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Rethinking emotional development in the early years curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education researchers have recently expressed the need to improve our understanding of children's emotional development in order to respond to challenges faced by early years teachers and educational policymakers. Starting with calls for improvement targeting the conception of emotional development at play in the English national early years curriculum (EYFS), the aim of this paper is to argue for a framework of early years emotional development that goes beyond these critiques and that can inform early years curricula across nations. The paper does so by appealing to a philosophical tradition emphasising a universal aspect of emotional development. According to this philosophical tradition, emotions are psychological responses open to rational assessment and justification in virtue of being responses to things we value. The framework therefore conceives children's emotional capacities not as blind reactions to what they experience but rather as shaped by cognitive and rational abilities to understand, evaluate and make sense of the world around them. The upshot is a framework that emphasises children's rational agency in their emotional development and that stresses the importance of scaffolding children's emotional development throughout their education and not simply in the early years.

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1. Introduction

Emotional development is recognised by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework as one of the core areas of development in early childhood. The EYFS sets the early years curriculum in England and it sits emotional development within the personal, social and emotional development (PSED) category of the curriculum. PSED is one of seven categories composed by early learning goals (ELGs) that any early year provider in England needs to ensure that children show satisfactory development of by end of Reception Class. The focus of the EYFS on emotional development is motivated by studies that argue that emotional development is a predictor of well-being, academic success and prosocial behaviour in later stages of life (Merrell and Bailey 2012; McClelland and Wanless 2012; Johnson et al. 2013; McClelland et al. 2013; Blewitt et al. 2018). Moreover, the EYFS recognises that intervention on emotional development specifically in the early years is more effective than trying to catch up later in life ('Social and Emotional Learning: an evidence review and synthesis of key issues', *Education Policy Institute*).

The PSED component of the EYFS has recently been critiqued from a number of different camps putting pressure on the way that emotional development is conceived in the early years national curriculum. First, reports by leading national research institutions suggest that the current EYFS

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conception of emotional development is not sufficient to help teachers navigate the new challenges with children's PSED that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it does not support teachers with the way in which the pandemic impacted children's confidence in social interaction in childcare settings, such as their verbal interaction with adults and other children and in children's ability to respond appropriately to others' emotions ('The changing face of early childhood in Britain', *Nuffield Foundation*; 'Education recovery in early years providers: spring 2022', *Oftsed*; 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's socioemotional well-being and attainment during the Reception Year', *Education Endowment Foundation*).

Second, experts on early years emotional development relying on neuroscientific and developmental data argue that the EYFS misrepresents emotional development by omitting one of its most important developmental aspects: co-regulation (Whitebread 2014; Conkbayir 2023). Co-regulation refers to mutually responsive social interactions with affective quality from which warm and trusting relationships emerge between child and caregiver. These studies argue that this omission leaves teachers with a conception of emotional development that emphasises compliance rather than nurturing attachments. To be sure, the latest version of the EYFS responded to this critique by adding a stronger emphasis on the role of relationships in children's emotional development. Nevertheless, as I will argue, it does not explain why affective relationships are important in children's emotional development.

Third, sociologists of early years education raise concerns that the conception of emotional development in the EYFS is directed towards the formation of 'neo-liberal' subjectivities that centre around notions of productivity and control, thus leading to social inequalities (Bradbury 2019; Voukelatou et al. 2021; Camangian, Philoxene, and Stovall 2023).[8] Although these critiques also relate to an earlier version of the EYFS, I will argue that they still resonate with the current EYFS focus on assessing children in Reception class on their executive functions.

As I will argue in Section 2, what these critiques have in common is a call for a conception of emotional development that goes beyond mere abilities exercised in completing tasks successfully. Rather, the curriculum should reflect children's rational agency in their emotional development. Broadly, and for the purposes of this paper, 'rational agency' refers to the ability to give reasons in justifying something. Rational agency is typically exercised in relation to a number of things, emotions being one of these. For example, we might get upset by someone's remarks and tell others why those remarks upset us. This is a paradigmatic example of exercising one's rational agency in relation to emotions that shows just how central it is to leading a good life. Moreover, as I will argue, once we recognise children's exercise of their rational agency in developing emotions we can recognise their active rather than passive nature in evaluating their surroundings. As I will argue in Section 3, this is because our emotions are responses to things that we value, that is, to things that we find important in our lives. Arguably, this is a structural feature of emotions that is therefore to be found universally across cultures. Once we appreciate this, we can see the urgency in asking how children develop this rational agentic capacity in relation to their emotions. We can then also see the reductive nature of the conception of emotional dveelopment in the current English early years curriculum and the need for curricula worldwide to recognise children's rational agency in thioer emotional development.

