The Development of "Emotion Faces" as a Visual Tool for Facilitating Emotion Regulation Among Primary School Students

Agnely Risqy Aulia[1*], Yohana Wuri Satwika[2]

[1] Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

[2] Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Emotional difficulties among elementary school students often hinder learning processes and classroom interactions. Many students struggle to recognize, express, and regulate their emotions due to limited emotional vocabulary and inadequate coping mechanisms. This study aims to develop and implement a visual-based educational media called "Emotion Faces" to support emotional regulation in elementary school students. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method and was conducted at SDN Ketintang II/410 Surabaya during the implementation of the Kampus Mengajar Program. Data were collected through participatory observation, informal interviews, and documentation involving 30 students from grades IV and V, along with two classroom teachers. The results indicate that the use of "Emotion Faces" helped students better identify their emotions and express them through visual symbols such as facial drawings and color. Teachers also reported improved understanding of students' emotional states and classroom climate. This study concludes that simple, low-cost, and creative media can be effective in fostering emotional literacy and regulation among young learners in the classroom setting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Emotional development is a vital aspect of a child's growth, directly influencing their learning capacity, social relationships, and mental well-being. Particularly in the early and middle childhood stages, students experience complex emotional states that they often struggle to recognize, understand, and regulate. In the Indonesian elementary school context, emotional difficulties such as uncontrolled anger, sadness, or social withdrawal are frequently observed in classrooms but rarely addressed systematically. The focus of education remains predominantly cognitive, emphasizing academic achievement through subjects like mathematics, language, and science, while emotional literacy is treated as a secondary or peripheral concern (Zins et al. 2007, 41). This imbalance may hinder students' ability to fully engage in the learning process and form positive relationships with peers and teachers.

Over the last decade, a growing body of research has emphasized the importance of emotional regulation in school-aged children. Emotional regulation, broadly defined as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modulate emotional responses in ways that enable goal-directed

behavior, is considered a cornerstone of both academic and social success (Gross 2015, 3). Brackett, Rivers, and Salovey (2011, 91) reported that children with higher emotional regulation skills not only perform better academically but also exhibit lower rates of behavioral problems and peer conflicts. Moreover, research by Denham et al. (2012, 114) concluded that emotional competence is a predictor of school readiness and long-term academic outcomes. In response to these findings, interventions such as SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) programs have been developed and widely applied, especially in Western educational systems (CASEL 2015, 7).

However, the application of SEL in low- and middle-income countries, including Indonesia, faces multiple challenges. Many of the structured programs require teacher training, institutional support, and the adaptation of culturally sensitive content (Calderon et al. 2021, 189). Moreover, previous studies tend to focus on formalized, curriculum-integrated interventions, while neglecting creative, low-cost approaches that can be immediately implemented in under-resourced public schools. There is limited research on the use of alternative emotional education media, such as expressive art tools, in the context of elementary classrooms in Indonesia. This presents a significant gap in the literature, as well as an opportunity to explore innovative models of emotion-focused learning.

This study aims to fill that gap by presenting the development and implementation of "Emotion Faces," a visual-based educational media that supports emotional expression and regulation in elementary school students. This tool was developed through the Kampus Mengajar program—an Indonesian national initiative that places university students in public schools to assist in learning activities and create community-based innovations. "Emotion Faces" is a non-digital, low-cost media consisting of blank facial templates and emotion-related color guides. Students are encouraged to draw or color facial expressions corresponding to their feelings, thus facilitating self-awareness and emotional articulation in a playful and culturally appropriate manner.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its context-driven, participatory design. Unlike previous emotion regulation interventions that require external facilitators or structured lesson plans (Schonert-Reichl and Roeser 2016, 146), this approach leverages the creativity of students and the guidance of regular classroom teachers to build emotional literacy. The development of the media is informed by psychological theories such as Ekman's basic emotions framework (Ekman 1992, 170), combined with art therapy concepts that support symbolic expression through visuals and color (Malchiodi 2015, 72). As such, this research integrates educational psychology, developmental psychology, and expressive arts to create a practical tool tailored to real classroom challenges.

