Article

Comics as Pedagogical Tools for Developing Emotional Intelligence in Primary Education: Theory, Practices, and Classroom Applications

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Abstract: This article explores the pedagogical potential of comics as tools for cultivating emotional intelligence (EI) in primary education. Drawing on contemporary research and international practices, it highlights how comics—through their unique integration of image and narrative—can support key emotional competencies such as empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, and responsible decision-making. The discussion begins with a typology of comics (educational, literary, and graphic novels) and their specific relevance to emotional learning. It then presents concrete examples of international programs and educational uses of comics to address issues such as bullying, diversity, and emotional expression. Emphasis is placed on how comics visually represent emotions, engage students' imagination, and provide a safe medium for discussing difficult emotional topics. The article concludes with a set of structured classroom activities tailored to different age groups (6–12 years old), each linked to specific EI skills. These include reading and discussing comics, role-playing, comic diaries, and interactive storytelling. A synthesis table maps these activities onto educational levels and competencies. Overall, the article argues that comics can be powerful, inclusive tools that foster not only language and creative skills but also core emotional competencies essential to holistic child development.

Keywords: comics; emotional intelligence; primary education; social-emotional learning; visual literacy

1. Introduction: Emotional Intelligence and the Educational Use of Comics

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to an individual's ability to recognize their own emotions as well as those of the people around them, and to use this knowledge to effectively manage the situations they face [1,2]. In modern schools, the cultivation of EI can be considered as important as the transmission of cognitive skills. It is a fact that the international practice of "Social-Emotional Learning" ("SEL") has for decades integrated the teaching of emotional well-being alongside academic subjects [3]. Social-emotional learning usually aims at five key areas: self-awareness, self-management (self-regulation), social awareness (empathy), relationship skills, and responsible decision-making [4].

Educators seek creative ways to develop these skills in elementary school students, so that students learn to recognize and regulate their emotions, show empathy, and collaborate effectively. One tool that has proven particularly useful in this context is comics and graphic novels. Comics are especially popular with children and combine text with images, capturing their attention and imagination. Research and pedagogical approaches suggest that the use of comics in the classroom can enhance not only text comprehension but also students'

social-emotional skills, such as self-awareness, creativity, and especially empathy [5,6]. The following sections examine the various types of comics and how they can be used in teaching, examples of international practices, how comics contribute to the development of emotional intelligence, and specific activity suggestions for elementary school students.

2. Typologies of Comics in Pedagogical Contexts

Stories in comic form can vary in style and purpose. In the context of education and the development of emotional skills, we can distinguish: (a) educational comics created specifically for pedagogical purposes, (b) literary comics—comics that have literary value or are adaptations of literary works—and (c) larger-format narratives such as graphic novels, which often target slightly older ages and address a variety of themes. Below are the aspects of all three categories and their role in teaching.

2.1. Educational Comics

Educational comics are designed to teach specific concepts, skills, or values. These include either comics integrated into school textbooks or stand-alone books/issues that deal with educational topics—from language and science to moral education. A characteristic of educational comics is that they often enrich the plot with positive values and messages. In a simple and child-friendly way, they convey concepts such as kindness, respect, love, and cooperation. Thus, in addition to knowledge, they also cultivate social and emotional development [7,8].

In the field of emotional intelligence in particular, comics that aim at the emotional education of children have begun to appear. A characteristic example is the European program EQstudents (https://eqstudents.eu) [9], which created a series of enjoyable educational comics with the heroes "Heart" and "Brain", designed to teach children the recognition and expression of emotions, the understanding of empathy, conflict management, and the development of positive relationships. In these comics, through entertaining adventures, students encounter situations that promote emotional intelligence through experiential learning.

Overall, educational comics offer a pleasant learning environment that holds children's interest. The humorous characters and short stories stimulate students' imagination and make the lesson more pedagogically effective, encouraging their participation. Studies have shown that such teaching materials can increase students' motivation and support both their cognitive and emotional development during the learning process [10–12]. Therefore, it may be no coincidence that teachers use comics to approach "difficult" topics: a comic can simplify a complex concept or an emotionally charged situation, making it more accessible to children [13].

2.2. Literary Comics and Graphic Novels

Literary comics and graphic novels are comics that emphasize narrative and character depth, often appealing to a wider audience as stand-alone works of art. In a school setting, these can be used just like children's literature: for reading, analysis, and discussion in the classroom. They often serve as a bridge for students who have difficulty reading text without images - their visual element aids in comprehension and keeps interest alive [14–16]. These stories can be fictional or realistic, but often deal with issues from children's daily lives, such as friendships, family, difficulties at school, the feeling of "belonging", or problems such as bullying and anxiety. It is noteworthy that modern graphic novels for children aged 8–12 increasingly address real-life challenges—from social anxiety to the dynamics of friendship and family [17,18]. Works such as Raina Telgemeier's "Smile" or "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" (in illustrated diary form) capture children's interest by presenting the ups and downs of childhood in an honest way.