The overall aim of this paper, then, is to articulate a framework of early years emotional development that brings centre stage children's rational agency and that in virtue of this can be applied across cultural and national contexts. I argue that the required notion of rational agency in emotions is best captured by appealing to a neo-sentimentalist conception of emotional development. I argue for this in Sections 3 and 4. In Section 5, I draw out the practical implications of the framework and argue that scaffolding children's emotional development should not be limited to the early years but rather should extend throughout their education. I conclude with Section 6.

2. Criticising the EYFS: a call for agency

I want to motivate the framework proposed in this paper by starting locally with the criticisms listed above. Even though these are directed to the English early years curriculum, we will see that in fact

they are directed to a conception of emotional development that is taken from the North American context. The best starting point to understand the motivation behind the criticisms that have been levelled at the EYFS' conception of emotional development is that conception itself. The EYFS specifies PSED as composed of three specific early learning goals: self-regulation, managing self, and building relationships (12-13). Each early learning goal is constituted by a number of abilities that children are expected to develop and that teachers are expected to facilitate. When we look at the wording used in articulating these abilities, it is not hard to see why the curriculum has been criticised in the ways reported in Section 1. The wording used seems to aim at restraining children's behaviour. For example, in the self-regulation early learning goal, the curriculum asks children to be able to understand their emotions and those of others in order to 'regulate their behaviour accordingly' (12). Moreover, children should be 'able to wait for what they want and control their immediate impulses when appropriate' (12) in addition to 'Give focused attention to what the teacher says, responding appropriately even when engaged in activity, and show an ability to follow instructions involving several ideas or actions' (12). In the managing self section, the curriculum asks children for 'resilience and perseverance in the face of challenge' (13) and 'Explain the reasons for rules, know right from wrong and try to behave accordingly' (13). The building relationship section is somewhat gentler asking children to be able to 'Form positive attachments to adults and friendships with peers' (13) and 'Show sensitivity to their own and to others' needs' (13). Nevertheless, it also asks children to 'Work and play cooperatively and take turns with others' (13).

It might be argued that this is an uncharitable interpretation of what the EYFS is trying to convey and that the conception of emotional development at work is supported by empirical evidence that shows how these early learning goals are conducive to well-being. The problem is that the way in which the EYFS uses the research that underpins its conception of emotional development does not assuage the concerns. Specifically, the EYFS selects a small portion of research within emotional development and interprets it to make the point that emotional development is important to learn how to focus on a task and complete it successfully. This is evident when we look at the government report used to explain the EYFS's early learning goals, namely the 'Best start in life Part 2: the 3 prime areas of learning'.

The report focuses on two psychological constructs: emotional competence and executive functions. Emotional competence is a psychological construct employed by cognitive psychologist Carol E. Izard used to devise the Head Start programme in the United States which aimed at improving the learning success of children from disadvantaged backgrounds by targeting their emotional development in the early years (Izard et al. 2004; Izard et al. 2008; Bierman et al. 2008). Emotional competence is therefore a psychological construct devised as s a tool of intervention in the early years to achieve the goal of children becoming more able to focus in class. Emotional competence is composed of two further related psychological constructs: emotional knowledge and emotional regulation (also known as self-regulation) (Izard et al. 2004; Denham, Bassett, and Zinsser 2012; Di Maggio, Zappulla, and Pace 2016; Lucas-Molina et al. 2020; Harrington et al. 2020). Emotional knowledge refers to the ability of labelling facial expressions with a correct basic emotion e.g. happy, sad, angry; and the ability to give a causal explanation of a basic emotional episode e.g. the child is angry because that other child took her toy. Emotional regulation refers to the ability to control and manage one's emotions and their overt expressions. One of the claims made by the research used by the EYFS is that emotional knowledge is causally related to an increment in emotional regulation. In turn, the research claims that emotional knowledge is best developed in conversational settings. For example, within an early years classroom, the research argues that teacher–child conversational interactions, when characterised by a trusting and affectively warm context, lead to higher emotional knowledge in the child and in turn to higher emotional regulation (Gavazzi and Ornaghi 2011; Ornaghi et al. 2015; Grazzani et al. 2016; Ornaghi et al. 2016).