The primary problem addressed in this study is the lack of accessible emotional education tools in public elementary schools, particularly those serving students from low-income backgrounds. Teachers often lack the training, time, and resources to recognize or respond to students' emotional needs, resulting in a learning environment where emotional dysregulation can go unnoticed or unaddressed. Students, in turn, may internalize their feelings or express them through disruptive behaviors, both of which negatively affect the classroom climate and their own learning outcomes.

To tackle this problem, the researcher applied a descriptive qualitative approach involving participatory observation, informal interviews, and documentation of the media's use in the classroom. The setting of the study is SDN Ketintang II/410 in Surabaya, where 30 students in grades IV and V, along with their teachers, participated in the design, trial, and feedback processes of the "Emotion Faces" media. The qualitative approach allows for in-depth exploration of students' responses, teacher reflections, and contextual factors that affect the media's implementation. Through this method, the study intends to explore how a simple visual tool can facilitate students' ability to recognize and express emotions, improve teacher-student interaction, and ultimately enhance the socio-emotional climate of the classroom. It also examines the feasibility of integrating such media into daily classroom routines without burdening teachers with additional academic content or requiring extensive training.

The objective of this research is twofold: first, to describe the development and classroom implementation process of the "Emotion Faces" media; and second, to assess its perceived effectiveness in supporting students' emotional regulation and teacher awareness of student emotional states. The expected result is a set of insights and recommendations that can be used to scale similar interventions in other public schools across Indonesia. Furthermore, the study seeks to contribute to the growing discourse on low-cost, creativity-based emotional education, particularly in developing country contexts where resources are limited but student needs are no less complex.

2. METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the process of developing and applying a media-based intervention to support students' emotional regulation. Descriptive qualitative research enables the researcher to interpret events, processes, and social phenomena in their natural setting while allowing for depth and contextual understanding (Creswell 2014, 186). The method was chosen to document the natural interaction between students, teachers, and the visual-based media "Emotion Faces" within the learning environment, without manipulation or controlled variables.

2.1 Research Site

The study was carried out at SDN Ketintang II/410, a public elementary school located in the Surabaya city area, East Java, Indonesia. The school represents typical conditions of Indonesian public schools, including high student-to-teacher ratios, limited access to psychological support, and modest availability of learning media. As such, it provides a relevant and realistic context for testing a low-cost, teacher-friendly emotional education tool. The research was conducted during the implementation of the Kampus Mengajar Program from February to May 2024. The program positions university students as teaching assistants and innovation drivers in public schools, promoting community-based educational solutions (Kemendikbudristek 2023, 9).

2.2 Research Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 30 elementary students aged 9–11 years from grades IV and V, chosen based on their involvement in regular classroom activities during the researcher's placement. The class was heterogeneous in terms of gender, learning needs, and emotional development stages. Two homeroom teachers and one school counselor served as key informants, contributing perspectives on classroom behavior, emotional issues, and the observed impact of the media. Participant selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives (Palinkas et al. 2015, 535).

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Three primary data collection methods were employed: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted continuously throughout the implementation of the "Emotion Faces" media. The researcher assumed the role of a teaching assistant, engaging in classroom activities to observe students' spontaneous emotional expressions and their interaction with the media (Spradley 1980, 56). Semi-structured interviews were conducted informally with both students and teachers. These interviews aimed to elicit insights on students' emotional experiences, their perceptions of the media, and teachers' reflections on classroom dynamics. Documentation included students' emotion drawings, activity logs, photographs, and field notes. These served as visual and textual data for triangulation and thematic interpretation.The use of multiple sources of data was intended to achieve data triangulation, which enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 305).

