For young learners, learning to distinguish—and spell—the words kit and kite can be an exercise in frustration, or even worse, boredom. The silent /e/ defies kindergarten logic. While the chances of students staying engaged with such a lesson seem slim, those chances rise when a teacher fashions students as wizards, having them use their wands to flick that /e/ into silence. The kids get excited; their engagement deepens. The key to the turnaround here is engaging their emotions in the learning process.

Emotion, at any grade level, is important and, as the prominence of test-based standards continues to rise, warrants further attention. This article holds that teachers need to understand emotional development and know how to support students’ learning engagement. Emotions play a pivotal role in helping children acquire academic knowledge and skills in the classroom (Lantieri and Nambiar 2012).

In recent years, early childhood teachers in public schools have been under pressure to meet academic standards (Goldstein 2007). The teachers feel pressed to spend increasing amounts of time on academic work to prepare students to excel in kindergarten, first grade, and beyond. This pressure could lead them to view cognition as central and emotion as peripheral to instruction. However, children’s emotions cannot be neglected in preparing them to become competent academically. Indeed, emotions provide a strong foundation for academic success (Hyson 2008).

Teachers can expect increased academic accountability in early childhood education. As a result, they need to view emotional support as imperative in children’s ongoing academic achievement.

The role of emotion in the learning process
Research in neuroscience has found that the emotional center of the brain resides in areas of the cortex, where most information processing occurs. Research has also established that emotion functions as an integral part of the cognitive process (MacLean 1990). When both emotions and cognition are integrated in instruction, they provide more optimal and effective outcomes in children’s learning and development (Hyson 2008; Wolfe and Bell 2007). The literature implies that staying conscious of children’s emotions in instruction can be a critical teaching tool for promoting children’s learning engagement—the observable behaviors that indicate children’s involvement in instruction (Hyson 2008).

For example, Hyson (2008) argued that children’s positive emotions—including interest, enjoyment, and happiness experienced through classroom activities—have a vital role in developing student engagement. She called the use of them “positive approaches to learning”—an essential component of children’s school readiness.
Wolfe and Bell (2007) argued that early emotional regulation influences the later development of cognitive control skills such as attention and working memory. They examined the association between infant emotional regulation and early childhood working memory performance, arguing that teachers could help improve cognitive function by supporting children’s emotional expression and regulation.

Types of emotions
Having established that emotion and cognition are intertwined, the research has zeroed in on how types of emotions affect the learning process. Research on types of emotions and their functioning in the classroom has found that students’ emotions can play a positive or a negative role (Meyer and Turner 2002; Pekrun et al. 2002). Students’ positive emotional states (for example, interested, joyful, excited, or curious) motivate their attentiveness, create incentives to stay on task, and cause them to view their learning in a positive light and to begin to self-regulate their learning. On the other hand, students’ negative emotional states (bored, frustrated, or angry, for example) lead to self-protective disengagement, avoidance, and off-task behaviors.

Pekrun et al. (2002) examined how emotions that students experience in school settings impact their learning and academic achievement. These researchers found that students who reported positive emotions developed strategies for self-regulated learning and expanded their cognitive resources. Students who reported negative emotions experienced discouragement and diminished motivation. Given similar cognitive teaching methods, the most effective instruction occurs when teachers provide students with positive emotional support. Humor, enthusiasm, and interest made students feel more motivated to learn.

Teacher accountability and emotional support
The literature pays considerable attention to factors that influence teachers’ attention to and support of children’s emotional development (Goldstein 2007; Lasky 2005). The literature also provides a framework for understanding how teachers’ practices are shaped by outside-the-classroom expectations and demands.

Recently, the increasing emphasis on standards and accountability raised expectations for early childhood educators, putting them in a position where they must make sure their students possess basic academic knowledge and skills in the areas of reading, writing, and math (Goldstein 2007). This shift in emphasis has produced the perhaps unintended consequence of neglecting children’s emotional development.

The most effective instruction occurs when teachers provide students with positive emotional support.

Goldstein (2007) provided convincing accounts of how some kindergarten teachers, faced with societal pressures or challenges, managed to integrate these demands with their own pedagogical beliefs and favored teaching practices. Indeed, a ripple effect can be felt there caused by the standardized tests intended for higher grades. In essence, Goldstein’s work (2007) asked how early childhood teachers’ beliefs and goals about developmentally appropriate practices conflicted with new professional demands created by school reform. Although she did not directly address emotional support in classroom settings, her work showed how teachers manage these challenges in their daily practices.

Supporting emotion in a kindergarten classroom
The following section describes how one public school kindergarten teacher, Ms. Cross, supported children’s emotional development and regulation through typical classroom instruction and interaction. To craft emotional support, Ms. Cross had two strategies: she recognized the value of emotional learning, and she exercised mediated agency (someone or something that intervenes to bring about action). In this case, she acted on her beliefs to shape effective classroom practices. Her approach to emotional support is based on the notion that she could help her students move forward in their understanding of academic concepts by stepping in at key moments with support and interventions based on children’s emotional needs.
Sustaining excitement

Ms. Cross’s objective was to get and keep her kindergarten students engaged. She used emotion as a tool, citing excitement as the most important emotion in her toolbox. She worked to sustain excitement that, she felt, made the children eager to learn more. Excitement became a motivating force behind her teaching—and the children’s learning.

