

# Emotional Intelligence Skills as a Vehicle for Collaborative Learning during Early Childhood Years

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**Abstract - This is a desk-review paper that explores the acquisition of emotional intelligence skills and their contribution to collaborative learning during the early childhood years. The paper focuses on young children between 0 – 5 years as the age group that is not fully integrated into formal schooling as a result this is the group that is often neglected. This is despite that this period is perceived as the crucial one by neuroscientists as children begin to learn concepts and acquire skills and attitudes that lay a solid foundation for their lifelong learning. The acquisition of emotional intelligence skills is perceived as imperative for collaborative learning during early childhood years. This is because, during collaborative learning, children engage in learning activities where teamwork is enhanced and young children freely express their views while listening to others' views. Hence, emotionally intelligent children become emotionally stable, accommodative, and empathetic. Early Childhood Development (ECD) educators need to ensure that emotional intelligence skills are acquired and mastered from the early years. The research focusing on promoting young children's emotional intelligence is evident, however, little is said in terms of linking the role that emotional intelligence skills play in collaborative learning. Therefore, the paper discusses the acquisition and significance of emotional intelligence skills during the early years, how emotional intelligence skills contribute to collaborative learning during the early years, and the available support for children and ECD educators. The paper suggests the training of ECD educators be prioritized. In addition, another suggestion is the approaches that ECD educators may adopt in solidifying the connection between the acquisition of emotional intelligence skills and collaborative learning.**

**Keywords: Civic responsibility; Emotional stability; Lifelong learning; Solidification; Teamwork**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Childhood is part of growing up and it is during these years that certain skills, concepts, and attitudes are acquired to prepare them for life beyond school. From the early childhood years, children's brain develops as early as during their first 1000 days and this, therefore, encourages the immediate environment to always stimulate such developments. This calls for a conducive environment that can nurture such developmental milestones for children's development. Furthermore, other developmental gains offer children an opportunity to develop later in life as strong foundations are laid from such environments. Hence, early childhood provisioning needs to be supportive of the developing child to prevent poor developmental outcomes as children grow. During early childhood years children develop holistically, hence, emotional intelligence is an important aspect of the developing child as it fosters children's holistic development, particularly when collaborating with other children when learning through play. When children develop, nurturing emotional competencies during the early years can eliminate the chances of everlasting stress and further challenges that children may have to endure in the future. According to Soltani, Jafari, and Abedi (2017) when children develop, they often experience behavior stability around the age of 8 years, therefore, it is during these years that they need to be taught about the effective expression of emotions to ensure that they have meaningful relationships with their peers more especially when learning through play. When this is done, this may diminish their mental and behavioral problems that may jeopardize their relations with peers. Hence, the teaching of emotional intelligence during the early years to decrease problematic behavior is encouraged. When children learn through play, children interact with others and this creates a meaningful experience for children as they develop. This paper examines the acquisition of emotional intelligence skills and their contribution to collaborative learning during the early childhood years for children between 0 – 5 years. This paper is organized as follows, the conceptualization of key concepts, theoretical framework, methodology, observation and discussion, and conclusion.

## II. CONCEPTUALISATION OF KEY CONSTRUCTS

As the paper examines the interplay between emotional intelligence and children's ability to collaborate with peers during play-based learning, this section, therefore, aims to contextualize key concepts relevant to this paper, namely; early childhood development, emotional intelligence, cooperative learning, and play-based learning.

#### *Early childhood development*

ECD is defined as the process where children between 0-9 years develop and thrive physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally (Department of Education (DoE, 2001). Furthermore, as children develop holistically, this ensures a smooth transition from birth until their primary school years (Nadeau & Hasan, 2016). During ECD years as children develop, they need to be provided with the ultimate care as the quality ECD services need to ensure that the developmental domains are nurtured at an early age to detect the developmental defects that may negatively impact their development throughout life. As ECD starts from birth, parents need to invest in prenatal care to foster the optimal development of their unborn babies to ensure their protection from any harm that may negatively impact their development. Even Nadeau and Hasan (2016) argue that there should be programs that stimulate the early development of children and nutritional gains in an attempt to generate positive gains in a child's life. It is during the early childhood years that a solid foundation is laid for children's emotional well-being to foster lifelong learning by promoting social cohesion.

