



# Emotional Literacy in the Early Years

Christine Bruce

Checklists

Lesson Plans

Electronic  
Resources

Age Range  
3-8



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Christine Bruce



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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# Emotional Literacy in the Early Years



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**For Dad, who gave me my energy and determination**

# Acknowledgements

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My quest to discover Emotional Literacy in action brought me into contact with a variety of colleagues exploring similar themes and to them I give my thanks for their support and advice, particularly Susan Maclellan, for showing me around her school and sharing her practice.

My family deserves very special thanks since they often came second to project work: my sons David and Peter, and especially my husband Malcolm for his encouragement, patience and understanding – for keeping me sane!

## About the Author

Christine Bruce has an energetic personality and great love of the outdoors. With almost 30 years' teaching experience she would describe herself as simply an ordinary class teacher who takes pride in her work. She continually strives to improve her teaching and became one of Scotland's first chartered teachers by completing a postgraduate Masters degree in teaching at the University of Edinburgh in 2006 and by meeting the enhanced standard for teaching that a chartered teacher must demonstrate.

Christine has long held the view that education should be child-centred and believes unequivocally that children achieve most when they are happy and comfortable in their environment. She feels that developing a holistic Emotionally Literate approach is the answer to many of her concerns. She sees a teacher's role as more than a simple educator – working with parents, leading after school clubs and outdoor activities throughout her teaching career.

As a newly qualified chartered teacher she presented her final research project at the inaugural conference of Chartered Teachers. Her work won an award at the BERA research conference in 2007 and she has since presented at the SERA 2009 national conference. She led the West Lothian Network for Health and Wellbeing for two years before accepting a secondment as a teaching fellow to Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. She is currently working within the infant years department of a large semi-rural primary school. Christine feels her experiences have broadened her views and strengthened her teaching. She continues to be interested in action research and like all dedicated teachers manages a full and active working week. She believes in the importance of Emotional Literacy as a life skill in our modern world.

# About this Book

I hope that through presenting my experience of undertaking this action research project in an honest and realistic manner that it will in some way, be it whole school, class, group or indeed at an individual level, encourage you to have a go and take on a similar project. I have learned such a lot from the experience, about myself, my teaching approach and working with my colleagues. I expect most readers will dip into this book for a variety of purposes and so the structure is intended to facilitate this approach with each of the six chapters able to stand alone.

Each chapter includes questions to support reflection, and ends with some suggestions for further reading. The resources were made to suit the specific needs of our children and are available on the website [www.sagepub.co.uk/christinebruce](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/christinebruce) for you to adapt to suit your particular needs.

Readers will notice that although the work is related to education across the UK it retains something of a Scottish flavour which soundly demonstrates the close links behind our common educational values. This underlies the principles of Emotional Literacy as an approach to bring the people of the world closer together through a common understanding and empathy, a greater sense of resilience and wellbeing. Readers are encouraged to read over and around the specific curricular references and reflect on how the ideas could be extracted and used or adapted to suit their own situation and individual needs.

Throughout this book, I have made use of the voices of children and parents recorded in my journal observations. These are used to give greater depth and richness to points being made and to help the work become more alive, within the context of a working classroom. In addition, I would be interested in any feedback and ideas that have worked for you.

## Ethical Considerations

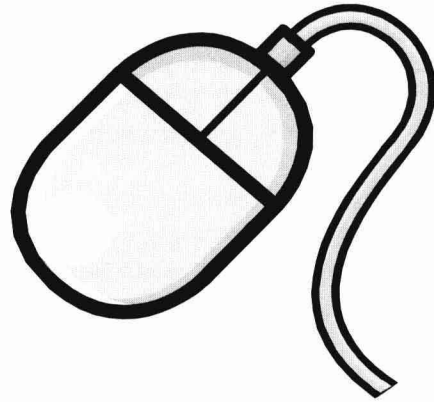
To give credence to this action research project (or indeed to the one you may undertake) I have taken particular time and attention in the planning, preparation and piloting of suitable research vehicles and to rigorous, systematic data collection. Confidentiality has been maintained at all times. Through working in collaboration with the nursery nurses and support assistants, I have used investigator triangulation, which minimises the opportunity for researcher bias on the data. I also kept parents informed of our work through an initial information letter, progress newsletters, open evening/afternoons and daily news bulletins at the nursery front entrance. The parents, children and staff were all informed of the research findings and invited to read my dissertation prior to submission. All pupil guardians gave permission for the use of photography.

# Electronic Resources

Electronic resources for this book can be found at: [www.sagepub.co.uk/christinebruce](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/christinebruce) for use in your setting. For a full list please see below.