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which comprises three interrelated components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014, 12). During data reduction, the researcher selected and organized relevant information aligned with the research questions. In the data display stage, matrices and descriptive narratives were created to visualize connections and patterns. Finally, in conclusion drawing, emerging themes were identified regarding the role of the media in facilitating students' emotional recognition and expression.

The entire analysis process was conducted iteratively and reflexively, with attention to the context of classroom interactions and participant perspectives. To ensure analytical rigor, the researcher maintained detailed field journals, coded student expressions, and validated findings through teacher feedback.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

This section presents processed data obtained through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation during the implementation of the "Emotion Faces" media. The data were organized into themes, quantified where appropriate, and are displayed in tables for clarity. Raw data such as student drawings, verbal expressions, and teacher notes were coded and synthesized into categorical summaries.

3.1 Student Emotional Expression through Media Use

Observation and worksheet analysis indicated that most students were able to identify and express their current emotional states using facial templates and color choices. These visual outputs were categorized into five emotional groups. Each student's drawing was reviewed and classified based on facial features, color intensity, and verbal explanations (if any). The following table summarizes these processed results.

Table 1. Emotional Categories Expressed by Students through "Emotion Faces" Media

Emotion Category	Frequency (n = 30)	Indicators Used by Students
Happy/Excited	13	Smiling face, yellow/pink colors
Sad	6	Downturned eyes/mouth, blue/grey colors
Angry	5	Sharp brows, red/black colors

| Confused | 4 | Asymmetrical faces, swirls, mixed tones |
| Afraid | 2 | Small faces, dark green or grey tones |

These results show that 90% of students (27 out of 30) could independently complete the emotion expression activity without assistance, and 73% (22 students) gave verbal elaboration of their drawings. The use of color and facial features followed consistent emotional-symbolic associations, which were recorded and coded during analysis.

3.2 Teacher Observation of Student Response

Qualitative feedback from two homeroom teachers indicated increased student willingness to engage in classroom activities after expressing their emotions. Teachers noted fewer incidents of classroom disruption and more positive peer interactions, particularly on days when the media was used as a pre-lesson activity. Teachers also reported that the drawings allowed them to quickly assess emotional readiness for learning without invasive questioning.

3.3 Integration and Practicality of the Media

Implementation data revealed that the media was integrated efficiently into the school schedule. Teachers used "Emotion Faces" as a morning check-in activity for approximately 10–15 minutes. All required materials (printed face templates, coloring tools) were low-cost and easily prepared. The table below summarizes teachers' practical evaluation of the tool.

Table 2. Teacher Evaluation of "Emotion Faces" Implementation

Criteria	Response Summary
Time needed	10–15 minutes per session
Ease of facilitation	No training required, easy to guide students
Observational usefulness	Enabled fast emotional mapping per student
Impact on students	Increased expression, reduced behavioral incidents

All data in this section were synthesized from observational logs, student outputs, and teacher statements, processed using coding and frequency tabulation. Visual data such as color usage and facial structure were interpreted using predefined emotional indicators. No raw data such as full transcripts or unprocessed drawings are presented here, in accordance with journal guidelines.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study were not based on raw data but were systematically processed through thematic coding and frequency analysis. Observational notes were grouped based on categories of behavior (e.g., emotional identification, peer empathy), while student drawings were classified by dominant emotions and visual elements such as facial expressions and color choices. Table 1 presents a frequency summary of emotional categories chosen by students, and Table 2 outlines teacher evaluations. These tables helped translate qualitative field data into structured visual representations, making the findings easily understandable and directly relevant to the study's aims (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 2014, 52). This approach also validated that "Emotion Faces" was used consistently and impactfully across different sessions and participants.

