

Studying the Impact of Creative Expression on Emotional Literacy in Children

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This project and report was completed at Imperial College London Dyson School of Design Engineering, under the Design Psychology course, led by Professor Safina Vohra.

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Abstract

WellWall is a creative classroom instrument that promotes emotional knowledge and mental wellbeing in children, through the use of creative expression and mindfulness. This toy is aimed at 7-10 year olds and is grounded in the behaviour science theories of Self-Determination and Dual Coding, with support from Flow Theory. The device combines physical tiles with digital analytics to provide a platform for children to willfully interact while providing teachers with analytical insights. The further study design of this intervention will use a pre-test-post-test control group study to analyze the impact of this intervention longitudinally. This study will have implications on the future of behavioural science research design, and curriculum development.

Keywords: Emotional knowledge, Flow Theory, Self-determination Theory, Creativity, Emotional Wellbeing, Dual Coding Theory

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Studying the Impact of Creative Expression on Emotional Literacy in Children

Emotional knowledge is a skill that predicts better social competence (Bracket et al., 2012) and better emotional regulation (Denman et al., 2003) in children. Emotional knowledge developed at childhood is a crucial tool to prevention mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Davis et al., 2019). Creative expression is an effective way for children to develop emotional knowledge, by working to understand their own emotions. This project outlines and defines a solution that encourages the development of emotional knowledge in children aged 7-10 by engaging in emotional expression, and leveraging key principles found in Self-Determination Theory, supplemented by Dual Coding Theory and Flow Theory.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) focuses on the growing intrinsic motivation of humans through the principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 1985). Autonomy is grown by task enjoyment, encouragement of open dialogue and listening to perspectives (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Children are given control of their expressions, to foster intrinsic motivation. Competence means that children should feel effectual in their emotional expression. Peer sharing adequately satisfies the pillar of relatedness. SDT will compel children to engage with their learned emotional competency.

Emotional Knowledge Through Creative Expression and Flow Theory

Creative expression is an effective way for children to identify and engage with their emotions, offering a path to emotional understanding (Burnett, 2023). Art therapy exemplifies this as it has shown efficacy in processing difficult emotions (Malchiodi, 2005). Creative expression also as been proven to place individuals into a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), which supports absorption of skills, and improves task resilience (Hamari et al., 2014). Engagement with flow states, develops resilience in emotional decoding. By

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combining the found positives of creative expression, art therapy and flow theory, a successful trepidation into emotional education can be developed.

Dual Coding Theory

Dual Coding Theory (DCT) states that memory and comprehension improves when verbal prompts and visual cues are combined (Paivio, 1971). Visual representations can more easily help children connect abstract emotions and physical representations. Children internally develop emotional identification skills with dual theory because they design and assign imagery to their emotions. This assists in emotional knowledge remembrance, and encourages deeper comprehension. DCT is a supportive addition to SDT driven creative expression, as DCT acts as a liaison between children and their emotions.

Demographic Importance and Classroom Placement

Piaget (Piaget, 1971) defined the concrete operational stage as ages 7-11. He found that his age group is when children develop more concrete cognitive skills. This development encourages engagement in more abstract subject matter and abstract ideas. This solution, the focus is ages 7-10, or in classroom terms Yr 2-4.

Schools are one of the most important places for a child's emotional development (Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2023). Schools provide structured opportunities for emotional learning. Research finds that as the time taken with each student decreases, emotional and behavioural issues grow (Denham et al., 2012), however, teachers are often unable to make time to visit each student individually due to growing class sizes and limited resources (Blatchford & Russell, 2020). Placement of this solution in classrooms bolsters teachers' ability to take more active roles in their students' wellbeing.

The Proposed Intervention - WellWall

WellWall (Figure 1) is a wall-mounted interactive system consisting of hexagonal tiles that hang on the classroom wall and display creative visuals developed by students. The tiles are large enough for children to easily grasp, and are covered around the back the woven

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nylon to be soft on the student's hands. Durable and fall-resistant materials make up the structure of the tile. The top of the tile has a pressure-sensitive digital canvas, with colour and digital marker selectors.