This is an important point because it shows that the EYFS relies on research showing that trusting and affectively warm relationships are part of a child's well-being (Marchant, Young, and West 2004; Stormont, Lewis, and Beckner 2005; Hamre et al. 2014; Sette, Spinrad, and Baumgartner 2017;

Thompson 2024). Yet, the EYFS sets this within the context of emotional regulation being important to focus in class and complete the tasks given to the child rather than for other reasons. This becomes apparent when we consider the second psychological construct that features prominently in the 'Best start in life' document: executive functions. As Diamond (2013, 136) clearly states, 'Executive functions [] refer to a family of top-down mental processes needed when you have to concentrate and pay attention, when going on automatic or relying on instinct or intuition would be ill-advised, insufficient, or impossible'. Indeed, one of the core executive functions is called 'inhibitory control' and it is that aspect of executive function that 'involves being able to control one's attention, behavior, thoughts, and/or emotions to override a strong internal predisposition or external lure, and instead do what's more appropriate or needed (Diamond 2013, 137; see also Rhoades, Greenberg, and Domitrovich 2009). As the 'Best start in life' document puts it, executive functions are important because they are 'a set of cognitive processes that are necessary for controlling behaviour' (Best start in life Part 2; Blair and Razza 2007). When set within this context, the conception of emotional development and its importance in early childhood education is reduced to the ability to control oneself and complete a task (see also Weiland et al. 2013; Blair 2016; Sankalaite et al. 2021).

Notice that the argument above is not that these psychological abilities should not be thought as part of emotional development or that they are not important. Of course, these psychological abilities are both part of emotional development and they are important. Rather, the point is that the conception of emotional development employed in the EYFS restricts itself to only those aspects that emphasise what it takes to complete a task successfully within the school environment. It is to this restriction that the complaints mentioned in Section 1 are best understood as responding to. For example, Bradbury (2019) argues that the EYFS wording encourages teachers in Reception classrooms to push children to persevere with activities and demonstrate 'grit' through attention-focused exercises instead of focusing on reflections of how and why one is feeling a given emotion. And Conkbayir (2023) emphasises how emotional regulation cannot be understood independently of co-regulation, that is, the child enjoying nurturing attachments that are not merely instrumentally valuable to achieve a further goal but rather are valuable in themselves. Although it is less evident, this applies also to the complaint made by teachers that the EYFS does not provide enough guidance as to how to tackle the post-pandemic problem of children being less able to confidently engage in relationships. After all, it is not clear at all how attempting to develop one's executive functions and inhibitory control to focus on school tasks is meant to make children more confident in engaging in relationships.

Framing the problem with the EYFS conception of emotional development as a problem of focusing on psychological abilities that are seen as valuable solely within the context of completing tasks within a school environment also helps us to see the direction towards which the critiques above are pointing to improve the conception of emotional development employed in the EYFS. I want to suggest that the direction is one that articulates a conception of emotional development that recognises children's agency within such development rather than mere constraint. In the next section, I argue that one way of capturing the kind of agency that is both developed and exercised in emotional development and that can improve the conception of emotional development in the EYFS is one that appeals to children's exercise of rationality. I do so by appealing to the neo-sentimentalist tradition in the philosophy of value.

3. Neo-sentimentalism: a brief introduction

Neo-sentimentalism is a tradition in the philosophy of value that argues that what we understand as valuable is inextricably connected to our sentiments, or emotions (see, e.g. McDowell 1985; Wiggins 1987; D' Arms and Jacobson 2000a, 2000b; Goldie 2000; Nichols 2004; Prinz 2007; Tappolet 2011; Deonna and Teroni 2012; Brady 2013; Montague 2016; Tappolet 2016; Cowan 2016; Deonna and Teroni 2022; D' Arms and Jacobson 2023). How so? The starting point is a conception of emotions as open to rational assessment. This means that neo-sentimentalists think of our emotional

responses as the kind of psychological response that can be justified. For example, suppose that you get angry at someone's remark. An intelligible question we can ask is, 'Why did you get angry?' What we are asking here is for a reason that, at least from your point of view, justifies your anger. For instance, you might reply 'Because that remark was offensive'. That is the reason that, at least from your point of view, justified getting angry. Notice that we cannot ask for justifications to any psychological response. For example, suppose you see a red rose and, referring to your visual experience of the red rose, I ask 'Why?' For this question to make sense when directed to your visual experience of the red rose, we need to suppose that it is asking a causal explanation. Your answer might then appeal to lighting conditions being normal, to the wavelengths of the colour red, the reflection of those into your retina, the connection between that and your neurological system, and so on. But this is not the kind of answer that provides a justification for what you saw. By contrast, according to neo-sentimentalists, emotions are the kind of psychological response that can be justified in the way illustrated above.

