



Feeling the way to social-emotional learning

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You are probably familiar with the saying, “Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man.” While its origins and interpretation have been debated over time, I like to think that it is a reflection of the importance of a child’s early years to his or her development and future possibilities. Recognising that we have a critical window during which we can influence and nurture the growth of social-emotional skills, US animation producer Nina Rappaport Rowan partnered with friend Susan Greenwood Schroeder, a children’s publisher, to develop Kimochis...Toys with Feelings Inside.

The philosophy behind Kimochis is that the toys act as a third party through which children can explore and build understanding of common emotions experienced by them and by those around them. ‘Kimochi’ is the Japanese word for feeling and each toy, or

what is called a ‘Kimochis character’ comes with three small pillows with a feeling written on one side and a face depicting that emotion on the other. The Kimochis characters have been crafted to represent common personality traits that children might exhibit or see in one another, and come with their own backstories that flesh out who they are and why they behave in particular ways. For example Bug, a caterpillar, is described as ‘thoughtful and ... extremely cautious. He is really smart, a skilled conversationalist and is known to talk himself and others out of any given situation, because he likes to examine all sides’ (kimochis.com.au, 2013). The three Kimochis or feelings that Bug comes with are *Happy*, *Brave* and *Left Out*.

Australian classroom experience

Although they were created in the US, Kimochis have made their way to Australia via mother-

daughter team Hilary Friedland and Lee Ostilly. Friedland stumbled upon the toys by chance during a trip to San Francisco where a child she was visiting had been given some of the characters as a tool to explore emotions after a parental divorce. Friedland immediately contacted Ellen Dodge, the lead author of the Kimochis teacher support material, and Kimochis’ journey to Australia had begun.

In a relatively short space of time, the take-up has been impressive. The first Kimochis shipment arrived in November 2009, and now they are in around 2500 schools across Australia. There has also been strong interest from health professionals including psychologists, and even in the corporate sector for team building. In fact, Friedland explains that the process to introduce Kimochis in Australia has gone more smoothly than she dared hope. “It was a ‘blue sky’ project originally,” she says. “We took it on with so



much enthusiasm and passion into the retail market and then into educational settings.”

It is evident in talking with Friedland and Ostilly that they have a genuine belief in the benefits of using Kimochis, born of their experiences with students and teachers to date. “They are so disarming and cute” Ostilly proclaims. “They launch in at the level of humour and once kids are comfortable they can start exploring.” The characters are both appealing and very inviting, which makes them immediately engaging for students of all ages. Friedland sums up her observations of Kimochis in action as impactful for young children who are at an age where they readily learn new concepts. “It’s a laying down of brain wiring ... they are kinetic, tactile, fun. [Through using Kimochis] vulnerability can be ameliorated,” she says.

The full Kimochis range includes seven Kimochis characters and 30 feelings pillows covering emotions as diverse as *Optimistic*, *Hurt* and *Guilty*. An educators’ toolkit is also available, which includes everything a teacher needs to introduce Kimochis in the classroom.

One of the starting points is the Kimochis ‘Keys to Communication’, a set of skills that underpin other learning possibilities offered by the program. The Keys incorporate ideas such as ‘Choose words that help instead of hurt’ and ‘Be kind and let people try again’ which set the scene for positive interactions between students.

There are then lessons that explore the feelings, and home link activities that allow strategies and language to be reinforced through strong home-school connections. A quick ‘Behaviours at a Glance’ guide identifies lessons and activities that address particular topics or behavioural issues, making it easy to find approaches that suit each unique classroom situation.

Through the course of the program, students are able to explore their own feelings and consider those of others in a non-threatening way. According to the Kimochis education book (LuluCo International, 2014), ‘By reflecting feelings, Kimochis enable children to identify their own feelings, and acquire the Kimochis core skills for interaction and connection. At the same time they also build an appropriate ‘feelings vocabulary’, one feeling at a time, in a fun, tactile interactive way.’

Special needs students

To support students with special needs in the area of social-emotional development, the program

also includes, ‘detailed enhancements, specific techniques and strategies ... to help accommodate the unique learning needs of these students’ (LuluCo International, 2014). This extra support gives teachers a larger range of strategies to draw on to cater to a broad range of personalities and situations within the classroom.

