

Exploring the Effectiveness of Social-Emotional Learning in a Picture Book Creation Course for Junior High School Students

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Summary

Identifying and managing emotions are essential life competencies in modern society, highlighting the importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Well-designed curricula can help strengthen these skills. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, n.d.-b) encompasses five core domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These abilities are especially critical for adolescents, a developmental stage marked by profound physical and psychological changes that offer opportunities for re-examining the self (Wang & Ko, 1999; X. R. Chen, 2021). Thus, SEL has become an important area of learning beyond academic subjects, as it helps individuals navigate the uncertainties of adolescence, learn emotional expression, engage in social interaction, and build healthy relationships with the external world.

Picture books, often part of shared childhood memories, create imaginative worlds through the combination of illustrations and text. These stories allow readers to explore and imagine alongside the characters, evoking emotional responses and resonance (Nikolajeva, 2013). The creative concepts offer a medium for emotional expression and integration. For adolescents, making art facilitates emotional release and allows them to reflect on their inner state through imagery and re-narrate their experiences. Therefore, this study integrates picture book reading and artistic creation into its teaching content, applying picture book-based instructional strategies to help students develop various SEL competencies in the classroom.

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To explore the research questions, this study guided students in reading an emotion-themed picture book and creating their own symbolic emotional narratives, in order to examine the effects on SEL development. A mixed-methods approach was employed. The participants were 8th-grade students from a junior high school in northern Taiwan. The intervention was implemented during visual arts classes over the course of nine consecutive weeks. Pre- and post-intervention assessments were conducted using the “Social and Emotional Learning Scale,” with data analyzed using paired-sample t-tests. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered and analyzed from multiple sources to evaluate learning outcomes, including interviews with 11 students who showed the significant differences in pre- and post-test scores. Based on the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, three main findings emerged:

1. Quantitative data indicated an overall improvement in students’ understanding of emotions. Results showed that after the intervention, students had a greater grasp of SEL concepts.
2. During the course, students demonstrated a variety of emotional awareness and expressions. Their artwork reflected memories of negative emotional experiences, alongside individualized strategies for emotional adjustment. In designing emotional characters, many students used rounded shapes, showcasing diverse stories through their own creativity.
3. Emotional learning art classes helped enhance students’ focus and understanding of emotional expression. Although students came to recognize a broader range of emotions, their self-awareness remained somewhat limited. The collaborative learning format promoted opportunities for emotional expression and empathy. Although most students reported that the picture book creation process enhanced their creative motivation, SEL learning outcomes varied across individuals. Furthermore, improvements in SEL were reflected in the pre- and post-test differences, but these changes did not necessarily correlate with students’ level of engagement in the art-making process.

The findings suggest that picture book creation activities offer an implicit and symbolic avenue for social and emotional learning. After participating in the curriculum, students showed enhanced SEL competencies. Their designs of emotional characters were influenced by instruction and visual experiences, and their diverse story content fostered a greater sensitivity to emotional self-awareness. The comparison of quantitative and qualitative data highlights the need for educators to continue professional development, gain relevant knowledge, accumulate teaching experience, and adapt flexibly. This ensures that every student in a group receives appropriate support. Additionally, assessment standards for SEL are needed. These insights may be valuable for educators and researchers interested in interdisciplinary instruction focused on SEL within art education.