## Chapter 1

- 1.1 Project Aims and Objectives
- 1.2 Project Action Plan
- 1.3 Project Timetable
- 1.4 Revised Timetable
- 1.5 Nursery Pupil Interview
- 1.6 Primary Pupil Interview
- 1.7 Nursery Parent Interview
- 1.8 Primary Parent Interview
- 1.9 Emotional Expression Drawings



## Chapter 2

- 2.1 List of Stories for Encouraging Discussion
- 2.2 Transition Sheet: About Me
- 2.3 Example of Emotional Literacy Class Contract
- 2.4 'How I Feel' Worksheet

## Chapter 3

- 3.1 A Checklist for Emotional Inclusion
- 3.2 Individualised Train Timetable Template
- 3.3 Positive Behaviour Support Cards
- 3.4 Puppet Letter

## Chapter 4

- 4.1 Circle Time Lesson
- 4.2 Small World Play
- 4.3 Wanted Poster and Resource Sheets
- 4.4 Parachute Games
- 4.5 Ideas for 'A Pocket of Instant Fun'
- 4.6 Ideas to Establish Creative Outdoor Fun
- 4.7 Games Instructions

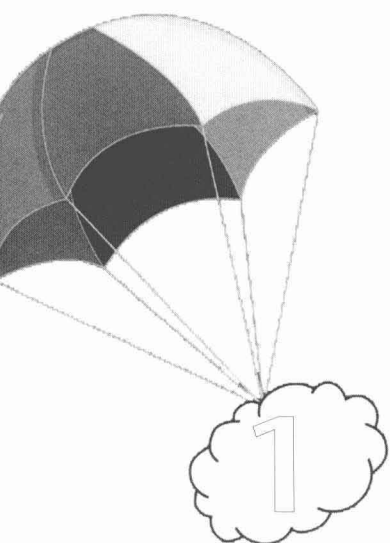
## Chapter 6

- 6.1 Useful Web Addresses

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>About the Author</i>	x
<i>About this Book</i>	xi
<i>Electronic Resources</i>	xii
<b>1 Why Emotional Literacy is Good for Your School</b>	<b>1</b>
An Introduction to Emotional Literacy	1
The Context	2
Where to Start with Emotional Literacy	3
The Importance of Establishing a Common Understanding	5
The Potential of Emotional Literacy	6
The Problems with Emotional Literacy	7
The Significance of Emotional Literacy to Education	7
The Action Research Context	9
Further Reading	13
Electronic Resources	14
<b>2 Emotional Literacy as an Approach to Learning and Teaching</b>	<b>15</b>
How Small Changes Can Have a Big Impact	16
Developing and Using Space	17
Planning for Emotional Literacy	20
Organising Teaching	24
Keeping a Reflective Journal	26
Further Reading	27
Electronic Resources	28
<b>3 How an Emotionally Literate Approach can Support Inclusion</b>	<b>29</b>
Creating an Oasis for Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Needs	31
A Different way to Form Groups	35
Puppets and their Uses	38
Building Self Esteem	43
Further Reading	45
Electronic Resources	45
<b>4 Using Emotional Literacy Across the Curriculum</b>	<b>46</b>
Classroom Initiatives	46
Circle Time as an Approach	46
Communication Skills	47
Story and Drama	49
Using Photography	52
Extension Activities	55

Parachute Activities	63
Outdoor Play	65
Further Reading	66
Electronic Resources	66
<b>5 The Role of the Adult</b>	<b>67</b>
General Points	67
The Role of Parents	68
Overcoming Barriers	68
What is Partnership?	70
Homework	70
Parents Meetings	71
The Role of Support Staff	72
Involving Parents and Families	73
The Role of the Teacher	74
The Importance of Teacher Self Esteem	76
Attachment	77
Working as a Collaborative Team	77
The Whole School Approach	78
Further Reading	80
<b>6 Implications for Practice</b>	<b>81</b>
Collected Data	82
Discussion of Research Effectiveness	87
The Advantage of Reflection	89
The Responsibilities of the Teacher (Communication)	91
The Impact on Pupils and the School Community	92
Implications for Professional Practice	92
The Emotionally Literate School Community	93
Final Word	93
Further Reading	94
Electronic Resources	94
References	95
Index	101



# Why Emotional Literacy is Good for Your School

In this chapter, I consider:

- What is Emotional Literacy?
- Why is it important?
- What benefits can it bring to a school or setting?



## An Introduction to Emotional Literacy

Have you considered the ethos you are aiming for? If the answer is that you want to achieve an enthusiastic and supportive learning community where there is a sense of belonging, where each pupil is valued for their unique contribution, where children have built the confidence, independence and resilience to enjoy challenge, explore creativity and fully engage in rich and deep learning experiences, where children respect each other and have a sense of pride in their achievements, then you could start with considering **Emotional Literacy**.



