator expressed her feelings in these ways: “I feel frustrated when you do not follow the classroom rule that we agreed on” or “I am pleased that you completed the homework assignment”, or “I feel encouraged when you share that you were able to exercise self-control by using the visualisation technique I taught you.” By using the language of emotions to express our own emotional states and to interpret others, children can also learn to identify emotions accurately and become accustomed to talking about feelings, creating a powerful mechanism for emotional regulation. As the teacher talks aloud a particular emotion, he/she is encouraging the use of a coping skill so that instead of bottling up emotions children can now regulate them.

Building the context for emotional learning is by no means an easy task. It requires the teacher’s consistent commitment to this process and a willingness to give time to develop caring relationships with children. When the teacher does this, he/she is contributing to their self-esteem and increasing their motivation for emotional development.

**Instructional Methods that Enhance Emotional and Social Learning**

Effective teaching practices promote students' emotional and social learning. Research has shown consistently that an active learning approach is superior to a
A didactic approach in promoting students' learning and understanding. Elias et al. (1997; p 50) describe several teaching strategies that are commonly used to engage students in introducing social and emotional learning lessons. These include story telling and biography, group discussion, rehearsal and practice (that is, role play), self-awareness and self-regulation, self-reflection and goal-setting, artistic expression, play and cooperative and small-group learning. Other teaching strategies used to promote children's social and emotional competence are practical scripts, games and pictures (Webster-Stratton, 1999). In addition, real-life situations during the class also provide many opportunities to exhibit self-control, express feelings or engage in problem solving. The teacher could exploit these moments to teach them about behaviours and apply the skills taught. The classroom thus becomes a microcosm of the larger community, providing the opportunity for students to learn and develop social skills.

A psychoeducational approach to teaching prosocial skills is also described by Goldstein (1999). It involves four steps: 1) modelling by the facilitator on the use of specific behaviours; 2) role-playing (that is, guided opportunities to practice and rehearse the behaviours); 3) performance feedback (that is, use of praise and reinstruction on how well role-playing of the skill matched the model's demonstration of the skill; and 4) transfer (that is, engaging in activities to transfer behaviours learned in other real-world settings).

The eventual choice of instructional strategies to promote emotional and social learning was based on a number of considerations, including the goals of the lessons, the developmental needs and interests of the children and the size of the class. In general, varying the teaching and learning activities is considered to be important to engaging the pupils.

**Description of Learning Activities**

Learning tasks were designed to enable pupils to learn specific skills through a variety of activities. Two examples are provided below.

**Task I.** This learning task sought to promote emotional self-awareness by helping children identify the things that arouse or trigger their anger.

First the facilitator described two types of triggers: external triggers (things done by one person that makes another person angry) and internal triggers (things we think or say to ourselves when faced with an external trigger to make us angry). They were given real-world examples that illustrated how people lost personal control through their reactions to others. A newspaper article on road rage created considerable interest among the pupils and was particularly effective for introducing feeling, dilemmas or situations that occur in everyday life. The pupils were required to identify the word, actions or body language that "triggers" anger in the different people involved. This generated a great deal of discussion on the feelings of the different people involved, how they reacted and the
consequences. The pupils then examined how they themselves react to their own problems and to similar issues. They were to identify the triggers and write down their response to the following questions:

- What are my trigger words?
- What kinds of body language are triggers for me?
- How do I react to my triggers?
- Who might be affected by my angry reactions?

Finally, the facilitator introduced the frustration log (see Figure 1) and explained the importance of the log in terms of helping them learn about what makes them angry and how they handle these situations. They were shown how to fill out the frustration log by an example. For homework, they were given several frustration logs and instructed to fill out a log as soon as possible after an incident. In this way the log was used as an effective tool for engaging pupils in self-monitoring and self-awareness.

![Frustration Log](image.png)

**Fig. 1.** Frustration log.
Task 2. This task required the group to identify anger cues (that is, how to know when they are angry) and to learn ways of reducing their anger.

The facilitator first provided examples of physical signs that indicate anger (e.g. muscle tension, clenched fists, increased heart rates). She also explained why it is important to know they are angry before they can use self-control to reduce anger. The pupils then identified their own warning signs.

A self-awareness tool, the anger thermometer, was introduced to assist pupils in self-monitoring of feelings and ascertaining the degree of arousal. The facilitator then demonstrated self-monitoring through the think-aloud strategy:

- How do I know I’m angry?
- How do I feel?
- How does my body feel?

They also learned the distinction between feelings of anger or frustration as emotional states and aggressive behaviours as a choice in how they respond when their anger is triggered and that exercising self-control is a choice.

Now that the group was able to identify their anger warning signs, they were ready to learn coping skills: deep breathing, counting, visualisation and self-talk. As this involved the learning of specific skills, four teaching methods were used: instruction, modeling, role-play and feedback.

First, the facilitator provided instructions on how to control anger via the four anger reducer skills. Next, the facilitator provided modelling of the skills taught. As she presented each of the anger reducers, she modeled its use. She involved the group in role-playing the skills and provided feedback on the role-plays. Finally, to ensure the transfer of the skills learned until they become habit, the facilitator gave a homework assignment. The children were also taught to applaud their own self-success. In this way self-regulation was promoted through the homework assignments.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the project was derived mainly from two sources: (a) an informal end-of-the-course feedback from both groups of pupils (i.e. primary 4 and 5), and (b) the facilitator’s own classroom observations and weekly monitoring of the pupils’ progress, as reflected in their entry of the weekly logs.

Pupils’ Response

Informal feedback indicated that many of the pupils, especially the primary 4 pupils, found the course interesting and the skills and strategies taught useful. In particular, they found the “stop and think” coping strategy, which involves the use of calming exercises, very beneficial. They also enjoyed the homework assignments, which required them to apply the skills to everyday life. Interestingly, they also appreciated the opportunity to make friends.
In addition, the pupils provided constructive feedback for improving the course in a number of areas. For teaching strategies, suggestions for improvement included more active learning activities and more animation and interesting visuals. On the instructional content, there was an expressed desire to learn more things and to have additional homework assignments. For classroom management, suggestions were made for punctuality in starting and ending class and for stricter enforcement of classroom rules to ensure optimum learning opportunities.

**Facilitator’s Observations**

There was a remarkable improvement in the socio-emotional climate of the groups. This was especially evident in the primary 4 group. Despite frequent bickering, there was a manifest bonding with each other and with the facilitator, which contributed to a more positive, though still rowdy, classroom climate. There was evidence of varying degrees of effort to transfer the skills and strategies to situations outside the classroom. Regular monitoring by the facilitator and review of the pupils’ completed journal entries provided encouraging evidence that some of the pupils were able to apply effectively the skills and to engage in self-monitoring.

**Conclusion**

This preliminary study lends support to research evidence that demonstrates that children can be taught to develop self-management of cognitive and behavioural processes. Several important lessons emerged from this study. One is the importance of creating a positive context for social and emotional learning. Another is the importance of effective classroom management, the absence of which can seriously impede the successful learning of the skills. A third lesson is the need to involve teachers and parents in the learning process in order to ensure application and transfer of skills. An end-of-the-course meeting with the teachers highlighted the need to keep teachers informed about the skills taught to the pupils so that they can reinforce them in the classroom context. In addition, the facilitator’s meetings with several concerned parents revealed that parents were keen to understand and to support their children in their emotional and social development. It is concluded that the nurture of emotional and social development requires not only effective instructional strategies but also the provision of a positive learning context and the partnership of parents and teachers. Future efforts in this direction will need to be cognizant of these lessons to ensure greater effectiveness in promoting the emotional and social development of children.

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