As class starts, the teacher chooses a prompt and displays it at the front of the class. First children choose a colour for their tile that is based on their current emotional state, then they draw their responses to the prompt. Colour choice is an integral part of this activity, as colour theory finds relationships between colours and different emotional states (Boyatzis and Varghese, 1994). The *Zones of Regulation* framework (Kuypers, 2011) will be used to define the colours. The framework categorises emotions into four colour buckets; low energy is blue, green is calm, yellow is heightened alertness and red is reserved for intense emotions. This framework is already used in many UK classrooms (Azar et al., 2021), so little disruption would occur.

The student's inputs are uploaded to an analytics dashboard that the teacher can view, annotate and assess. This profile contains a historical view of all the inputs over time, and analytics to provide insights into the child's emotional trends. Alerts are pushed to teachers about large emotional changes and concerning trends. The teacher can export and share anonymized reports to parents, counsellors, and other support system. This data can be used to inform teachers how they may want to engage with the pupil.

The activity will take place twice a day. Once to centre the student in an emotional check-in at the beginning of the day (Denham, 2006), and once at the end of the day for emotional regulation (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Most children in this age range have an average attention span of 15-20 minutes (Simon et al., 2023), so this activity will be run at 10-15 minutes to consider shorter attention spans. Short and frequent activities are more effective for skill-building (Grolnick & Kurowski, 1999), and the structure of these timings makes the activity easy to add into a class teaching structure (Sanders, 2001).

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Prompts are key for engagement, and rotating between prompts prevents repetition fatigue. To keep in line with DCT, the prompt cards will contain imagery and text. There are four main categories that prompts will fall into based on research (Table 1). *Emotional naming and labelling* prompts use DCT by giving the children the ability to assign imagery to their emotions. *Colour and shape based* prompts have shapes acting as symbols, which uses symbolic play through DCT to assist children in projecting their emotions effectively (Vygotsky, 1978). Prompts that are in the *metaphor and imagery* category make abstract emotions more accessible, as metaphoric thinking helps children articulate complex emotions (Kossyn & Koeing, 1992). Finally, prompts that fall under the *future-oriented resilience building* category builds optimism and resilience by allowing children to anticipate positives. Focussing on positives enhances mood and emotional wellbeing (Seligman et al., 2005).

The *EAST* framework (Team, B. I., 2014) gives concrete suggestions about design that were instrumental in the development of *WellWall*. *WellWall* is easy to use, and the simple familiar design reduces the cognitive load needed by each child. Bright, colourful screens keep this toy attractive, and displaying creations to peers makes it social. *WellWall* is timely because the activity is conducted in sessions. Using the *EAST* framework assures that the development is in line with successful behaviour intervention techniques and the elements will be able to maintain interest to children.

The development of this product also has ethical considerations, and for that the *Information Commissioner's Office's Children's Code on Age Appropriate Design* (Information Commissioner's Office, 2020) was considered. *WellWall* engages in data-minimization by collecting only the drawn images, and no additional materials from the children. This data is transparently collected through informed consent procedures for the child and parent.

The proposed solution was directly informed through user group feedback gathered in qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with children to

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examine interest in creative expression, and garner insights into current classroom activity pain points. Thematic analysis identified patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which supported strong teacher participation, and child enjoyment of creative-based activity. A survey was circulated to teachers, which informed the decisions to categorize colours via the *Zones of Regulation* framework. Additionally, this feedback informed the development of alerts for recurring patterns and red flags. This survey also supported the structure of timing and frequency in this product. All teachers marked cost as the largest concern, which will be addressed in the discussion section of this paper.

When conducting semi-structured interviews with children, parents and children were required to provide informed consent. Parents were present for the entirety of the child interviews. Researchers also made it clear that the subjects may withdraw at any time and had no pressure to answer any questions. The teacher survey started with a requirement for the participants to confirm that they had read the attached privacy and consent forms. Data was kept anonymous, and there were no places where teachers could leave any identifiers in the survey. All completed studies were approved by The Imperial College London ethics board, and approval will be required prior to starting future methodology.