For example, in teaching the principle of the silent /e/, Ms. Cross made two child-sized magician costumes, a couple of wizard hats, and two star wands with the letters e and k in the middle of the stars. She explained:

I asked, “What is a kite?” and “What is a kite?” I showed pictures of simple kites with tails, and we discussed the distinguishing features of each. I also had several kits to share—sewing, cooking, and art—and we examined each, working to build a definition of the concept. I said, “Well let’s use the sewing kit since we’re studying K. Let’s spell kit.” We spelled the word several times with different children filling in the first, second, and third letters. I was hoping someone would say, “That’s too easy. We already know that.”

When the children protested that there was no challenge in spelling kit, Ms. Cross brought out the costume and accessories. She said that she had intentionally tricked children into asking for something more challenging to elicit their excitement and to scaffold their knowledge of /k/ and the silent /e/.

I said, “Well, I better make it harder for you. Let’s spell kite.” The children were just bubbling with excitement and enthusiasm.

Ms. Cross said that she had considered the children’s developmental stage to help them learn the letters in an enjoyable way. She wasn’t hampered by a concern that fun impedes learning. Instead, she supported the fun with dress-up clothes and props capitalizing on the appeal of fantasy in the 5-year-old children. She also said that she had fun herself creating an activity that gave the kids unexpected pleasure.

Ms. Cross employed her belief about a pedagogically important emotion—excitement—to carry out her instruction and to sustain children’s engagement. She used the children’s excitement to promote their engagement with spelling instruction. This belief in emotion’s linkage to engagement directed her to consciously support children’s positive emotions.

Exercising mediated agency

Ms. Cross consistently showed a sense of mediated agency in her support of children’s emotions during instruction. She saw academic pressures as opportunities to focus on creating teaching strategies for emotional support rather than as challenges that would lead her to neglect students’ emotions in instruction. By contrast, her fellow teachers saw academic pressure as an inhibiting factor restricting their relationships with their students, similar to what was shown by Lasky’s work (2005).

But Ms. Cross argued that academic pressure about reading motivated her to capitalize on emotion to increase children’s reading skills. Hence, the magician outfits. Doing so allowed her to absorb the pressure and avoid passing it onto her students while they were learning how to read. “It does give us an opportunity,” she said. “It seems challenging at first but then it becomes an opportunity.”

By focusing on emotions in an academic context, Ms. Cross created her own teaching strategies for emotional support by combining or mediating her assessment of academic pressures and her pedagogical beliefs. She strongly felt that her key obligation was to scaffold children’s early literacy development into alignment with school expectations. Using this strategy, she worked to mediate both the external expectations of academic readiness and her pedagogical beliefs about how students learn through emotional engagement.

Ms. Cross reported that she met the literacy standards of the state as measured by a standardized test. This achievement, she said, gave her faith in her approach. She also shared the report of the children’s progress with the students themselves, enabling them to continue to enjoy—and celebrate—learning.

Building parent excitement

In shaping her teaching strategies, Ms. Cross drew
on her own experience as a parent. She displayed her own family pictures in the classroom, thereby allowing parents to see her as one of them—a parent. She hoped it reflected her empathetic understanding of the parents’ feelings about their children.

“My role in the learning community is to foster a positive partnership between parents, teachers, and children,” she said. “I really do think that parent involvement affects children’s emotions, their positive learning, and their intellect.”

Ms. Cross sought parental involvement to support their children’s excitement about reading at home. Seeking an activity that would help children engage with sight words, for example, she created the idea of bubblegum words, based on a story that the class read. In the story, a frog gets stuck in bubblegum. She asked her students to think of the words as sticking in their minds to elicit their interests.

Kindergarten standards require children to know many words on sight—and it’s a long list. Ms. Cross continues:

I could do what the standards say and make flashcards. I rejected the idea as too unemotional. Memorizing sight words can be really dull and boring—guaranteed to produce conflict and frustration. I wanted to add some emotional spice, to make a game, of the exercise. I asked parents to partner with me in teaching by posting the bubblegum words on the home refrigerator.

In her refrigerator strategy, Ms. Cross said the parents helped their children cut out the words and post them on the fridge, so they would encounter these words on a daily basis and outside a traditional learning context. Ms. Cross thought that this strategy increased the children’s excitement and engagement in the activity.

She reported that her students’ parents also saw positive emotions using this strategy. One student’s mother said, “We like bubblegum words better than sight words….We went to church yesterday and Marianna was pointing to all the bubblegum words in the church bulletin. She said, ‘Look at all the bubblegum words.’ She was excited to know something.”

Ms. Cross involved the family in activities in and out of the classroom. She did so by creating student excitement about reading and improving their academic achievement.

**Emotional support increases student engagement**

Attention to emotional support, in this case through generating appropriate levels of excitement, can increase student engagement with learning. Ms. Cross crafted her approaches to emotional support by identifying the most important emotion regarding engagement and then using that emotion as an instructional tool.

Emotional support was an important part of the teacher’s mediated agency. Ms. Cross considered and supported her students’ success in an environment where the mandated curriculum could create academic pressure. She created strategies that squared with her pedagogically important emotion as well as with her knowledge of her students. When she attended to her students’ emotions, she believed that this led to an engagement that increased the students’ academic achievement.

In a time of increasing accountability, teachers’ mediated agency in the early childhood classroom might be ever more critical. If we frame emotional support in early childhood education as an example of the interrelationship of cognition and emotion, we can expand teachers’ awareness of the role of emotion in learning engagement and encourage teachers to provide high-quality support for emotional development.

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