Reesa Sorin

The Fears of Early Childhood

Emotional Literacy in the Early Years

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AND HE WENT BACK TO MEET THE FOX.
"GOODBYE," HE SAID.
"GOODBYE," SAID THE FOX. "AND NOW HERE IS MY SECRET, A VERY SIMPLE SECRET: IT IS ONLY WITH THE HEART THAT ONE CAN SEE RIGHTLY; WHAT IS ESSENTIAL IS INVISIBLE TO THE EYE."
"WHAT IS ESSENTIAL IS INVISIBLE TO THE EYE," THE LITTLE PRINCE REPEATED, SO THAT HE WOULD BE SURE TO REMEMBER.
ANTOINE DE SAINT EXUPERY (1971) - THE LITTLE PRINCE. NEW YORK: HARCOURT, BRACE AND WORLD.

This book is dedicated to my son, Ben Claremont, for his patience, love and tolerance while I was researching and writing this, and now to celebrate his achieving of his important goals.

Background to the study

> *A massive survey of parents and teachers...shows a worldwide trend for the present generation of children to be more troubled emotionally than the last: more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive.*
>
> *If there is a remedy, I feel it must lie in how we prepare our young for life. At present we leave the emotional education of our children to chance, with ever more disastrous results. One solution is a new vision of what schools can do to educate the whole student, bringing together mind and heart in the classroom...I can foresee a day when education will routinely include inculcating essential human competencies such as self-awareness, self-control, and empathy, and the arts of listening, resolving conflicts, and cooperation (Goleman, 1995, pp. xii-xiv).*

Up to ten emotions are reported as innate or basic, and become visible from the early years of life (Campos, Bertenthal and Kermoian in Plutchik and Kellerman, 1983; Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980; Reber, 1996). These emotions include happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, disgust, anger, shame and interest. Up to the age of three, children express both positive and negative emotions freely. They are unable to either mask their feelings or to act in ways contrary to how they feel (Berk, 1997). At the age of three, children can assume emotion "masks" for positive emotions such as happiness and surprise, but cannot feign more negative emotions, such as sadness, disgust and anger. Their understanding of emotion is developing and they are able to identify situations that elicit simple emotional reactions (Stein in Bamberg, 1997; Thompson in Saarni & Harris, 1989). By the age of four, children can envisage situations where familiar emotions will occur (Terwogt & Olthof in Saarni & Harris, 1989). By the age of five, children's discussion of emotion incorporates cause and effect (Berk, 1997), although they still tend to take in some emotion information while ignoring other information (Harter & Whitesell in Saarni & Harris, 1989). Yet by six years of age, children are usually fluent in describing events that precede and follow an emotion (Saarni & Harris, 1989) and are able to feign and switch emotions

easily (Harris, 1994). The preschool years, between the ages of three and five, are obviously a time of considerable emotional growth. Yet much of this is unfacilitated; left to the child's own devices.

True literacy goes beyond language. "Competence in literacy...not only entails how to read and write identifiable genres of texts. It also requires strategic knowledge of how to 'read' social situations and institutional rule systems and act effectively in order to conceptualise, articulate and achieve social goals, actions and alternatives" (Luke in Unsworth, 1993, p. 10). According to Goleman (1995), children who are emotionally literate, who manage their feelings well and recognise and respond to the feelings of others are at an advantage in all areas of life. Conversely, unresolved emotion can negatively affect our recall ability, judgement and general learning skills (McKnight & Sutton, 1994). As early as the preschool 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 & Fabes, 1995). Eisenberg and colleagues (1997) concluded that the understanding and regulation of emotion in the preschool years led to high quality social and emotional functioning in the later school years. Children who were able to cope in constructive ways with negative emotions developed better social skills and emotional functioning than those who showed low levels of coping with negative emotions.

Gardner's (1984) theory of Multiple Intelligences includes Interpersonal (social) and Intrapersonal (emotional) intelligences among the seven intelligences and advocates addressing all intelligences in pedagogy and assessment. Yet school curricula today still focus largely on the academic skills of reading, writing and mathematics. This is

exemplified in the Key Learning Areas that frame the primary school curriculum: English, Mathematics, Human Society in its Environment (HSIE), Science, the Arts, and Health and Physical Education (HPE). Emotional and social learning, if addressed at all, are relegated to a small part of the Health and Physical Education subject.

The early childhood classroom differs in some respects. It is here that the value of play is recognised and children are encouraged to experiment, to be creative and to learn through play. Even so, most learning focuses on reading, writing and number skills. Many books, games, kits and computer programs have been created to develop reading, counting, sorting and classifying skills. Resources dealing with emotions are much more limited.