#### *Emotional intelligence*

Emotional intelligence is the capacity to perceive and recognize emotions, to reason hypothetically using the information that is generated by emotions in order to foster one's thinking, and regulate emotions when interacting with others (Erasmus, Van Eeden, & Ferns, 2022). Anastasios (2020) argues that emotional intelligence is composed of identifying and monitoring feelings, controlling emotions, regulating emotions, and interacting with others. It is evident that emotional intelligence improves as one develops and gets older, as emotionally intelligent people are able to express their feelings and regulate their emotions as they are aware of themselves. Emotional intelligence is crucial for young children in early childhood centers because it encourages them to create effective social relationships that enable them to be in emotional control as they become resilient (Petrides et al., 2016). The acquisition of emotional intelligence skills can benefit children even beyond their early childhood years.

#### *Collaborative learning*

Collaborative learning is defined as a teaching strategy aimed at promoting peer interactions through the formulation of groups for learners to complete the given task (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Collaborative and cooperative learning are teaching strategies that are often used interchangeably. The benefits of collaborative learning include learners exchanging ideas as they learn from each other because the formation of the groups encourages learners to be grouped based on their different abilities so that the struggling learners benefit from other learners. When collaborative learning is employed there are numerous strategies that make such learning to be effective. Such strategies according to Cheng, Lam, and Chan (2008) are aimed at ensuring that intended learning outcomes are achieved. Such strategies include positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, personal responsibility, and interpersonal and small-group processing skills. In early childhood education, collaborative learning may not be as structured as it is when compared to other school levels like primary or secondary school, however, the level of collaboration from early childhood can be experienced when learners learn through play. Hence, collaborative learning is perceived to be in sync with the characteristics of play-based learning.

#### *Play-based learning*

Play-based learning is a teaching strategy that involves free and guided play for children in early childhood years (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2015). This is important because even though play-based learning is often perceived to be child-directed, the important role that adults play is of utmost importance to guide and support children's learning through play. Hence, Pyle and Danniels (2017) believe that ECD educators need to guide young children when learning through play for them to be focused and develop skills as they engage with peers through play. In other words, play-based learning is when learning is mediated through play whereby young children are afforded opportunities of being active and engaged in their learning. This also encourages children to collaborate with peers when engaged in play-based learning. Although learning through play may be viewed as unstructured, the learning environment should be free and supportive for children to ensure that the intended outcomes are met. Furthermore, children need to be allowed to be independent and experimental for them to develop. Platz and Arellano (2011) argue that play

and learning are the main fundamental aspects of young children's lives, and integrating play when they learn may have positive developmental gains including the stimulation of emotional intelligence skills. Although Lillard, et al (2013) argue about how play-based learning is still contested, there are also some advocates for its importance in terms of benefiting young children as it prepares them for formal school and further encourages collaboration among children (Nichols, Gillies & Hedberg, 2016).

### *Objectives of the paper*

This paper aims to examine how emotional intelligence skills serve as a vehicle for collaborative learning during the early childhood years.

### **The study was guided by the following research questions:**

- What is the significance of emotional intelligence skills during the early years?
- How do emotional intelligence skills contribute to collaborative learning during the early years?
- What strategies can be adopted to enhance emotional intelligence skills in young children?