There are two points about the justification of emotions that are important for our purposes. First, just as an emotion can be justified, it can also be unjustified. For example, suppose that you realise that the remark you got angry about was in fact not offensive after all. Say, you misheard what the person said. At that point, your anger is unjustified. There is in fact no reason justifying your anger. What typically follows is that one does not feel anger anymore. Importantly, what this shows is that the justification of emotions does not depend only on how you see things from your perspective. Rather, it depends also on more objective features of the situation. For example, suppose that the remark said 'That was idiosyncratic' and not, as you heard it, 'That was idiotic'. It is an objective feature of the situation that the person said the former and not the latter. This means that when we justify an emotion, we don't just rely on how things seem from our point of view. We need to also consider objective features of the situation. This includes how other people see the same situation. Because the task at hand is the justification of emotions, this involves conversing with others and seeing how others saw the same situation and trying to understand whether there is a reason that justifies how we felt.

Second, the rationality of emotions is connected to the fact that our emotional responses constitutively involve an evaluation of the situation we are responding to. Suppose that, in fact, you did not mishear what that person said and they did say 'That was idiotic'. This means that you are right in justifying your anger by saying 'That remark was offensive'. What your judgement shows is that you have evaluated the remark as being offensive. 'Offense' is an evaluative term we use to describe something as hurting others in certain ways. Importantly, for neo-sentimentalists, your anger is not merely a response to your evaluation. That is, it's not that you first coolly evaluate the remark as being offensive and then, in a second moment, you get all heated up and feel angry. Rather, and this is crucial, your anger is itself an evaluation of the remark as being offensive. Neo-sentimentalists argue that the rationality of emotions cannot be understood independently of thinking of emotions as evaluations. That is because it is in virtue of evaluating a situation that we find reasons justifying our emotions. You evaluate the remark as offensive and in virtue of that you now appeal to the offensive character of the remark to justify your anger. It is in this sense that neo-sentimentalists argue that emotions are cognitive responses to the value of things.

Neo-sentimentalists use a technical term to refer to the fact that emotions are open to rational assessment in virtue of being cognitive responses to the value of things. They say that emotions can be either appropriate or inappropriate. The appropriateness of emotions is not meant in a Victorian way as what is seen by the majority as the conventional way of feeling about things. Rather, when an emotion is appropriate, it means that the emotional response correctly picked up on the corresponding value of the object it responded to. For example, if indeed the remark is offensive, then your anger is appropriate because it correctly picked up the offensive character of the remark. But if the remark was not offensive, then your anger was inappropriate because it mistakenly thought it picked up on an evaluative feature of the remark that, in fact, is not there. Although this kind of talk might seem as it is committed to a weird claim about evaluative properties as there in the world to be discovered just like an object's solidity – and indeed some neo-sentimentalists think like

that-, what is important for our purposes is to focus on the claim that emotional responses are open to justification because they constitutively involve an evaluation of the situation.

We are now in the position to understand why neo-sentimentalists think that our understanding of what is valuable is interconnected with our understanding of emotions. On the one hand, to understand what, say, anger is, one should think about what anger is responding to. For example, offence. Anger is a response to what is offensive. On the other hand, our understanding of what is valuable ought to appeal to what makes a corresponding emotion appropriate. For example, our understanding of what an offence is ought to appeal to what justifies an emotional episode of anger. So, if someone says that a given remark is offensive, one way of thinking about what that means is to think about what about the remark, if anything, would justify an angry response towards it. What emerges from this conception of the relation between our understanding of what value is and our understanding of the rationality of emotions is that one side cannot be understood independently of the other. This is captured in particular by David Wiggins who argues that our coming to understand evaluative concepts like 'offensive' is a 'process of interpersonal education, instruction and mutual enlightenment'

(Wiggins 1987, 196) that is circular in nature. For example, we start by thinking about what an offence is, we then turn to asking what would justify feeling angry towards the remark, and in this way we identify certain features of the remark that would justify feeling angry and that therefore constitute what is offensive about it. This can then take a social form when we engage in this circular activity with others and include different perspectives on the question we are trying to answer.