Method

Participants

Based on conducted priori power analysis and supported by similar studies (Göbel et al., 2016), 6 classrooms will be recruited, approximately 140 children and 6 teachers (n=146). Randomized classrooms in the UK will be chosen with 8 classrooms from Yr2, 8 from Yr3, and 4 from Yr4. Half of each year of groups will be assigned as control groups through randomization. Classes will be selected to represent students from various linguistic, ethnic

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and religious backgrounds. Classes will also be represented of various socio-economic background. Children of any ability will be able to participate.

Materials

A pilot of *WellWall* will be supplied to each of the non-control groups. Teachers from both groups will be given a Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC) (Pons & Harris, 2002).

Procedure

This pre-test-post-test control group study will be longitudinal and run across all groups over the course of a school year. Before the school year starts, control groups will be supplied with *WellWall*'s and teachers will be instructed on usage. In the first week of the school year, each child will complete a TEC. As the school year progresses the control group will engage with class and artistic expression as usual. The intervention group will use *WellWall* as intended, per teacher direction. At the middle point of the school year students will again be tested with a TEC. As the school year ends, students will be tested again.

Ethics

The British Psychological Society's *Code of Ethics and Conduct* emphasizes respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity as fundamental principles guiding ethical research practices (British Psychological Society, 2021). This will be a guiding framework for this research design and execution. Methods like informed consent, voluntary participation, and data anonymization will be practiced. Relevant ethics boards will also be required to approve any study prior to execution.

Results

The data extracted from the TEC results will directly assess the efficacy of *WellWall*. The TEC assesses nine domains of emotional understanding (Pons & Harris, 2002), by producing a score for each of the nine domains, ranging from 0 to 9. This will be used in Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (RM-ANOVA) analysis. Using RM-ANOVA,

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variance across the control and intervention groups will be decoded. RM-ANOVA will accurately be able to analyse the three periods of testing, and how this relates to the variance across groups in an educational setting (Dugard & Todman, 2006). Data gathered over this year will first be analysed to find standard deviations for the scores recorded. Results can be estimated to be a positive correlation between *WellWall* usage and higher TEC scores, based on previous research showing the positive effect emotional literacy has on TEC scores (Cavioni et al., 2020; Pons & Harris, 2002; Rocha et al., 2015).

Discussion

This project aimed to propose an educational toy that benefitted children's mental health. *WellWall* uses key behavioural science principles and theories pillars to encourage the development emotional knowledge and competency in children. This classroom toy is educational in it's design, teaching children important skills for the betterment of the states of their current and future mental health. The proposed intervention is influenced by the insights gained from user interviews and surveys, bettering the design to fit the needs of a classroom. Research and supports that this toy would be highly effective.

Using a series of Tests of Emotional Competence tests, it will be shown that *WellWall* usage has a positive affect on scores over the course of the proposed longitudinal study. Pre-test-post-test control group designs have been well researched as tools of study for innovation in educational environments (Dugard & Todman, 2006). Control groups are engaged through the same period as the intervention group, which allows for the normalization of the expected changes in education environments. This research also shows the efficacy of RM-ANOVA analysis as particularly effective at handling this method in educational research. Given the research on this model it can be assumed that this variance will accurately be calculated across all 24 classes, to gain an understanding of *WellWall*'s overall efficacy.