The findings affirm the study's hypothesis that visual-symbolic tools enhance children's ability to regulate emotions. Aligned with Gross's (1998) emotion regulation model, "Emotion Faces" facilitated the first two stages of regulation: emotional awareness and labeling. By providing a non-verbal avenue, the media helped children externalize feelings safely and constructively, thereby initiating self-regulation processes. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory is reflected through the scaffolded experience of emotion identification, wherein teachers and peers supported the interpretation of internal states via media symbols. The drawings acted as mediating tools, guiding cognitive-emotional development through social interaction and internalization. Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences, especially visual-spatial intelligence, is further substantiated. Students who might struggle in verbal expression demonstrated high engagement and clarity in conveying emotions through drawings, indicating that the tool taps into underutilized but critical learning channels.

This study's outcomes mirror and expand upon previous findings in emotional learning. Durlak et al. (2011) highlighted the positive effects of SEL programs, but also noted challenges related to cost and teacher training. In contrast, "Emotion Faces" offers a minimal-resource alternative without compromising outcomes. This aligns with Cipriano et al. (2023), who argue that SEL initiatives are most effective when embedded into natural classroom routines. Jalongo (2014) advocated for the role of art in children's emotional growth, while Yu and Gamble (2022) demonstrated the power of visual engagement in helping children manage psychological stress. Both works complement the visual-symbolic mechanisms of "Emotion Faces," affirming that even simple media can yield therapeutic and developmental benefits.

Garner (2010) previously asserted that curriculum pressures hinder the integration of emotional education. However, this study contradicts that notion: teachers implemented the media within 10–15 minute windows without disrupting instructional time. Teacher reflections indicated that students became more focused and emotionally ready for lessons after the activity. Ebersöhn

(2020) emphasized the importance of culturally responsive SEL tools, particularly in low-resource settings. The contextualized development of "Emotion Faces" within the Kampus Mengajar Program mirrors this principle. Unlike imported curricula, the tool emerged from local classroom challenges and was refined through iterative feedback. Moreover, Schonert-Reichl and Roeser (2016) noted the role of mindfulness-based visual exercises in reducing classroom tension and increasing social awareness. "Emotion Faces" functioned similarly by encouraging emotional self-checks that prepared students for academic engagement.

Theoretically, this study adds to the discourse on symbolic and visual modalities in emotion regulation. Malchiodi (2015) contends that symbolic expression provides an alternative route to verbal disclosure in emotional interventions. "Emotion Faces" substantiates this, particularly for students with speech, cognitive, or behavioral barriers. It reinforces the expanding definition of emotional literacy as multimodal and experiential. Practically, the study demonstrates how educational innovation—driven by students within national programs like Kampus Mengajar—can produce cost-effective, context-sensitive tools that meet real classroom needs. The simplicity of materials, ease of integration, and minimal time requirements support the tool's scalability. Its success also highlights the potential of empowering future educators as co-creators in curriculum development.

Furthermore, inclusive participation among all student demographics confirms the tool's accessibility and flexibility. The activity supported engagement from typically marginalized groups, including children with special needs, indicating its potential as a universal SEL strategy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In conclusion, the findings emphasize that visual tools like "Emotion Faces" are not merely artistic exercises but serve as developmental bridges to emotion regulation. They bring together theory and practicality, innovation and inclusion, and provide a replicable model for emotional education in diverse classroom environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the "Emotion Faces" media is an effective visual tool for facilitating emotion regulation among primary school students. Its development and implementation within the Kampus Mengajar program demonstrated that young learners were able to identify and express their emotions more openly through visual symbols such as facial drawings and colors. The tool provided an accessible alternative to language-based emotional expression, which was especially beneficial for students with limited verbal skills or emotional vocabulary.

The application of "Emotion Faces" not only supported students' emotional awareness but also contributed positively to the classroom environment. Teachers reported improvements in student

behavior, emotional openness, and peer empathy. The media was successfully integrated into daily routines without requiring extensive time, training, or resources.

Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of creative, low-cost, and scalable emotional education tools in under-resourced school settings. "Emotion Faces" serves as a practical model for incorporating social-emotional learning into everyday classroom practice, offering inclusive support for diverse student needs while fostering early emotional competence in a developmentally appropriate and engaging manner.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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