4. A neo-sentimentalist framework of emotional development

How does the above help us to think about emotional development? Let me start where I left off. In the previous section, I characterised neo-sentimentalism as a view within the philosophy of value that argues that our understanding of the value of things is inextricably, and circularly, connected to our understanding of what justifies an emotional response. For example, our understanding of what makes something offensive is inextricably connected to our understanding of what would justify someone feeling indignation towards that thing. And in turn, our understanding of what would justify someone feeling indignation towards a given thing is inextricably connected to our understanding of what makes that thing offensive. I also pointed out that David Wiggins thinks that this kind of circularity is what is at play in, as he puts it, 'interpersonal education' about a given value. For instance, suppose someone does not know what an offence is. One way of going about teaching someone what an offence is would be to illustrate an example of an offence, say a rude remark, and then point out how it might hurt someone and make others angry. In doing so, one might explain why these emotional responses could be justified given the kind of remark that was made. Once the learner gets a handle on why these emotional responses might be justified, then at the same time the learner is getting a handle on what about the remark is offensive. The teacher can then attempt to generalise this understanding by using other examples until the learner gets an understanding of what an offence is.

Of course, this is an oversimplification of how one might go about teaching what, say, an offence means. But it holds a grain of truth. That is, that one's acquiring an understanding of a given value can come via thinking what would justify a corresponding emotional response. What I want to suggest is that we should think of children's emotional development as involving something analogous to what I described in the example above. Children's emotional development is not merely a matter of learning how to control one's emotional expressions so as to focus on a given task. Rather, their emotional development involves learning the value of things and learning how to articulate this value. They do so via learning how to justify their emotional responses. There are two aspects of this that need to be spelt out clearly.

First, to appreciate just how fundamental children's emotional development is for their understanding of the value of things, it is useful to distinguish between two kinds of understanding of

value (see Vanello 2020). On the one hand, there is an understanding of value that does not require our emotional engagement to be acquired. Call this a 'didactical understanding' of value. For example, suppose children a little older than Reception Class are learning about cultures around the world. One thing that they might learn are the festivities of these cultures and why these festivities matter to these cultures. In learning this, children are learning some of the values of these cultures and the kind of social practices that embody these values. At the same time, many of the children might not be from backgrounds that identify with these cultures. So, they are learning about the values of these cultures from a didactical point of view. That is, they don't value themselves these festivities and social practices. They are learning about these values without being emotionally engaged in a way that reflects that they identify with these cultures. So, although they might acquire the ability to articulate why these festivities are important to the relevant cultures, they are not invested int hem as members of the communities that identify with these cultures.

On the other hand, children whose cultural background does identify with a given culture learn about the value of these festivities and related social practices in a way that involves an emotional engagement with them. For example, a child growing up in a Muslim family might learn the value of Eid-al-Fitr in a way that involves experiencing a range of emotions towards it. This is part of what is commonly meant when we say that a child is being socialised in a given culture. In learning the value of Eid-al-Fitr, the child whose background is one that identifies with a culture that values Eid-al-Fitr will be emotionally invested in this social practice in a way that a child who learns about it in a didactical way will not be. So, although the child who acquires a didactical understanding of the value of Eid-al-Fitr in school might be able to explain why it is of value to a Muslim community, this child will not be emotionally invested in it. Importantly, the child who learns the value of Eid-al-Fitr by being emotionally invested in it, is not merely learning the same didactical understanding of its value as the child who isn't emotionally invested in it. It is a different kind of understanding because it involves the ability to reflect on one's past emotional experiences that were felt in being socialised within the given social practice. This is something that the child who learns the value of the social practice didactically cannot do for the simple reason that their learning of its value was didactical and not of the kind that one undergoes when being socialised in the given social practice.

We can now see how deep emotional development goes. Emotional development shapes the sense of identity of the child because it involves a process of learning the value of things characterised by becoming emotionally invested in it. The child who is socialised in a culture that values Eid-al-Fitr is a child whose sense of identity is shaped, in part, by valuing Eid-al-Fitr where this means that the child is emotionally invested in it. Importantly, the notion of socialisation here does not involve indoctrination. Since the process of learning the value of the given practice involves understanding what justifies relevant emotions, the child is at the same time acquiring the ability to explain and justify why the given practice is valuable. The child can reflect on the way they feel about a given social practice and unpack, so to speak, the reasons why the given practice has value.

The second key aspect of emotional development when understood within a neo-sentimentalist context is its sociality. Specifically, a constitutive feature of the process of learning the value of something that leads one to being emotionally invested in it is the kind of social interactions that the child engages in. A paradigmatic example of the social aspect of learning the value of something in the way that makes one emotionally invested in it is the kind of joint reminiscing that is enjoyed between a child and their caretaker. Joint reminiscing is the act of reflecting on a shared past experience of a given event. For example, reminiscing about going to the zoo the day before. There are a lot of empirical studies showing how conversations between a caretaker and child about an emotional experience that both shared in the past plays a role in the child's learning how to justify the given emotion (Fivush 2007, 2011, 2014, 2019, 2020; Fivush and Nelson 2006; Fivush, Haden, and Reese 2006; Laible 2004a, 2004b). Consider the following dialogue (taken from Fivush and Nelson 2006, 245–246):

M: I remember when you were sad. You were sad when (friend's name) had to leave on Saturday, weren't you?