The integration of such literary comics into teaching can have multiple benefits. First, it enriches the language and literature lesson, as it teaches students how to "read" a story on both a textual and visual level. Each frame in a comic or graphic novel is deliberately designed, with the placement of words, colors, and character expressions contributing significantly to the narrative. By teaching children to analyze these elements, we help them develop critical thinking and visual literacy [19 – 21]. Second, literary comics offer students emotionally charged stories with which they can connect. Their characters are often multidimensional, and they

experience emotions or dilemmas that children may have faced. Thus, students can identify with the heroes and gain a deeper understanding of the situations - a process that enhances their empathy and self-awareness [22].

Third, comics can act as a bridge to classical literature. A successful teaching practice is to "pair" a traditional text with a thematically related graphic novel. For example, reading a short story in class and then reading a graphic novel with a similar theme has been implemented—something that helped students delve into concepts such as identity and social responsibility and transfer knowledge from one medium to another. The discussions that arise through such interdisciplinary comparisons can lead to meaningful dialogue on topics of self-awareness and empathy [23–25]. Overall, then, literary comics and graphic novels are not only a means of entertainment but also a valuable learning tool that combines the power of literary narrative with the immediacy of the image, creating powerful stimuli for cognitive and emotional development.

3. Comics in Education: Insights from International Practice

At the international level, comics have found their place in various educational practices, particularly in supporting social and emotional learning. Educators around the world use comics to bridge the gap between theoretical teaching and the experiential learning of emotions. Based on this premise, creative approaches such as comics in online lectures can effectively foster understanding and enhance essential skills such as communication, empathy, and emotional intelligence [26, 27]. Furthermore, in the effort to promote socio-emotional development within the context of English as a Foreign Language instruction, illustrated narratives are employed as a teaching tool with the potential to cultivate introspection and expand students' emotional vocabulary [28]. Especially in the United States, many schools have integrated S.E.L. programs. where students learn skills of empathy, self-regulation, and conflict resolution [29, 30]. In this context, graphic novels and comics are an additional gateway for learning social-emotional skills. Through visually appealing stories with strong and relatable characters, teachers can teach important concepts such as the recognition and regulation of emotions, empathy, collaboration, and responsibility [31,32].

Libraries and educational organizations also promote the use of comics for emotional learning. For example, in the USA, collections of comics have been created specifically selected to support SEL [33]. In this way, the potential for stories (in any form) to build bonds and develop empathy among students is enhanced, and comics offer a variety of options for every age and interest [34]. Along the same lines, it is noted that the characters and settings found in comics can help young readers develop empathy towards themselves and others, providing clear perspectives on experiences with which they can identify or introduce them to new points of view [35].

In the rest of the world, in addition to the EQstudents program, there are other similar initiatives [36]. Educators in various countries share best practices through conferences and online communities, suggesting the use of comics for the prevention of school bullying, the teaching of tolerance and cultural empathy, etc. [37–39]. Furthermore, many international publishing houses have published children's graphic novels with social messages, which are used in school libraries and reading clubs for children. Titles that address issues of diversity, friendship, anger management, or grief become tools for educators around the world.

It is worth noting that the popularity of graphic novels among children is increasing globally, which is also reflected in the interest of educators to use them [40,41]. Today, it is widely recognized that comics and graphic novels can cultivate a love for reading and at the same time convey important life lessons [42,43]. This powerful emotional impact of comics is used internationally to create meaningful learning experiences.

4. Comics as Emotional Learning Tools: Mechanisms and Impacts

Based on the above, comics are not just entertaining stories with pictures but appear to incorporate some unique features that make them excellent tools for developing children's emotional intelligence. Some of these features are:

Firstly, there is a direct visual representation of emotions. The design in comics is simplified and can, without unnecessary details, show the essence of the character—that is, each emotion and reaction in a clear form [44,45]. Thus, even a young child can "read" joy, sadness, anger, or fear on the face of a comic hero without the need for extensive verbal description. The bold sketches, expressions, and visual symbols (e.g., tears, a dark shadow over a

sad character, stars around a dizzy hero) make the emotional content immediately clear [46,47]. In this way, comics help children recognize and name emotions, which is a basic skill of emotional intelligence.

Additionally, active participation of the reader is required. In contrast to cartoons on television, comics require the reader to use their imagination to fill in the gaps in the narrative frames. In this way, each student can internally experience the story in their own way as a co-narrator. This creates a deep connection between the child and the story and characters. They feel that they are part of the world of the comic, which makes the messages and emotions of the comic more experiential for them. It seems, therefore, that the symbolic representation of the emotions of comic heroes and the involvement of the reader's imagination in the construction of the narrative gives the images a dynamic that can cultivate aspects of students' emotional intelligence.