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Cavioni et al. (2020) investigated the emotional differences in children by assessing 1478 children between the ages of 3 and 10, using the TEC. This research strongly supported the psychometric structure of the TEC. The research also supports the TEC as a stable source of obtaining robust data across age groups. Research from Rocha et al. (2015) examine the use of TEC's across children of various ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic backgrounds, and supports the strength of this tool, finding it effective for data collection across all surveyed. Further research indicates that this tool is also effective assessing the success of behaviour interventions among children with autism spectrum disorders (Marino et al., 2020). Given the positive support of the TEC, this research proposal incorporates the tool through three time periods to investigate the difference in emotional comprehension. It is estimated the results for *WellWall* will prove a positive correlation between usage and TEC scores, which is supported by previous research investigating emotional comprehension of 3-11 year olds, which found that TEC scores improve when children gather emotional understanding (Pons & Harris, 2002). Given this research it is clear—if *WellWall* is effective, RM-ANOVA analysis will show greater TEC score improvements in intervention groups as opposed to control groups. The TEC was also investigated by Rocha et al (2015), as 182 children aged 8-11 were tested for with the TEC, and found as reliable for assessing children's emotional knowledge and drawing deep quantitative data from the results of the assessment. The discussion section of the Rocha et al (2015) study makes suggestion for future research to consider results from TECs viable grounds to analyse or propose behaviour interventions. As evidenced by this paper, that is what this study does.

Larger contributions that will be derived from this research can form well-defined suggestions, as *WellWall* will be able to illustrate the importance and efficacy of emotional teaching. Educational bodies and legislators can inform curriculum changes based on the data gathered in this longitudinal study, opting to include emotional competency improvement techniques and lessons. Teachers will also be able to study these effects and adjust their

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teaching plans accordingly. Research in the field child psychology can use this paper as a supplement to further classroom intervention development, citing the TEC test improvement as rationale to examine concepts of SDT, DCT, and emotional education further. Additionally, research is lacking on the efficacy of TECs to measure behaviour interventions in children with developmental delays and other challenges outside of autism. This research can directly inform the efficacy of said tool.

Limitations of these study design mostly involve the attrition of participants, or withdrawal of data. As it is important that all participants are given autonomy over their data, parents, guardians and students may wish to withdraw to protect their privacy. This is a condition of working with people, but more so when working with children. Child privacy is a sensitive issue and this may prove as a limitation of this study. Additionally, this intervention will be limited as the cost of making *WellWall* will be presumably high. To mitigate this, partnerships with research bodies will be sought out. Successful partnerships are expected to be possible due to the usefulness of study results, which will aid in subsidizing the cost of this instrument. After *WellWall* is proven effective and this study concludes, partnership with government bodies or educational institutions will be important, as the cost of *WellWall* will be presumably higher than feasible for a classroom and subsidization. This sentiment was echoed in the teacher survey. Subsidies will be offered in an attempt to place this intervention in various classrooms to reach students of a variety of socio-economic statuses.

Overall, this study uses research based approaches to examine the efficacy of an intervention on the mental health of children, routed in behaviour science frameworks and theories. The success of *WellWall* will directly contribute to research that improves the wellbeing of children, and will inform educational changes to consider inclusion emotional competence teachings.

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Tables

Table 1

Categories of Prompts, and Backing in Literature

Category	Examples	Supporting Evidence
Emotion Naming and Labelling	"Can you draw a figure or object showing how you're feeling right now?" "If you're feeling more than one emotion, can you draw something that shows all of them?"	Labelling emotions helps children become more aware of their feelings, which is critical for emotional regulation. Research by Denham et al. (2003) found that early recognition and labelling of emotions directly improve emotional competence and social skills. By encouraging children to identify emotions, these prompts help them make connections between their feelings and physical expressions.
Colour and Shape Based	"Pick a color that feels like your emotion today, and use it to make something." "If your emotion was a shape, what shape would it be? Could you create it?" "Pick a color and shape for how you're feeling. Can you make it?" "What would today's feeling look like if it were round or spiky? Try creating it." "Could you use two colors to show a mixed feeling? Try blending them in your creation."	Colour and shape association with emotions helps children visually process and represent feelings. Research in developmental psychology (e.g., Boyatzis and Varghese, 1994) shows that children often associate colours with emotions (e.g., using red for anger, blue for sadness), which can simplify their expression. This approach also helps children build emotional vocabulary by connecting abstract emotions with concrete visuals.
Metaphor and Imagery	"If your feeling was an animal, what animal would it be? Can you draw that animal?" "If your feeling were a type of weather, what would it be (sunny, stormy, rainy, etc.)? Try drawing that." "What kind of animal feels like your emotions today? Can you draw it?" "Can you make your feeling into a little creature or monster? Show us what it looks like."	Using metaphors or familiar imagery can make abstract emotions more accessible for young children. According to research by Kosslyn and Koenig (1992), metaphoric thinking helps children articulate complex emotions by using symbols. Imagining feelings as animals or weather patterns helps children externalize and verbalize internal states they may not fully understand or have words for.
Future-Oriented, Resilience-Building Prompts	"Draw something that you're looking forward to." "Draw something you did today that made you feel proud."	Anticipating positive future events can build optimism and resilience. Positive psychology research shows that focusing on hopeful aspects enhances mood and emotional well-being (Seligman et al., 2005).