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is underpinned by the Bar-On model of emotional-social intelligence (Bar-On, 2006). When one is emotionally and socially intelligent, this means that one is at the stage of managing self, being able to interact with the social surrounding in a more realistic and flexible manner so as to cope with the challenges confronted with, solve problems, and make informed decisions. Goleman (1998) views emotional intelligence as being self-aware, able to control emotions, and maintaining good relationships with others. This model is important because it perceives emotional intelligence as the skill that enables people to possess some abilities and skills that enhance emotion regulation and a deeper understanding of self and others (O'Connor, Hill, Kaya, Martin, 2019). This means that emotional-social intelligence regulates how excellently people comprehend and express themselves, and realize the appropriate manner of relating to others as they deal with day-to-day difficulties (Bar-On, 2006). The chosen model of Bar-On (2006) has principal concepts that are linked to one's ability to be self-aware, and be aware of other people's feelings. Once there is a balance between interpersonal and intrapersonal relations, one is able to form and preserve reciprocated, productive, and genuine relationships with other people, possess effective stress management techniques, and adapt to change swiftly as they are always positive, open-minded, and self-motivated. When emotional intelligence is explored in terms of how it relates to academic performance, there seems to be a strong relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance (MacCann et al. (2020). For the purpose of this paper, this relationship is important, especially since the paper focuses on young children. This means that if young children have acquired emotional intelligence skills, these may not just enhance collaborative learning when learning through play in their early learning contexts, however, these may further prepare them even for beyond childhood years. Petrides et al. (2016) introduce another dimension that the environment can be influential in determining whether emotional intelligence is developed or inhibited. This, therefore, calls for a conducive and stimulating environment where the acquisition of emotional intelligence can be nurtured for it to benefit young children. Young children can acquire emotional intelligence at an early age, and this also enables them to understand other people's emotions too, and in turn, this is likely that their cognitive abilities increase significantly (Louw & Louw 2019). The role of an adult is of utmost importance when it comes to developing emotional intelligence, children do need assistance as they move towards being independent and having emotional intelligence. Hence, Zeidner et al. (2002) suggest that children need support from educators in ensuring the children's emotional development and also modeling acceptable emotional behavior. This is further supported by Roeser and Peck (2003) when indicating that children come from different backgrounds and such diverse backgrounds may become a disadvantage for other children as they have not been fortunate enough to get support from family and community, educators can therefore bring about balance in the inadequate socioemotional guidance. When children have successfully developed emotional intelligence skills this may be advantageous for them as those cognitive advances may result in greater social understanding, which makes it easy to manage and control emotions as expected (Louw & Louw 2019). This theory is relevant for this paper because it talks about the importance of emotional intelligence and how it benefits children as they begin to be self-aware and aware of other people's emotions. This is very important for play-based learning because when children learn through play they interact with others hence, good and productive relations with other people become crucial.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a desk review that studies emotional intelligence skills as a vehicle for collaborative learning during the early childhood years. The paper further wishes to explore the significance of emotional intelligence skills during the early years, how emotional intelligence skills contribute to collaborative learning during the early years, and what strategies can be adopted to enhance emotional intelligence skills in young children. The researcher adopted a narrative review approach when reviewing relevant literature for this paper. The narrative review approach was useful for this paper in checking how research around emotional intelligence and collaborative learning has progressed over the years. As stated by (Wong, et al. (2013), the narrative review approach seeks to find and know all possibly relevant sources that are relevant to the studied phenomenon with the aim of producing these using meta-narratives. During the review, it was evident that emotional intelligence and collaborative learning have been researched extensively, however, little was available in terms of linking the two to early childhood years particularly when young children learn through play. For this paper, emotional intelligence was viewed in relation to the role it plays in collaborative learning particularly when learners learn through play in early childhood centers.

#### V. OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

As this paper is a desk review, this section presents the observations made from the literature reviewed regarding the studied phenomenon. The section further discusses the observation made during the literature review process. This section therefore Hence, from this section, the importance of emotional intelligence skills, emotional intelligence skills and collaborative learning, and strategies adopted to support the acquisition of emotional intelligence skills are discussed. As collaborative learning promotes children's interaction, for the purpose of this paper, play-based learning is explored further as it is an emerging strategy that is encouraged to be in early childhood contexts.

##### *Importance of emotional intelligence skills*

Emotional intelligence is perceived as a protective resource that helps one to cope with stress as the moods and emotions are being regulated (Herrera, Diaz, Méndez, Rivera, & Reynosa, 2021). Emotional intelligence abilities are important for young children as they lay a solid foundation for formal schooling. Moreover, children who possess higher emotional intelligence abilities are perceived to be focused as they are reported as attentive, more engaged in their learning, and have established a good rapport with peers as they are also empathetic (Eggum et al. 2011). As emotional intelligence encourages children to regulate their emotions, they become focused, as a result, at times emotional intelligence is often associated with academic performance (Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald 2007; Rivers et al. 2012). When it comes to older people, emotional intelligence benefits them as well as encourages mutual relationships, having good feelings about work, and minimizes the chances of work-related exhaustion (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey 2011). There are five skills that have been identified as important when teaching emotional intelligence, namely, (i) identifying one's feelings and those of other people; (ii) knowing the origins and consequences of emotions; (iii) precisely classifying emotions; (iv) communicate emotions appropriately and (v) modifying emotions (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). The identified skills can be integrated into schools during a teaching in order to enhance emotional intelligence (Hagelskamp et al. 2013; Rivers et al. 2013). Emotional intelligence abilities are important for young children due to the influence they have on the developing child. This is because emotional intelligence abilities do not only facilitate children's optimal development, but they can also influence one's cognitive realm. This is because emotional intelligence has been widely recognized as a predictor of psychosocial adaptation that helps in curbing academic problems, intellectual disorders, and psychosocial struggles (Gershon & Pellitteri, 2018). Nix, Bierman, Domitrovich, and Gill (2013) have also emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence for young children during their early childhood years. This is because during the early years little emphasis is placed on the development of emotional intelligence abilities as compared to higher grades (Weare & Nind, 2011). This is despite that during the early years the development of emotional intelligence needs to be prioritized to ensure that interventions are done timeously to better prepare children for formal schooling. As a result, Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017) believe that emotional intelligence programs have been associated with positive and productive child development as the ECD sector is perceived to be important in developing young children and preparing them for school, encouraging them to engage and interact with each other. Hence, Torres, Domitrovich, and Bierman (2015) argue that there seems to be a relationship between young children's acquisition of emotional intelligence skills and their academic performance. Emotional intelligence is one of the skills considered to be emerging during the childhood years because primarily the child communicates

