

The Diary of My Emotions: Recognizing and Supporting Emotional Wisdom of Children from Economically Underresourced Communities

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This paper presents a reflective account of the implementation of The Diary of My Emotions, a pedagogical project designed to support and highlight the existing emotional competencies in a preschool classroom in an economically underresourced context. Grounded in critical childhood studies and postdevelopmental approaches, the initiative engaged children and their families in co-constructing emotional understanding through multimodal literacy, embodiment, and the visualization of their peer culture, which evoked their existing emotional skills and cultural knowledge making. Despite challenges such as time constraints and initial family resistance, the project contributed to a more inclusive and emotionally supportive educational environment.

Key words: children's peer cultures, early childhood education, postdevelopmental approach, social and emotional skills

A light in the shadows

In our daily practice with young children, we have recognized that emotional education (EE) is not an extra but a necessary foundation for meaningful learning and connection, especially in contexts marked by economic hardship. Thus, drawing on our roles as co-teachers, researchers, and facilitators of the pedagogical project "The Diary of My Emotions," developed in a Colombian neighbourhood, we, Mrs. Carrillo and Mr. Navarro, write from within the lived experience of co-creating emotional education spaces with kindergarteners. Working in a classroom where many children carry the weight of complex life experiences, we have learned that creating space for emotions is essential to fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and agency. Initially, we found guidance in frameworks such as social and emotional learning (SEL), which emphasize competencies like self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision making (Weissberg et al., 2013). However, as our practice evolved, we began to question the notion of SEL

as something to be delivered to children, as if emotional intelligence were absent and needed to be developed from scratch. Instead, SEL became a reflective lens through which we could better recognize and support the emotional wisdom and social capacities children were already demonstrating. This shift aligns with critiques of traditional developmental psychology such as that of Burman (2016), who argues that these models tend to pathologize those who do not conform to dominant norms, and that "developmental psychology constructs children as incomplete adults in need of normalization, often marginalizing their actual voices and experiences" (p. 23).

In contrast, our work draws on postdevelopmental and critical childhood studies perspectives that view emotional

knowledge as socially and contextually situated rather than as a set of deficits. In this view, EE is not about instilling skills but about co-creating spaces where children's existing emotional worlds can emerge, be shared, and be affirmed. Following James and Prout's (2015) foundational work in the sociology of childhood, we position children as beings and active agents capable of constructing meaning, navigating their realities, and shaping the emotional tone of their communities. This framing echoes Corsaro's (1992) concept of interpretive reproduction, which emphasizes how children create their own peer cultures, not through passive learning but through active meaning making. In that way, children take elements of adult culture and rework them to make sense of their world (Corsaro & Everitt, 2023). In our classroom, children's work and peer interactions served as rich evidence of this cultural production. Children were not simply making evident their social-emotional skills but coauthoring emotional knowledge through shared experiences, metaphors, and reflection.

Our diary-based methodology thus became more than a pedagogical tool; it evolved into a form of attuned listening. As Spyrou (2018) reminds us, working with children requires openness to contradiction, silence, and nuance. In this sense, our role shifted from teaching emotional literacy to making visible what was already there. Aligning with participatory approaches, we came to understand children not as recipients of adult-designed interventions but as co-creators of emotional insight who shaped both the process and the meaning of the work, highlighting the relational, situated, and agentic nature of children's emotional lives.

In this article, readers will learn about a vibrant and marginalized corner of Floridablanca, Santander, Colombia. A small school has become a space of resilience and hope for children facing adverse conditions such as poverty, abandonment, and family instability. Although many enter the school with complex experiences such as family separation, violence, or undiagnosed needs, they demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to manifest resilience, creativity, and empathy. These qualities constitute adaptive responses that challenge reductionist narratives about their vulnerability, evidencing an intrinsic strength that drives processes of symbolic and emotional resilience. The school has transcended its conventional pedagogical function by becoming a space for social transformation where individual resilience intertwines with community and family networks, promoting empowerment and the reconfiguration of their life trajectories. In this context, these children are not merely passive recipients of their circumstances but active agents in building their well-being and future.

A safe space to feel

Our work in the school did not aim to fix or rescue, but rather to create space that could amplify what was already present: emotional wisdom, empathy, and the will to express. The project was grounded in the belief that children already possess the ability to make meaning of their experiences. Through play-based practices and reflective storytelling, we aimed to create an environment where children could express and understand their emotions on their own terms and in their own language. Play became a method for connection, not correction, a way for children to build on the strengths they and their families were already drawing from to face daily challenges. This work was shaped as much by what the children brought into the classroom as by what we offered. The emotional growth and trust that developed emerged from relationships grounded in mutual respect, not intervention. While there were difficult moments, there were also everyday expressions of care, solidarity, and shared understanding, reminders that transformation happens not through rescue but through recognition of what is already there.