C: Uh huh.

M: You were very sad. And what happened? Why did you feel sad?

C: Because (friend's name), say, was having (Unintelligible word)

M: Yes.

C: And then she stood up on my bed and it was my bedroom. She's not allowed to

sleep there.

M: Is that why you were sad?

C: Yeah. Now it makes me happy. I also, it makes me sad. But (friend's name) just left.

M: Uh huh.

C: And then I cried.

M: And you cried because …

C: (friend's name) left.

M: Because (friend's name) left? And did that make you sad?

C: And then I cried (makes 'aaahhhh' sounds) like that. I cried and cried and cried and cried.

M: I know. I know. I thought you were sad because (friend's name) left. I didn't know you were also sad because (friend's name) slept in your bed.

In this exchange, the mother is helping her child to articulate how she felt at the time of experiencing a specific event, in this case when her friend had to leave. What these studies suggest is that the mother, or more generally a caretaker, is responsible for setting the tone of the conversation and that the given tone will have an impact on the child's learning how to justify an emotion they felt in the past. For example, if the caretaker uses an elaborative reminiscing style, they ask a lot of open-ended questions, keeping calm and making the child feel safe when answering the questions. By contrast, if the mother uses a closed style of conversation, they don't ask many questions, and if they do, they assume an answer which they often given before the child can answer. Moreover, in a closed style, the child is not made to feel safe in the kind of answers they give. According to the studies, above, while an open style of conversation leads to a child learning how to justify their emotions, a closed style doesn't.

This is crucial for our purposes (for an elaboration of what follows, see Vanello 2024). What the studies above do not appreciate is that the child, by learning how to justify their emotions, is also learning the value of things. In the dialogue above, the child is learning not only that was they felt was sadness but also how to think of sadness as something that can be justified. For example, the mother is directing the child to features of the experienced event that can justify (or not) the child's feeling of sadness. For instance, the friend sleeping in her bed. The mother is teaching the child to reflect on what might justify (or not) the feeling of sadness. Specifically, the child is learning whether, say, a friend sleeping in one's bed is the kind of thing that justifies (or not) one's sadness. Although we can only speculate how the dialogue ends, it is not farfetched to suppose that the mother directs the child to think that a friend sleeping in one's bed is not a reason to feel sad about. Suppose, for example, that the friend was tired and needed a nap and that is why she was sleeping in the child's bed. The mother can then explain to the child that friends are people that we help when they are need. In turn, this can then become part of the child learning the value of friendship. Crucially, this kind of learning is not merely didactical. The child is emotionally invested in the situation, both in the past experience of feeling sad and in the present situation

while speaking to her mother. This then feeds into the kind of learning that she undergoes while in conversation with her mother so as to give rise to an understanding of the value of friendship of the kind that involves an emotional investment. That is, the child is learning what it is to be someone's friend.

Notice how different a neo-sentimentalist conception of emotional development is from the conception used in the EYFS as presented in Section 2. There, I showed that the EYFS relies mainly on the notion of emotional competence which is composed of emotional knowledge and emotion regulation. That is, the ability to label facial expressions with a correct basic emotion and to give a causal explanation of a basic emotional episode, the ability to control and manage one's emotions and their overt expressions. None of this entails that the child is able to think of emotions as psychological responses that are open to rational assessment, that is, that can be *justified*. This is the crucial difference between the two conceptions of emotional dveelopment because it is only once we introduce the idea that emotions can be justified that we think of emotional dveelopment as involving learning to think of emotions as something that can be justified and how to justify them. As we will see in the next section, this brings with it important practical implications.

5. Implications for practice

A neo-sentimentalist framework offers insights into how to develop the kind of educational practices that can foster a child's rational agency and emotional development. In this section, I draw out the implications for practice of the framework. I begin by proposing one way in which the framework could be implemented in the classroom. Specifically, I will use a Reception Class for this example. A key challenge identified in reports by early years teachers in relation to PSED is how to teach children to sustain positive relationships ('Approaches to Supporting Personal, Social and Emotional Development', *Education Endowment Foundation*). This became especially salient after the COVID-19 pandemic. The report argues that oral language used by teachers is effective in helping children sustain positive relationships. This is a claim that the EYFS' 'Best start in life' report also appeals to (Gavazzi and Ornaghi 2011; Ornaghi et al. 2015; Grazzani et al. 2016; Ornaghi et al. 2016). The focus in these studies is on 'emotion state talk' (Harris 1989, 2008). This is conceived as part of a child's emotional competence. It refers to the ability to use words to refer to one's own and other people's mental states, specifically emotions. In other words, it is an aspect of emotional knowledge. The claim, then, is that teachers can play a crucial developmental role for children in engaging in conversations with them where they foster the child's ability to refer to emotions by using the correct words. The studies correlate children's engagement in these conversations with a higher competence in emotion understanding.