Research

A great deal of research has been conducted in the area of social-emotional learning, and Kimochis draw on this in a very accessible way. Friedland explains that the program complements research conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an American organisation that focuses on evidence-based social and emotional learning in education, which found that classroom behaviour, social emotional skills and even test scores improve where effective social-emotional programs are used, whereas negative outcomes such as depression decrease.

A recent independent Australian study by the University of South Australia lends further weight to the effectiveness of Kimochis. The research, conducted with a class of Year 2

and 3 students whose teacher was using the approach for the first time, found significant improvements in the students’ ability to identify feelings. ‘When children were asked to write all the feeling words they knew, before the *Kimochis* intervention, the children produced between four and 11 feeling words. After the intervention the children produced between five and 22 feeling words’ (McInnes et al, 2014). The teacher reported that interpersonal conflict resolution skills were improved through the use of Kimochis, and that students could more easily discuss their feelings.

The class involved in the study also used a second social-emotional program, ‘Play is the Way’, and Ostilly explains how the fundamental skills taught through Kimochis lay the foundations for social-emotional learning and can easily be integrated with existing school strategies. ‘The beauty of Kimochis is that it provides a framework for emotional intelligence and social intelligence,’ Ostilly notes. “Children learn to name feelings and translate the abstract concept of feelings into physical manifestations.” She also relates that the study found taking time away from literacy and numeracy to develop social and emotional intelligence did not generally have an impact either way on academic outcomes, and at worst, literacy and numeracy achievement was maintained while extra time was devoted to social-emotional learning.

Interpersonal skills

On a practical level, Kimochis give students the opportunity to learn interpersonal skills in a fun and controlled way that they can then start to put into practice when faced with an emotionally difficult situation. “Once we externalise a scary sensation, it becomes a brain activity,” says Ostilly. “It’s therefore easier to talk about. For example, three feelings in a hand is easier to talk about and navigate. Usually the brain operation shuts down when difficult feelings kick in. It’s less difficult to communicate with physical things in front of you.”

Friedland adds that some principals have worked with a bowl of Kimochis feelings on the desk when discussing conflict with students to allow them to focus on feelings driven behaviours. Once students have identified the emotions with which they are dealing, conversation can be geared towards talking about what happened to make the child feel that way, which will hopefully lead to better choices in the future.



Redos

Kimochis also facilitate 'redos'. "It's important to have the ability to do things over. For example, if a child has had a meltdown, you can say, 'Show me how you can do this better,' or 'What you're feeling has got a name,'" suggests Friedland. "When things happen in the classroom, you can say, 'That's not the Kimochi way. Let's redo that.'"

"We allow students to practise reading or maths skills many times in order to build their understanding, and it makes sense that the same attention is given to the development of social-emotional skills."

The results of this approach have been very positive. Friedland recalls a session conducted by lead author Ellen Pritchard Dodge with an upper primary class. "After the lesson, the teacher in the staffroom mentioned that when naming Huggtopus [a Kimochis character who doesn't always respect physical boundaries], a student said, 'I have been putting my hands around people's necks and squeezing and I know now that this is not OK.'" The remarkable thing about this admission, Friedland adds, is that in the past this child had refused to take responsibility for her behaviour and either consistently denied ever putting her hands on people or claimed they deserved it. "You can use the characters to identify similarities," Ostilly says.

In Australia, Kimochis have been used by the Alannah and Madeline Foundation in their Children Ahead program to help children who have been through traumatic or violent events. "It's very gratifying," Friedland remarks. "We have a horrific teen culture. If we start early enough, we can help overcome this ...if we put NAPLAN aside and give precedence to emotional intelligence, it will have a potent effect."

Further reading

kimochis.com.au (2013) Kimochis Australian website available at: <http://www.kimochis.com.au>. Accessed 14 June 2014

LuluCo International Pty Ltd (2014) *Kimochis...toys with feelings inside education book*



McInnes, E, Diamond, A & Whittington, V (2014) *The Wellbeing Classroom: Developing trauma informed pedagogy in a Year 2-3 classroom: An evaluation of a Salisbury Communities for Children school based project* University of South Australia.



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