The project's implementation faced challenges. One of the main difficulties was the initial resistance of some parents who prioritized academic skills and did not see the importance of emotional development in early childhood. To this end, we held information sessions that highlighted the benefits of emotional learning, leading many families to value the project over time. Another challenge was the emotional diversity of the children, who

had different backgrounds and experiences. Some struggled to verbalize their feelings, which led to frustration. To help them, we used different modes of representation such as drawings, puppets, picture books, and the like. Time management was also a challenge, as incorporating The Diary into the school routine required additional space and sometimes conflicted with other curricular activities. However, it was evident that supporting children's emotional expression improved their academic performance (see also Garnica-Rey & Navarro-Arana, 2025) and increased their participation in school activities.

The power of storytelling: A movie day that changed everything

To begin our exciting journey with The Diary, we proposed a special activity: a class trip to the cinema to see *Inside Out 2*. The idea for the Diary arose from our master's thesis proposals. The concern that motivated this initiative stemmed from the observation of inappropriate behaviours in 4- and 5-year-old children, such as aggression, use of foul language, and other behaviours that triggered alarm bells in their communities and sparked interest in developing a way that would have a positive impact on students. Although these children experienced and expressed their emotions, they did not have the proper tools to visualize and regulate them effectively. Therefore, the proposal sought to explore strategies that facilitated emotional recognition and management at this early stage, thus promoting a healthy space to express emotions through reflective and formative practices.

While researching our thesis proposals, we watched the film *Inside Out 2*, which immediately captured our attention and inspired an innovative idea to begin our research. This choice was not accidental; it served as a key starting point for addressing children's emotions and behaviours, promoting in-depth reflection on how children appropriately express emotions from childhood. However, given the number of students participating in this initiative, we required financial support, which was given through the nonprofit foundation Abrazos de Amor. This outing marked the beginning of an emotional awakening for our kindergarten class. Families prepared for the outing with enthusiasm—many of the kids had never been to the movies before. It was a first for everyone in many ways. When we arrived at the mall, the children's eyes lit up with wonder. The bright lights, vibrant colours, and bustling shops created a magical world far from their everyday lives. Parents and guardians smiled as they watched the kids take it all in. Entering the dark cinema, a hush fell over the room as everyone settled in. When the screen lit up and the characters—Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, Anxiety, Envy, and Disgust—came to life, the kids were captivated. Laughter filled the room during Joy's antics, and hearts tightened in scenes of Sadness. This experience became the foundation for the Diary journey they were about to begin.

The diary of my emotions: A daily practice

In the classroom the next day, the excitement was still fresh. The children could not wait to share their movie experience. Their stories echoed across the room.

I felt sad when Sadness left.

I laughed so hard when Joy jumped through the memories!

Thanks to the kids' enthusiasm, we introduced The Diary. Each child received a colourful notebook decorated with drawings of the movie's characters. We explained that this diary would be a safe space for them to write and draw about their feelings every day.

"Today, we're going to talk about how we felt after watching *Inside Out 2*," said the teacher with a smile.

Some of the children spoke of the joy they felt, others about how sadness is also a part of life. As the days passed,

their diaries filled with drawings and words—smiling and sad faces, short stories written with help from family members, all reflecting their understanding of emotions. They learned to identify moments when they felt scared, excited, angry, or frustrated. Most importantly, they realized that every emotion has a purpose.

Parents became essential partners in this process. At home, they read and wrote alongside their children, fostering conversations about emotions. Therefore, the diary became a bridge for connection and empathy. Parents learned more about their children's inner world, fears, joys, and struggles. Through this collaboration, homework became a memory-making ritual. Families were no longer spectators—they were emotional co-travellers.

The diary quickly became more than a reflective tool; it emerged as a rich site for multimodal literacy practices and embodied emotional expression, as children were engaged with language, movement, art, and storytelling in ways that demonstrated their sophisticated communicative repertoires. Rather than limiting expression to conventional writing, the diary allowed children to draw, narrate, dictate, and co-construct meaning with peers and family members. These multimodal practices align with what Kress (2010) identifies as a shift in meaning making, where children use a full range of semiotic resources such as gestures, images, and body movements to communicate ideas and emotions.

After the powerful movie and the deeply personal stories shared by the children, it became clear they needed a peaceful and safe place to reflect. Thus, the “Calm Corner” was born, an outdoor sanctuary with sensory tools, books, and quiet space, which further underscored the importance of the affective environment in supporting emotional learning. It became a physical extension of the diary, another literacy-rich space where children could engage in reflection through silence, touch, and observation. As Hackett (2012) notes, young children's literacy practices often occur across bodies and spaces, involving movement, sensation, and the environment in ways that challenge traditional classroom models.

Another milestone activity that enriched the diary was “In Someone Else's Shoes,” an empathy-building experience in which each child was given a symbolic pair of shoes representing a classmate. Through role playing, they imagined how their peer felt, what they enjoyed, what scared them, and what they dreamed of. This activity provided a lens into children's empathetic capacities through symbolic play. As they role-played the imagined lives of their classmates, children demonstrated narrative fluency, social imagination, and a willingness to engage with the emotional realities of others. This activity mirrors Dyson's (1997) work on children's storytelling as a form of emotional and social negotiation in which children shape identity and community through shared narrative worlds. Afterward, the children documented their reflections in their diaries, some of which deeply moved and impacted us, highlighting the genuine manifestation of authentic emotions reflected in the children's looks, gestures, and words.