In addition, many comics (whether educational or literary) have protagonists with whom children can easily identify. Whether it is a classmate who faces similar difficulties or a fictional hero with human feelings, the characters of comics function as mirrors and as role models. Studies have shown that when children see characters "who are like them" or go through situations similar to their own, they feel that they are not alone in their experiences and develop empathy towards both the heroes and their peers in real life [48–50]. For example, a child who has difficulty making friends can read a comic where the hero feels lonely and then finds a friend through an adventure—this can give the child hope and understanding, both for their own feelings and for those of others. Even superheroes, despite their fictional element, often present dilemmas of morality and emotions (responsibility, self-sacrifice, conflict of duty and desire) that offer material for discussion about values and empathy [51,52].

Furthermore, the narration becomes multisensory. Comics combining words and images activate multiple learning pathways. This means that the stories and messages they convey are often more strongly recorded in children's memory. A child may remember the scene where the character made a wrong choice and upset their friend, because they not only read what was said but also saw the expression of sadness on the friend's face. This memory (visual and textual) makes the lesson about the value of apology or good cooperation more vivid and applicable. In other words, comics provide examples within a rich multimodal context, which makes it easier for children to remember and transfer knowledge into practice [53,54].

To the above, it should be added that approaching difficult topics becomes more accessible. Topics such as anger, loss, failure, or diversity can be difficult to discuss directly with young children. The comic can act as a safe mediator: through a story, children can approach a difficult emotion or issue with a distance that offers them safety [55]. For example, instead of the teacher asking directly "How does a child feel when they lose the game?", they can show a comic where the character is lost and angry, and ask: "How do you think the hero feels? Have you ever felt like this? What would help them now?". In this way, the child talks about emotion through the character, which makes them feel more comfortable and freer to express themselves. Even at home, parents can use comics or illustrated books to start discussions with their children about emotions [56].

In summary, comics are a versatile tool. They stimulate the imagination, activate interest, facilitate the understanding of complex concepts, and—most importantly—touch the hearts of children. The identification with the characters, the joy of reading and creating comics, as well as the discussions that arise, all contribute to the development of emotional intelligence in a natural and joyful way.

5. Suggestions for Comic-Based Activities for Emotional Intelligence in Primary Education

Building on the theoretical framework and international practices discussed above, the final section presents a series of structured classroom activities designed to support the development of emotional intelligence (EI) among elementary school students using comics. Each activity targets a specific domain of EI—such as empathy, emotional expression, self-regulation, and problem-solving—and leverages the multimodal affordances of comic narratives to engage learners in reflective and expressive practices.

● **Reading and Discussing Comics**: A short story in comic form that addresses a specific emotion or social situation (e.g., friendship, jealousy, sadness) may be selected and read collectively in class. The reading can be followed by a guided discussion using questions such as: "What did the central character feel?", "Why did they react in that way?", "How would you feel in their place?" or "What advice might be offered to the

protagonist?". This activity is designed to foster perspective-taking and empathy in children, while also encouraging reflection on the causes and consequences of emotional responses.

● **Exercise "Expressions and Emotions"**: Students may be presented with a variety of facial sketches drawn from comics (or, alternatively, simple emoticons/emoji), each depicting a distinct emotional expression. They are then encouraged to identify and label the corresponding emotion (e.g., joy, surprise, fear, anger). The activity can be further extended by inviting students to illustrate their own facial expressions representing a given emotion, or to create a short comic strip featuring characters who display a range of emotions. This form of activity is grounded in the premise that cartoon facial expressions can effectively support the development of emotional recognition and categorization in children (for an application of this approach, see Johnson's contribution) [57]. By transforming otherwise "invisible" emotions into visible representations, such activities help render discussions about emotional states more concrete and accessible.

● **Creating comics in the classroom:** Students may be divided into small groups and invited to develop an original short comic story centered on a specific emotional theme (e.g., "How to make a new friend", "What I do when I feel angry", "A Day when I felt very happy"). Drawings, speech bubbles, and captions can be employed to convey the characters' emotions and actions. To support the process, simple worksheets with empty frames and space for dialogue may be provided, or alternatively, digital comic-creation tools can be utilized. Upon completion, students may (optionally) present their stories to the class. This activity enables the creative expression of personal emotions and thoughts, thereby fostering greater self-awareness. Moreover, through assuming the role of scriptwriter, learners are encouraged to explore potential solutions and outcomes for the situations portrayed—ultimately promoting an understanding of how emotional scenarios might evolve and how they can be effectively managed.