What the neo-sentimentalist framework can contribute to this kind of school intervention is the claim that to understand why, from the point of view of the subject of experience, one feels certain emotions, one needs to understand the perceived value one is responding to, that is, the perceived significance or importance of the thing that one is responding to. As we have seen above, the process by which children learn to understand their emotions and how they are responses to value occurs via conversational scaffoldings with caregivers, so a neo-sentimentalist framework is in agreement with the current studies appealed by the 'Best start in life' report. Where it differs is that it doesn't focus solely on the ability to use words to label one's own and other people' emotional states. Rather, it encourages children to think about what the emotions are responding to and how what they are responding to justify (or not) the emotion. A key strategy to implement this change is for teachers to focus on the evaluative language, rather than only emotion state talk, used by children to explain why, say, they feel resistance to sharing a toy. This can in turn help teachers find suitable evaluative language to explain to children why sharing a toy is important, for instance by explaining how good friendships make one feel. As the example and studies appealed above show, encouraging children as young as 2 to think about emotions as the kind of thing that can be justified, and doing so by using evaluative language that refers to emotions, is not farfetched.

Within the classroom, I believe this change can be implemented in what I call 'thinking pockets'. My experience volunteering as a teacher assistant in a Reception Class is a North London primary school taught me that when you are in a classroom with children 4–5 years old, it is very difficult to get them to focus on a single task in large groups. The best way to get children that age to focus is to ask them to participate in the given task in a small group, say 2–3 children, while the other children are involved in a class task or playing. Moreover, it is also very difficult to ask children to reflect on their emotions or on the consequences of their actions, such as taking a toy away from another child or refusing to share, while the event in question is taking place. 'Thinking pockets', which I have not implemented yet and they are at a hypothesis stage, would happen when 2–3 children are presented with a scenario that is fictional but reflects a typical event in the classroom that the children can recognise, for example a child refusing to share. It is important that the children are separate from the larger group and that they are made aware that the session is not a punishment but rather a fun exercise. An analogy I witnessed in the classroom is when 2–3 children are separated from the larger group and are asked to complete a numbers exercise, thus exercising their counting abilities. Separating them from the larger class creates a sense of calmness and joint commitment to completing a task. Hence why I call this exercise thinking *pockets*. Once the children are presented with the scenario, the teachers use the elaborative style of conversation introduced in Section 4 together with evaluative language with the aim of helping children think about the emotions involved in the scenario in terms of justification and what they are responding to.

An important aspect of the EYFS is assessment. So, how could teachers use 'thinking pockets' to assess children's emotional development? A key part of the narrative of this paper is that the early years curriculum should focus more on developing children's rational agency than the ability to complete tasks in time and without a fuss. I argued that the current Early Learning Goals in the curriculum assess children mainly on the latter. By contrast, the practice underlying 'thinking pockets' aims at children's ability to think about their emotions and those of others as open to justification, a key part of rational agency. 'Thinking pockets' could be used in assessment if the assessment is how well children can think of emotional responses as open to justification and how children engage socially in the act of justification. Justification involves a practice of reason giving that is social in that we give reasons to each other justifying each others' emotions. The assessment therefore would not be whether a child gets 'the right justification' as if justifying an emotions is completing successfully an exercise in algebra. That is not the ability that is fostered in 'thinking pockets'. Rather, it would assess children's ability to enter into a conversation justifying emotions. These include the ability to listen to other participants in the conversation, to take seriously what is being said by the other participants, to recognise reasons, to provide reasons in return. I anticipate that many might think that this is too abstract for the early years curriculum. But I would disagree. In my experience, children this age have the potential, if not always capable, to engage in these justifying practices. The early years curriculum should reflect that.