While some teachers recognise the importance of teaching to the affective domain, and some children's picture books and resources deal with social or emotional issues, for the most part these areas are left to the child to work through alone. If they are not resolved, these issues are put aside until the child is older and is diagnosed as needing help. When that actually happens, many approaches to emotional problems rely on Cognitive Appraisal, where the written or spoken word is used as a tool to define, categorise and correct emotions. Using this technique, the child is asked to interpret perceived harmful events and to gauge their personal resources to cope with these events (Santrock, 1994). These cognitive skills are still formative in a preschool child, but emotions are not.

The culture in which one lives constructs the ways in which emotions are named, understood and displayed; those deemed "emotionally literate" are those whose

expression and management of their emotions reflects the rules of their culture. It has largely become the responsibility of the school to indoctrinate children into the language and ways of the culture.

> Eventually as the child comes to use the language and to participate in the culture, the affective element becomes so locked in with the knowledge that it requires such major institutions as schooling, science, and a written language to create a new set of rational concepts that can be operated upon by those famous (but non-natural) rules of right reasoning (Bruner in Bearison & Zimiles, 1986, p. 15).

My study of emotions, in particular the emotion of fear, began in 1992, when I began work on my Master of Arts Honours Thesis – "The Fears of Early Childhood – Writing in Response to the Work of Maurice Sendak" (Sorin, 1994). Sendak's work at times addresses young children's fears and their resolution, such as when Max, in *Where the Wild Things Are* returns from his adventures to the security of his bedroom and a home-cooked meal. However, by the time Ida (*Outside Over There)* saves her baby sister from the goblin kidnappers and returns home to take on her absent father's responsibility of looking after the family, or Mili (*Dear Mili)* returns home to die with her aged mother, it is questionable whether Sendak is helping to resolve or to create fear in children.

While children's literature may or may not help to facilitate the understanding of fear and other emotions in young children, as an Early Childhood practitioner I felt that teachers could certainly help this process. Sadly, I observed very little being done in classrooms, and very few resources available about emotions. This prompted my 1997 Preliminary Study on emotion understanding, display and facilitation of emotion, which led to this current research. It seemed that too little was understood about young children's emotions and very little was being done in the early childhood setting to facilitate children's understanding of emotion.

Significance of the Study

This study recognises the importance of emotion learning, beginning in the preschool years, and aims to assist educators to maximise that learning through awareness of the range of emotions and fears that a young child experiences, and through strategies to assist them to actively teach the emotions within their early childhood classrooms. It aims to give parents a broader picture of the role of the early childhood educator and the extensive background in child development and teaching strategies that educators bring to their work. Finally, it aims to effect change at the tertiary level, where teacher preparation courses delve deeply into the Key Learning Areas but place less importance on the human skills of social and emotion education.

To broaden our understanding of emotions in young children, this study begins by asking participants whether eight emotions, that are described by theorists as innate or basic, are present in preschool children. From this point the study focuses on fear, one of the emotions named as basic. Fear is an important emotion because unresolved fear adversely affects learning and memory (Darke, 1988 in Mackie and Hamilton, 1993; Izard, 1977; Strongman & Russell, 1986 in McKnight and Sutton, 1994). This study aims to increase awareness of which fears are reported as having been experienced by preschool children and how children are reported as exhibiting those fears.

With increased understanding of emotions and particularly of fear, this study examines current practice, both by parents and caregivers, in responding to children's fears, examining a range of responses and their effectiveness in helping

children to deal with fear. Finally, it looks at possibilities for enhancing future practice in emotion pedagogy.

Limitations

The methodology employed in this research was characterised by some limitations. These limitations included sample size, time frame, limitations of observer and limitations of children's ability to articulate.

While this research has drawn from a wide sample of participants in varying early childhood settings, there was still a size consideration. The minimum requirement per centre was ten children and their parents/guardians. One centre had ten children participate, the others had eleven, thirteen and fourteen respectively. In some instances, a child or parent withdrew from the study. While this only happened in a very small number of cases, the sample size may have been a limitation of the study. It is also noted that four types of early childhood settings are represented in this study: an independent preschool, a long day care centre, a preschool attached to a school and an Aboriginal children's service. Family Day Care and children educated in the home are not part of this study.

The time frame for data collection was six months, rather than a longitudinal study of two to three years. During this time surveys and interviews were conducted, activities

implemented, observations made and discussion with participants transcribed. A longer period of time may have illuminated other information or shown a progression in caregivers' emotion education practice or in children's emotion understanding.