● **Role-playing based on comics:** Selected scenes from comics in which characters experience intense emotions or encounter conflict may serve as the basis for classroom role-playing. Students can be invited to enact these scenes, adopting the perspectives of the characters and expressing the corresponding emotions in a contextually appropriate manner. Following the role-play, a reflective discussion may be conducted focusing on how each character might have felt and exploring alternative ways of responding to the situation. Such activities support the development of empathy and offer learners the opportunity to consider diverse strategies for emotional regulation and conflict resolution.

● **"What If..." Discussion:** While reading a comic in class, a strategic pause may be introduced before the resolution or conclusion of the story. At this point, students can be guided through reflective questions such as: "What would happen if the protagonist had chosen a different response?" or "What alternative options were available?". For example, if a child character reacts to anger by running away, the class may explore other possible reactions, such as verbalizing feelings, seeking support, or maintaining composure. This approach encourages learners to contemplate multiple courses of action and to practice decision-making in emotionally charged contexts. Some educational programs further incorporate comics with embedded decision points in the narrative, prompting students to select among options that lead to different story outcomes—a form of interactive storytelling. Such practices help students develop problem-solving and self-regulation strategies that may be transferable to real-life situations. One such program is Pixton (https://ideas.pixton.com/?subject=sel-social-emotional-learning#:~:text=Making%20Smart%20Choices, accessed on 26 May 2025).

● The Comic diary: Students may be invited to maintain a "comic diary" in which they document their daily experiences and emotional states through comic-style narratives. Short, illustrated scenes accompanied by captions can be used to depict events and associated feelings. This activity fosters self-awareness and supports the development of emotional literacy, offering children a creative medium through which to recognize, articulate, and reflect upon their emotions.

● Comic Library: A small in-class "library" may be established, consisting of comics or graphic novels that explore a variety of social and emotional learning (SEL) themes. Examples may include stories addressing bullying, diversity, collaboration, and related topics. A fixed time can be scheduled weekly, during which students may select and read one of the available texts, either individually or in pairs, followed by a structured discussion focused on key insights gained. Regular engagement with meaningful narratives of this kind helps

students develop the ability to recognize behavioral and emotional patterns. In addition, such discussions offer a space for the exchange of thoughts and personal experiences, contributing to the cultivation of an open, empathetic classroom culture and a strengthened sense of community.

Each of the activities can be adapted to suit the developmental stage, interests, and specific needs of a given classroom. Central to their implementation is the creation of a safe and playful environment that encourages free expression and active participation. Within such a context, comics serve as a communicative bridge between teachers and students: they meet within the imaginative world of the narrative and, from there, collaboratively draw insights relevant to the emotional realities of everyday life. Notably, the proposed activities correspond closely to the emotional intelligence skills and grade levels outlined in the accompanying table. For each stage of primary education, targeted comic-based practices are suggested to support the development of key competencies such as emotion recognition, empathy, self-regulation, and responsible decision-making - all within creative, collaborative, and narrative learning contexts (Table 1).

Table 1. Suggested Activities for Developing Emotional Intelligence Skills using Comics in Primary Education (Ages 6–12).

Grade Level	Emotional Intelligence Skill	Suggested Comic-Based Activity
Grades 1–2	Emotion recognition	Matching facial expressions from comics with corresponding emotion words.
Grades 1–2	Empathy	Read a comic about friendship and discuss: How do the characters feel? How would you help them?
Grades 3–4	Self-regulation	Create a three-panel comic depicting a difficult situation and how the characters managed it.
Grades 3–4	Social skills	Collaborative comic: each group continues the story focusing on teamwork and conflict resolution.
Grades 5–6	Empathy and responsible decision-making	Analyze a comic with moral dilemmas and discuss choices: "What would you do in the character's place?"
Grades 5–6	Self-awareness and emotional expression	Individual comic creation: "A moment when I felt happy or sad."

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, comics are not just a form of entertainment but a dynamic educational tool that can significantly contribute to the development of emotional intelligence in students. Through the combination of images and words, visual narratives offer a unique way for children to explore, understand, and express emotions. They cultivate empathy, promote self-awareness, and teach effective communication and conflict resolution skills. Comic-based pedagogy, with the universal language of the image and the narrative, may develop as an ideal medium for this purpose. When students read a graphic storytelling, they not only improve their language skills or their imagination but also participate in an "exercise" of empathy—each frame and dialogue invite them to feel along with the characters.

Furthermore, the creation of comics by the students themselves gives them a voice and a space to process what they feel. The classroom is thus transformed into a workshop of emotions, where humor, art, and communication are combined. Overall, comic-based pedagogy can be considered as a valuable ally of the educator in shaping well-rounded personalities. This medium promotes a love for reading, teaches valuable life lessons, and does so in a way that is natural for children—through stories and images. As education increasingly recognizes the value of social-emotional learning, comics emerge not as a supplementary tool, but as a core pedagogical medium for cultivating empathy, imagination, and emotional literacy in the young learner.

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