To Think About:

- *What sort of classroom ethos are you trying to achieve?*
- *What sort of class do you want to have?*

## What is Emotional Literacy?

Emotional Literacy is a way of 'being' not just of 'doing'. It is a pedagogical approach concerning teaching style and learning environment which you can develop with your pupils as a community approach to inclusion. Salovey & Mayer (1990) originally

defined it as a type of 'social intelligence' which enables people to differentiate between emotions and the resulting actions. The teacher's role is then to provide a safe but rich and challenging learning environment where children are free to grow socially and emotionally, while academically nurtured. Mia Kellmer Pringle (1986) used Maslow's well known hierarchy of needs pyramid to develop a simplified theory for the needs of children. Basically, only when a child feels emotionally safe and secure in their environment will they undertake the challenge and risk needed to learn. New learning challenges our self confidence; we need resilience to overcome disappointment or acknowledge our mistakes. Many children are simply not ready to do that and need our support to explore challenge safe from ridicule. Successful deep learning can only take place where recognition and praise is given not only for what is correct but for effort and for solutions found through collaboration. This type of supporting yet challenging environment, where collaboration is encouraged with 'scaffolding' to support and extend learning, follows the principles of social constructivism, allowing children to blossom into independent learners through developing self esteem, self control and social skills.

## The Context

This book is based in particular on the Emotional Literacy project which I undertook as a nursery class teacher, working at that time towards a postgraduate degree in education. The project followed and documented an extended action research initiative initially with 76 nursery children aged between 3 and 5 years, then subsequently followed 19 of those children aged between 4½ and 5½ years through the transition into their first school year, with myself as their class teacher. Those 19 children were then joined by six other children who had all attended a neighbouring nursery. The six additional children had not had an explicit focus on Emotional Literacy, which allowed for a contrast of data.

In the very beginning during the school annual audit, the staff expressed a concern that there seemed to be a steady decline in the general levels of respect and discipline around the school. It was felt that our attainment targets were affected through poor attitudes being displayed by a growing number of pupils towards the school community, and particularly by many of the older children. This lack of social skills was perceived by the staff as a particular concern despite the existing good use of circle time, positive discipline and reward strategies throughout the school. The feeling was highlighted further in a whole school pre-project baseline survey in which data were collected from children, parents and in-school adults regarding perceptions of in-class and out-of-class behaviours. The result was a whole-school commitment to introduce and develop a programme of Emotional Literacy.

It was hoped that focusing on Emotional Literacy would establish an inclusive feeling of responsibility and belonging between pupils and the school community. Further it was hoped that the issues raised in the audit would be addressed through this initiative while not just maintaining but improving attainment. However, to successfully achieve any pedagogical change, staff need to believe in the worth of an initiative and understand the principles behind it (Fullan, 1991). This requires training; in our case an initial whole-staff training session was followed by professional reading around the subject and then the trial of resources led by a small

group of committed staff. Effectively the whole school began to participate in the action research process, which as Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000: 226) assert is *'a powerful tool for change and improvement'*.

Introducing Emotional Literacy from the earliest stages in the nursery class played a foundational part in the wider whole-school plan. To make progress required not only staff collaboration within the nursery setting but also with the whole-school working group, and dialogue with other professionals, the management team, and vitally, with our parents. The focus within the nursery was supported at that time by the 3–5 curriculum, SCCC (1999), which was first and foremost based on promoting social skills. Writing as an experienced teacher it was my contention that these skills were the foundation of all education, a view which is readily supported in current educational literature and in the new curricula across the United Kingdom.

## Where to Start with Emotional Literacy

In the beginning of your project it will be prudent to ensure that all staff involved have a clear and shared perception of your goal. It would also be prudent to have a little background knowledge and a common understanding of what Emotional Literacy is. It is important then to consider how the concept has evolved and the many benefits the approach can bring.

### Why Emotional Literacy?

Emotional Literacy (EL) is still a relatively new and growing area in education and is based on the theory of Emotional Intelligence (sometimes referred to as EI or EQ); the ability to process emotional information. This theory is usually considered to have been developed by Salovey & Mayer in 1990, the term 'Emotional Intelligence' making the simple link between the affective and the cognitive domains. Today their work is supported through contemporary research (Smith, 2004; Blakemore & Frith, 2005) which tells us that the brain plays a central role in emotional response. We know, for example, that the pre-frontal cortex is involved in social, cognitive and emotional processes such as the regulation of attention, pain, self control, flexibility and self awareness and seems very sensitive to the environment. We also know that our brain makes strong and crucial connections between our senses and our emotions (Damasio, 2003).

Emotional Intelligence is often referred to as Emotional Literacy in educational circles, the term 'Literacy' suggesting a practical process or concept which one can be taught 'to read'. I believe there is an innate element to emotion which through careful nurturing can be developed and refined, and then further skills taught developing into what may be known as Emotional Literacy.