Thinking pockets can develop children's abilities to think of emotions as the kind of thing that calls for justification, and in so doing attend to what the emotions are responding. Teachers clearly play a crucial role in this. It therefore follows that teachers should be trained in how to carry out activities such as thinking pockets. In addition to the training teachers have on children's emotional development, their training could benefit from a critical engagement with the key claims made by the framework presented in this paper. Specifically, there are two sets of skills that could be included in. teacher training. First, a critical engagement with the farmwork itself. The framework should not be blindly imposed on teachers. What is needed is that teachers engage with the framework so as to understand it and reach an independent view of it. For example, teachers could critically engage with the claim that emotions can be justified and that the justification appeals to the values one has. Second, teachers could use their critical understanding from the first set of skills to identify and foster the abilities that children should develop in learning how to think of emotions as psychological responses that can be justified and the way in which they are justified. These include, as per above, conversational abilities focused on specific events where understanding the emotions

involved in the scenario is a constitutive part of understanding the scenario and justifying the emotions themselves.

Notice that thinking pockets are applicable to older ages as well. In my view, it's a mistake that emotional development is dropped after Reception Class in the national curriculum. Critically engaging our thinking with situations where emotions drive thinking and action should be continued throughout a child's education. There is nothing to stop thinking pockets to be applied throughout a child's education.

The implementation of the framework is not without its potential challenges. I want to end this section by responding to potential objections and in so doing clarifying further the framework. First, it might be argued, as it often is when there is mention of values in education, that it is not the business of education to teach values to children. Since the framework proposed in this contribution explicitly posits a connection between emotional dveelopment and learning value, it might be argued that it is inappropriate for an educational context. This objection relies on a conflation between teaching specific values to children, for example that we should be accepting of same sex marriage, and teaching how to think about values in general. The framework above does not commit to any specific value having to be taught. It is crucial to appreciate that the framework provides an understanding of emotions that is not wedded in any way to culturally specific norms of how one should respond emotionally to something. Rather, the conception of emotional development proposed here is one that unpacks the rational nature of emotions. That is, the fact that emotions are the kind of psychological response that is open to rational assessment. This is reflected in the practice of giving each other reasons as to why we think an emotional response is justified or not, which in turn is connected to our evaluative judgements as to why we think that something is valuable or not.

Second, it might be argued that a focus on the ability to justify emotions and evaluative judgements, especially when assessment is involved, can lead to the idea that children must learn what is the correct emotion in given situations. But this is not the goal of thinking pockets. Words like 'justification' and its cognates need not even be mentioned. These are technical term used by theoreticians to explain the theory behind a practice. Rather, the goal is to teach children that emotions are always open to being talked about and that they are crucial aspects of how we navigate a world of norms and values. Relatedly, teachers would need to ensure that thinking pockets are a space for open conversation, perhaps starting with topics children want to talk about, rather tit being spaces where children are merely taught which emotions are appropriate and which ones are not.

Third, it might be argued that thinking pockets are impractical. But this is not the case. Thinking pockets start from practices that are already well entrenched in Reception Classes. As mentioned above, teachers in Reception Class often use the method of taking 2–3 children apart from the larger group to get them to focus on specific tasks. Assessment also need not be impractical as categories can be set up to observe how children respond to open ended questions and whether they draw links between their emotions and what they are a response to.

6. Conclusion

The EYFS conception of emotional development misses the kind of rational agency exercised by children in their emotional development. A neo-sentimentalist framework lays this bare. Even more importantly, a neo-sentimentalist framework explains why the kind of rational agency exercised in a child's emotional development is vital for a child's well-being. In developing emotions, the child is not merely learning how to articulate what is right and what is wrong, how to label people's facial expressions, how to give a causal explanation of their occurrence, or how to control emotions so as to focus on completing a task. Rather, the child is learning how to value things in a way that make sense to the child and where this learning will inform their sense of identity. For example, the child is learning how to value friendship and therefore how to be someone's friend. This ability goes over and above the ability to articulate explanations from a detached point of view of why, say, friendship is important, let alone the ability to control one's emotions to successfully complete a task.

The framework of emotional development proposed above contributes directly to future curriculum development globally because it brings centre stage a universal feature of emotions, that is, rational agency. Curricula in both the early years and throughout education should include the facilitation and scaffolding of children's ability to think about their own and others' emotions as open to justification. The practice of justifying to others how one feels about something allows for more awareness of the kind of values one and others have, reasons why one thinks these are good or why they need revision, and, arguably, they focus on the responsibility one has towards others to justify why one believes things to be of value or not. Because of how the scaffolding of emotional capacities comes about, it also increases children's capacities to form positive attachments. All of this is clearly part of what it is to lead a good life in harmony with others. Curricula should ensure that children's emotional development is put centre stage and that it aims to develop their rational agentic capacities rather than simply aiming at completing school tasks successfully.

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