Note: This research was committed as part of a larger research team, and insights were shared via this table. These insights directly feed into the prompt development, and were iterated upon after teacher input.

Figures

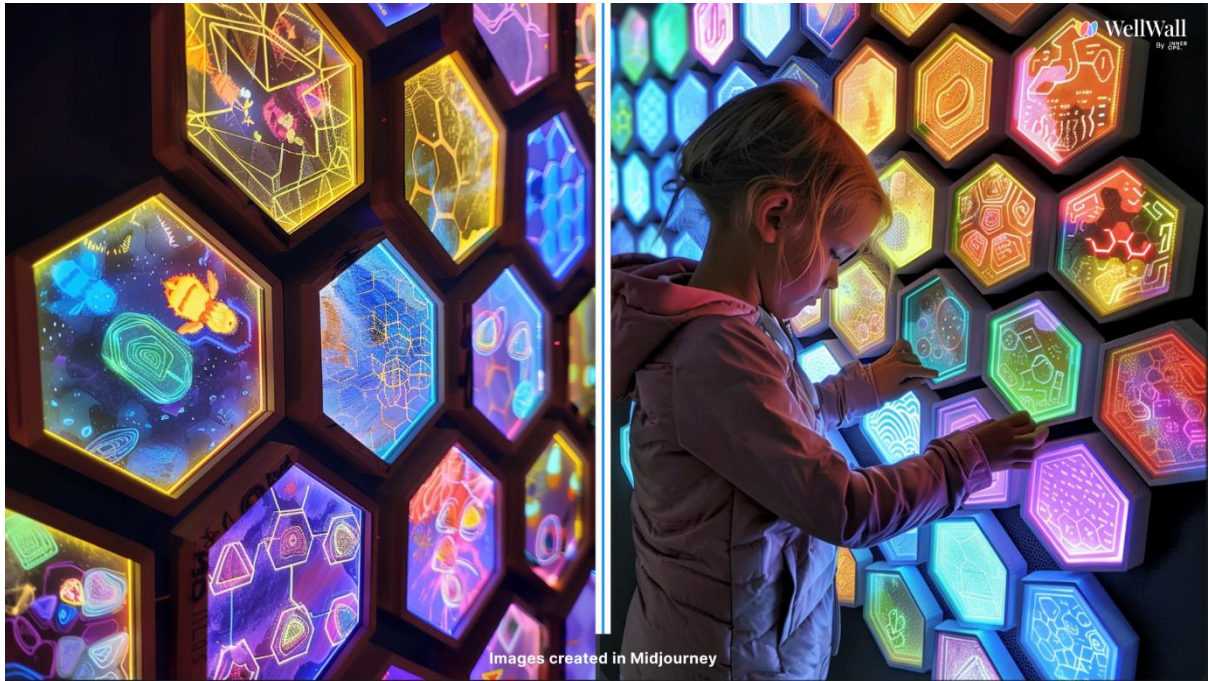


Figure 1: Visualization of proposed WellWall design and solution.