through the expression of emotions.

### *Emotional intelligence skills and collaborative learning*

As mentioned by Parker and Thomsen (2019), collaborative learning is a strategy that promotes positive peer interactions. While from Rivera-Pérez, León-del-Barco, Fernandez-Rio, González-Bernal, and Gallego (2020), collaborative learning has emerged as a learning strategy that encourages the active engagement of learners in classrooms. When introduced, one of its tenets was to ensure that there is promotive positive, and reciprocated interaction between learners and the increased level of interdependence. When the collaborative strategy is employed, it often encourages learners to be grouped in order for them to interact and complete the task at hand. There is evidence from the literature that when learners work together they are likely to complete the work and solve the problems they encounter successfully (Asha &Hawi, 2016). There seem to be challenges with implementing collaborative learning in classrooms, as a result, Rivera-Pérez, et al. (2020) argue that when collaborative learning is implemented one needs to consider some factors, namely; (i) constructive interdependence, (ii) promotive collaboration, (iii) individual responsibility, (iv) collective or group processing and (v) societal skills. This is in response to what Johnson and Johnson (2014) mentioned about fewer studies being carried out to ascertain the emotional proportions of collaborative learning. This is despite that García, Alcalá, Fernandez-Rio, Calvo, and Barba-Martín (2020) emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence and the incredible role they have in collaborative learning. This means that the connection that exists between emotional intelligence cannot be underestimated as emotionally intelligent children seem to have mastered the management of their emotions. Managing emotions is important especially during collaborative learning because when children are engaging with peers nothing could be achieved during emotional turmoil. When children are working collaboratively, there are important elements to be considered for achieving effective collaboration, for example, self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and social skills are perceived as the foundational aspects of emotional intelligence (Rivera-Pérez, et al., 2020). This is because emotional intelligence involves the emotional development that enables one to recognize his feelings and those of other people (Puertas, et al., 2018). This is important for collaborative learning because if children become intolerant of each other during collaborative learning, they may never achieve positive results in accomplishing the task at hand. In the context of ECD, collaborative learning is evident when children learn through play. Emotional intelligence is also an important contributor when children learn through play because at they engage with others, being self-aware and being aware of other's emotions is key in harmonizing the children's engagement during play (Hodzic, Scharfen, Ripoll, Holling, & Zenasni, 2017).

### *Play-based learning in early childhood*

Play-based learning is basically a child-centered pedagogy where children are encouraged to collaborate with peers as they explore the resources to play with (Hunter, 2019). When children are engaged in play-based learning this encourages children's development and learning. Köngäs, Määttä, and Uusiautti (2021) argue that each child has a unique way of playing because the skills that children possess when starting play activities are not obvious to everyone, but for other children to be able to join they need to first observe and adjust for them to be accommodated (Köngäs, 2018). It is for this reason that Vygotsky (1967) believe that play often emerges from the children's needs and interests and when they play, an adult through observation may be able to determine the children's development through play. This may also require an adult who is supervising children during play to note some elements of continuity when the children play, in terms of how play is initiated, how children interact with others during play, and when play activities stop and what influences such stops (Kangas, Määttä&Uusiautti, 2013). Through play, children can also practice social skills. When children play, they are required to be active, creative, and sensitive to maintain relations with peers. Being sensitive is fundamental for emotional intelligence because this enables young children to regulate their emotions as they interact with peers during play. When children have emotional intelligent abilities, during play they can easily create and sustain relationships with other children while dealing with conflicts in a more amicable manner (Köngäs, et al., 2021). Among several benefits associated with play-based learning, it also supports children's cognitive abilities (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, & Berk, 2011) and emotional intelligence (Köngäs, 2018). The active involvement of children, when engaged in play-based learning, cannot be overemphasized, however, what matters is how emotional intelligence and collaboration serve as the basis for relationships formed when children learn through play (Coelho, Torres, Fernandes, & Santos, 2017). The emerging friendships may be sustained only if children are able to regulate emotions, interact with each other as they easily express their feelings without hurting others' feelings (Wang, Palonen, Hurme, & Kinos, 2019).