These heartbreaking confessions transformed our classroom into a sanctuary where every emotion mattered and every voice was honoured. To tie everything together, the “Pac-Man: Expressing My Emotions Through Movement and Behaviour” activity was implemented. In this game, children acted out emotions through posture, facial expressions, and motion: dancing with joy, curling up in sadness, and stomping in frustration. These embodied performances reinforced the idea that emotional expression is not only cognitive or linguistic but also physical and relational (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). Through their bodies, children externalized what might otherwise remain unspoken, and in doing so displayed powerful emotional insight. This fun activity expanded their emotional vocabulary, not only through verbal language but through physical embodiment, and built on what they had learned from “In Someone Else's Shoes.”

Every activity in class became a family conversation at home. Though many children could not then write fluently,

their words were captured by parents and caregivers, who helped transcribe their stories into the diaries. Thus, the diary itself became a multimodal text coauthored by children, caregivers, and educators. This collaborative authorship highlights the distributed nature of literacy across home and school and aligns with Perry's (2012) notion of translanguaging spaces, where meaning is constructed through flexible, relational literacies that include multiple modes, languages, and participants. These practices, such as embodied, visual, collaborative, and sensory, reflect a broad understanding of literacy and emotional knowledge. They suggest that children were not merely acquiring skills but enacting and sharing what they already knew, using all the communicative tools available to them. The project, then, was not about delivering literacy or EE but about listening, making visible, and valuing the full range of children's existing competencies.

At the end of the school year, we celebrated with a special exhibition where each child presented their diary to the school community. Each page is a sacred testimony to their journey—dreams, hopes, fears drawn with crayons or spelled out in shaky letters. These children are no longer just victims of their environment. They are change makers capable of building stronger relationships and breaking the cycles of dysfunction. These written reflections now serve as a record of growth and healing. They also symbolize something deeper—a renewed family bond built on empathy and emotional openness. Parents have shared how their children now ask to talk about feelings after family disagreements, or how once-quiet children are finding their voices.

There is no doubt this project was a transformative and enriching journey that is worth sharing, considering not only the need to address the social and emotional wisdom of children in educational settings in Colombia (Pérez, 2016) but also the huge gap that exists in the Colombian literature regarding the inclusion of this practice in public institutions (Medina, 2024). Current and future educators should then consider that through this type of project, children not only were enabled to explore and demonstrate their existing emotional skills but also strengthened family bonds, promoting a holistic approach to learning that extends beyond the classroom. Thus, teachers must go beyond traditional education; they must meet students' needs and understand their peer cultures to provide them with cutting-edge learning experiences that help learners overcome their difficulties (Navarro-Arana et al., 2024).

The diaries ceased to be merely a tool for emotional expression and became a space where the children's emotional and social capacities could flourish and be recognized. Through creative practices such as drawing, storytelling, and role playing, the children shared lived experiences and deep understandings. This does not necessarily imply learning to reflect but rather expressing already-formed knowledge through metaphors and stories. By sharing these stories with their peers, it became evident that many were already practicing skills such as active listening, mutual support, and adopting different perspectives. The journals served to amplify these capacities and make them collectively visible, allowing the children to reveal a nuanced understanding of both their own emotions and those of others. This process strengthened their empathy and also promoted a sense of community in the classroom, where each voice contributed to building a culture of caring, shared understanding, and mutual support.

The diary of my emotions: Final reflections

It was clear that The Diary of My Emotions had a meaningful and positive impact on both the children and the families involved. The project's accomplishments far outweighed the obstacles, providing a strong foundation for future educational initiatives centered on emotional well-being. The evidence collected throughout the process—vivid drawings filled with expressive faces, touching narratives of happy and sad moments, and photographs of group interactions—speaks to the emotional and social growth the children experienced. These artifacts not only document each child's process but also illustrate the collective impact of the project on our learning community.

At the same time, the challenges we faced offer important lessons about the value of flexibility and adaptability in our educational practice. The initial resistance from some families underscores the importance of engaging all stakeholders from the beginning and creating opportunities to discuss the significance of an emotional learning focus. Similarly, the emotional diversity among the children reminds us that each learner is unique and shaped by their own experiences and family contexts. Rather than seeing this diversity as a barrier, we have come to understand it as an opportunity to enrich the learning process, as by acknowledging and valuing these emotional differences, we designed inclusive strategies that meet each child's specific needs and foster a sense of safety and support for all.

Furthermore, the hesitation expressed by some families highlights the critical role of effective communication and the need to build strong, trusting relationships with parents. Creating spaces where concerns and expectations can be shared helps families understand how working on emotional skills positively contributes to academic learning. By involving families from the outset, we not only strengthened the connection between home and school but also cultivated a shared commitment to the emotional well-being of children. Finally, this project encouraged us to reflect deeply on our teaching practices and to continually seek innovative approaches to emotional learning. Flexibility in our methods allowed us to adapt to the shifting realities of the classroom and respond to our students' emerging needs. In this way, each challenge became a learning opportunity, bringing us closer to our goal of contributing to a well-rounded education in Colombia.

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