Another limitation noted is that young children are formative in their ability to articulate. They may answer questions in exactly the same way as they have heard their friends answer them, and they may not always be able to understand the words used by the researcher. When a child asked me for clarification, I explained the term until I felt that the child understood, but some children may not have vocalised their lack of understanding. I used stories, photographs and long term observations to obtain a richer picture of the child's understandings. I also interviewed some children on more than one occasion to check if the data I had collected were accurate.

While the above limitations exist within this research, I believe the data and the analysis of data present a clear picture of perceptions and practices in emotion education.

Research Questions

1. Which emotions are reported as present in preschool aged (3 to 5 year old) children?

- Which emotions do parents and caregivers report they have observed in children?
- Which emotions do children report they have experienced?

This question is based on the many theorists who name from three to nine emotions as being innate or basic (Campos et al in Plutchik and Kellerman, 1983; Darwin,

1872; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980; Reber, 1996; Watson, 1970). If this is the case, then these emotions are present in very young children. This question is an attempt to confirm whether eight of these emotions are reported as present in three to five year olds.

Eight emotions were chosen for this study. Izard (1991) looks at the universality of "fundamental emotions" based on Darwin (1872), Ekman and Friesen (1975); and Izard (1971) as providing "a sound basis for inferring that the fundamental emotions are subserved in innate neural programs" (p. 17). Emotions named as fundamental include: interest, excitement (in this reference they are categorised as the same emotion), joy, surprise, distress, disgust, anger, shame and fear. Some theorists have noted that emotions such as shame or embarrassmem are not innate, but appear in the first few years of life (Dunn in Ekman & Davidson, 1994). However, the six emotions - happiness, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger and fear - were "found by every investigator in the last thirty years who sought to determine the vocabulary of emotion terms associated with facial expression" (Ekman & Friesen, 1975, p.22). The emotions of interest and excitement, also named by many theorists as innate (Izard, 1977; Tomkins, 1962 in Plutchik, 1980) were added to these original six emotions to make eight basic emotions that were investigated in this study.

There has been much discussion about whether emotions can be recorded, or merely the reporting of emotion can be recorded. Vanman and Miller (in Mackie & Hamilton, 1993) state "the ability to measure emotions sets limits on the theoretical questions that can be addressed" (p. 217). McCathie and Spence (1991) questioned whether it is the fear or the idea of fear that is actually being recorded:

> We do not know what the FSSC-R is measuring and it is possible that he information produced merely reflects an affective reaction to the

> thought of stimuli if they were to occur, rather than reflecting the child's fearful behaviour in terms of frequency of fear thoughts or avoidance behaviours (p. 502).

Stevenson-Hinde and Shouldice's (1995) multi-method approach to studying children's fears suggested that fearful behaviour and reports of fears should be treated as distinct. They noted that "observed approach/withdrawal behaviour was not correlated with fears and worries reported by either mothers or children" (p. 1027). In this current research, reports from parents, caregivers and children were considered as well as observations by the researcher. However, most of the data came from reports as very few incidents of fearful behaviour were observed during my time in the early childhood settings.

2. Which fears are reported as present in preschool aged children?

- Which fears do parents and caregivers report they have observed in preschool children?
- Which fears do preschoolers report they have experienced?

3. Which fears are reported as having been experienced by preschool – aged children in the early childhood setting, and how are they reported as having been demonstrated?

- Which fears do parents and caregivers report that children have experienced in the preschool setting?
- How do parents and caregivers report that fears have been demonstrated in the preschool setting?
- How do children report that they demonstrate fear?

4. How do parents report that they respond to their child's fears?

5. How is it reported that caregivers respond to children's fears?

- How do parents report that caregivers respond to children's fears?
- How do parents expect caregivers to respond to children's fears?
- How do caregivers report that they respond to children's fears?
- How do children report that caregivers respond to children's fears?

6. How do participants rate the effectiveness of the ways caregivers currently respond to children's fears?

- How effective do parents report current responses by caregivers to children's fears to be?
- How effective do children report current responses by caregivers to children's fears to be?
- How effective do caregivers report their current responses to children's fears to be?

7. What other methods for responding to children's fears are suggested by participants?

Definition of Terms

- **Caregiver** - for the purpose of this study, a caregiver is an educator in a Preschool environment. This includes: University - trained Early Childhood teachers, TAFE-trained Child Studies teachers, mothercraft nurses, untrained assistants and centre administrators.

- **Parent** - This includes biological parents, adoptive parents, and children's primary guardians in the home environment.

- **Early Childhood Education** - While this area generally covers the age range of birth to eight years, this study undertakes to investigate the preschool years; three to five years of age.