In a school context, an educator can easily determine children's level of emotional intelligence by ensuring that when children play as educators they curiously observe children (Fleer, 2015; Köngäs, 2018). Observing children when they play may not be enough as Ivrendi (2020) suggests, hence, educators need to be involved in the children's play. This may be achieved in several ways, maybe an educator creates a structured play with its intended outcomes to check the children's level of collaboration, emotional stability, and how relationships are formed and maintained during play. Although emotional intelligence has many benefits for children even after school, little attention is given to it. This is even worse with young children who are still in early childhood centers. There is no doubt that collaborative learning is one of the strategies that is predominantly used in schools when learners are allowed to work with peers in groups to do a given task. However, what seems to be missing is how learners are emotionally intelligent and prepared for collaboration as it requires a lot from them, starting from understanding their emotions and those of others and the acquisition of social skills. The next section, therefore, explores how best can emotional intelligence be prioritized in early childhood contexts in terms of supporting children to acquire such skills.

#### *Support the acquisition of emotional intelligence skills*

The early childhood years have been seen as important in terms of shaping the child for success more than any other stages. When the foundations are laid at this stage, children become well-rounded people throughout their life. This is also because during this stage developmental delays can be easily detected and interventions are made timeously for the child's benefit. When children are given ample opportunities to be themselves during this stage, their ability to regulate emotions and possess social skills will put them at an advantage in being ready for primary school (Ulutaş, Engin, & Polat, 2021). This is because research states that when children are socially and emotionally incompetent, this often compromises their relationship with other children leading to unresolved conflicts. Hence, the integration of emotional intelligence is perceived to be important to circumvent the prevailing problems (Ulutaş, et al., 2021). When children are provided with the right stimulation during the early years, their emotional intelligence may develop. Parents and educators need to find ways of encouraging children to develop emotional intelligence skills as such skills may benefit children and enhance their school readiness too (Hazizar&Murni, 2021). In a school context, educators need to be careful of the methods to choose when teaching in order to stimulate children's emotional intelligence. The play-based learning for ECD context may be the starting point when educators want to stimulate children's emotional intelligence. For example, children may be provided with ample opportunities to pay close attention and observe their surroundings, and this may help them understand themselves and other people (Hazizar&Murni, 2021). In addition, children need to be encouraged to interact with friends because it is through the communication and socialization they do with friends that children's emotional intelligence may be stimulated (Ulutaş, et al., 2021). This means that the adoption of collaborative learning as a strategy that involves children physically and mentally in activities related to other people in schools with reference to play-based learning in early childhood centers is important to create space for children interaction. Social interaction is a way of making people understand themselves as well as others and this makes them in a better position of controlling themselves and respecting other people at all times.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that collaborative learning strategies are recommended when children learn during their early childhood years. Play-based learning is therefore seen as a strategy that may encourage children to develop social skills and understand themselves and other people. This may therefore promote children's emotional intelligence as it is perceived to be important for the developing child and enhancing their school readiness. Emotional intelligence abilities are not only benefiting children during their school years, these are the skills that can be used even beyond school years, hence, the stimulation of such skills at an early age is mostly recommended rather waiting for later years. In addition, there is further evidence from the literature that there is a relationship that exists between emotional intelligence and academic performance, hence, mastery of these skills at a younger age benefits the child. While emotional intelligence skills cannot be acquired and mastered from nowhere, for educators to be able to know if children have developed such abilities there has to be a context that the educator creates. For example, during play-based learning, the principles that underly collaborative learning should be met, where children are expected to respect each other as they work collaboratively with peers. In ECD centers, play-based learning can be viewed as an

space where children's emotional intelligence is stimulated by ensuring that the activities did promote social skills, empathy, respect others, and self-regulation. When young children are offered opportunities to experiment and to be themselves this may also stimulate children's emotional intelligence. The paper suggests that ECD educators and parents need to support their children and stimulate their emotional intelligence abilities. In addition, ECD educators need to engage children in collaborative activities that promote the development of emotional intelligence.

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