The initial research of Salovey and Mayer has been reframed and internationally popularised during the last 10 years through the works of Daniel Goleman (1996, 1998). Goleman made the case that emotional and social intelligence is more relevant than conventional intelligence in the workplace and for a successful life. Salovey and Mayer saw Emotional Intelligence as being made up of four distinct

• Self awareness	the capacity to recognise your feelings as they happen
• Emotional control	the resilience to self manage your emotional reactions
• Self-motivation	perseverance and determination to work with your emotions to overcome challenge
• Empathy	emotional sensitivity to other people's feelings
• Handling relationships	self confidence and social skills to work collaboratively or to lead people.

**Figure 1.1** Bringing the key areas of emotional intelligence together

branches; put very simply these are perception, thought, understanding and management. These could be seen as foundational to the five domains for Emotional Literacy laid out by Goleman (1996). The DCSF *Seal Strategy* (2005) is based on a similar set of five core aspects: self awareness, managing feelings, empathy, motivation, and social skills, which are considered basic to the development of Emotional Literacy. These key areas are brought together in Figure 1.1.

The work of Howard Gardner (1983) on multiple intelligences could be considered to take a parallel view and has had a significant impact on teaching and learning. His theory stresses the breadth of intelligences including interpersonal and intra-personal intelligence which both relate to Emotional Literacy. Interpersonal intelligence relates to taking account of other people and their emotional states and intra-personal intelligence, recognising and managing our own emotions successfully. The idea of Emotional Literacy is therefore nothing new but it demonstrates a growing awareness of the multi-faceted nature of intelligence and the importance of understanding the relevance of this as an approach to learning and teaching.



#### To Think About:

- *Who should provide this nurturing?*
- *Is this within the remit of teachers?*

Governing bodies recognise the potential implications of disruptive or indeed compliant behaviour masking underlying emotional problems which teachers often feel ill qualified to handle. There is also support in Christie et al. (1999) for the assertion that many children demonstrate a lack of empathy which challenges teacher professionalism. However, successful teachers can and do encourage the development of intra-personal awareness and self esteem. If there is even some small cognitive element to emotion, then, as Sharp (2001) acknowledges, the skills of control and understanding should be nurtured, taught and practised in the form of Emotional Literacy. To be really effective these skills need to be modelled and taught not only by individual teachers but as a whole-school community, including both teaching and non-teaching staff. Weare (2007) believes there is unequivocal evidence to support a whole-school approach to Emotional Literacy.

Basic Recognition	Simple Understanding	Appropriate Handling & Expression	Active Understanding & Expression of Empathy
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Figure 1.2 Continuum of Emotional Literacy

## The Importance of Establishing a Common Understanding

From the outset I strongly suggest that if you are considering undertaking a project to develop Emotional Literacy then you should create your own shared definition or understanding, through teasing out and exploring existing definitions to consider which aspects you agree with. The key to Emotional Literacy is, as Mathews et al. (2002: 3) establish, the ability not only to recognise emotions in oneself and in others but to have some understanding and even control of these emotions, to ‘*assimilate them in thought*’. Achieving Emotional Literacy could be considered to be a continuum where initially one must first learn to recognise basic emotions through facial expression and body language, then develop an understanding of what that means before one can handle and express emotions appropriately (see Figure 1.2). The nursery project started through developing an initial recognition which naturally followed along the continuum through simple understanding and appropriate handling and expression of emotion, to active understanding and expression of empathy, a skill that many adults are still rehearsing. It is, after all, possible to recognise emotion but fail in the capacity of empathetic understanding, instead showing apathy and indifference.

This crucial ability to understand and appropriately express emotion must also depend on socio-cultural factors, in keeping with the ecological perspective of the Bronfenbrenner model (1979). This model emphasises the important influence of the wider environment centred around the child’s ‘microsystems’, or micro-environment, in a nested effect. These uniquely influence individual development and behaviour, through an ever widening and complex mix of environmental and social contexts and experiences. The effect of different personal experiences changes the way we perceive and express emotion, both in ourselves and others. To take account of this, any definition formed should acknowledge people’s differing abilities to understand that other people ‘feel’ different things, even from a shared experience. Goleman (1998) suggests this shared understanding or empathy may require maturity to develop, however I believe it could be initiated in the early years. Support exists for this in the work of Brown & Dunn (1996), who found that young children of 3–4 years could express their understanding of emotion in others.

An essential consideration in forming your own definition is therefore the different individual interpretations each of the staff has developed in relation to past experience. For this project it was important that this awareness of individual and personal difference in understanding was acknowledged and as far as we were able, and a common understanding of Emotional Literacy developed, allowing construct validity or a shared, clear and common focus with which to gauge observations in the same light. To this end the staff immediately involved in the project each wrote their personal understanding of Emotional Literacy. After reflection together, with