

**Building Empathy and Emotional Intelligence through
Children's Literature: A Study of Emotional Themes in
AKind of Spark by Elle McNicoll**

Asst. Lect. Suheir Hameem

Mohammed

greenrose019@gmail.com

Second Karkh Education Directorate,

Ministry of Education, Iraq

Abstract

This study analyzes how the literature of children facilitates the development of emotional intelligence and empathy and particularly concentrates on the book, *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll. The article follows the theory of Emotional Intelligence (EI) by Daniel Goleman to examine how the novel is applied to demonstrate some of the important elements of the concept: self-awareness, empathy, motivation, and social skills as Addie, an autistic protagonist, experiences them. The analysis examines the process of emotional development of Addie, advocacy, and her personal relationships that assist the readers to comprehend emotional development.

The novel opens discoveries by revealing themes of exclusion, resilience and justice to younger readers to construct their emotional understanding and hearsay. It builds on this emotional engagement because of the first-person narration, which contributes to making Addie and her perspective accessible and meaningful. The paper concludes that emotional narratives and stories with neurodivergent characters are considered strong instruments of emotional education, whether in a literary or educational context.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Children's Literature, Empathy, Neurodiversity, Elle McNicoll, A Kind of Spark, Daniel Goleman.

بناء التعاطف والذكاء العاطفي من خلال أدب الأطفال: دراسة للمواضيع العاطفية في كتاب
"نوع من الشرارة" لإيل ماكنيكول

م.م. سهير هميم محمد

وزارة التربية والتعليم مديرية التربية الكرخ الثانية

الملخص

تحلل هذه الدراسة كيف يُسهم أدب الأطفال في تنمية الذكاء العاطفي والتعاطف، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على رواية "شرارة من نوع خاص" لإيل ماكنيكول. تتبع المقالة نظرية الذكاء العاطفي لدانيال جولمان لدراسة كيفية تطبيق الرواية لتوضيح بعض العناصر المهمة لهذا المفهوم: الوعي الذاتي، والتعاطف، والدافعية، والمهارات الاجتماعية، من خلال تجربة آدي، الشخصية الرئيسية المصابة بالتوحد. يتناول التحليل عملية التطور العاطفي لآدي، ودفاعها عن حقوقها، وعلاقتها الشخصية التي تُساعد القراء على فهم التطور العاطفي.

تُتيح الرواية للقراء الصغار فرصة اكتشاف مواضيع مثل الإقصاء، والمرونة، والعدالة، مما يُساعدهم على بناء فهمهم العاطفي وفهم ما يسمعون. وتعزز الرواية هذا التفاعل العاطفي بفضل السرد بضمير المتكلم، مما يُساهم في جعل شخصية آدي ووجهة نظرها مفهومة وذات مغزى. وتخلص الورقة البحثية إلى أن السرد العاطفي والقصص التي تتناول شخصيات ذات اختلافات عصبية تُعد أدوات فعّالة في التربية العاطفية، سواء في السياق الأدبي أو التعليمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء العاطفي، أدب الأطفال، التعاطف، التنوع العصبي، إيل ماكنيكول، نوع من الشرارة، دانيال جولمان.

Chapter One: Emotional Intelligence and Children's Literature

1.1 Overview of Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory

Daniel Goleman's theory of Emotional Intelligence (EI) changed the way everyone from educators, to psychologists and scholars thought of intelligence. Unlike traditional IQ, which measures cognitive ability, EI involves a set of emotional and social skills that affect the way in which individuals perceive, understand and manage their emotions and those of other people. Goleman has identified 5 key elements of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Goleman, 1995, p. 43).

These abilities aren't traits that are fixed in nature but can be built upon with time especially experiences involving emotions and relationships. This makes children's literature an especially appropriate area to study EI, as stories often present emotionally laden situations and relationships through which young people can vicariously learn.

1.2 Emotional Intelligence in Childhood Development

Emotional development in childhood provides the basis for the development of mental health, successful school achievement, and interpersonal competence. Research has shown that children who are emotionally intelligent are better able to handle stress, develop positive relationships and succeed in collaborative environments (Goleman, 1995, p. 79).

Literature can play a large role in this development through providing characters and situations that reflect real life emotional experiences. Given a chance to meet characters like Addie in *A Kind of Spark*, who have to struggle to overcome frustration, misunderstandings in the societal context, and personal advocacy, young readers have an example of how to recognize their emotions and develop (McNicoll, 2020, p. 37).

1.3 The Role of Children's Literature in Shaping Empathy and EI

Children's books do more than entertain – they encourage moral reasoning, empathy and emotional insight. Narrative fiction, particularly when expressed through the eyes of the protagonist, is an invitation for the reader into the emotional world of the protagonist. This narrative closeness allows for what scholars call "transportation," that is, the psychological process by which we become emotionally and cognitively immersed in a story (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009, p. 407).

In this immersive space, readers have an experience with the emotions of characters as if this was them. Books such as *A Kind of Spark*, where the focus is on a neurodivergent character's emotional and social

struggles, are uniquely powerful in that they challenge readers to see things differently from themselves, building greater levels of empathy and emotional intelligence (Applegate, 2020, p. 58).

Chapter 2: A Kind of Spark — Context and Summary

2.1 Brief Overview of the Novel

A Kind of Spark (2020) is a very modern novel for children by Scottish author Elle McNicoll. The story is about Addie who is eleven years old and autistic in a small Scottish village. Addie is inquisitive, ardent and very thoughtful, especially when she discovers the past slander of women suspects of witchcraft in her community. She sees a reflection of her own experiences of the injustices of the past and becomes determined to campaign for a public memorial.

The novel balances Addie's inner world of emotions with her outer battle – especially in school, where she struggles with misunderstanding, bullying and isolation. Through Addie's personal journey, McNicoll includes themes of self-acceptance, neurodiversity and emotional strength into a heartfelt story (McNicoll, 2020, p. 9).

2.2 Addie's Character and Narrative Voice

The novel is narrated in first person through Addie, giving readers access to her emotional experiences and thoughts directly, through her. This narrative technique heightens the emotional bond between Addie and the reader, allowing for more of an understanding of the way that she perceives the world. Addie's voice is honest and vulnerable – she is frustrated when not understood, joyful when supported and courageous when faced with injustice.

She has a very strong degree of emotional self-awareness in the form of internal dialogue, which is a significant aspect of emotional intelligence. They find out about her sensory sensitivity, social anxiety and structure-seeking – not as things that are wrong about her but as actual components of her identity that impact the way she engages with

people and experiences emotions (McNicoll, 2020, p. 17; Goleman, 1995, p. 56).

2.3 Neurodiversity and Emotional Insight in the Story

Among the largest aspects of the novel is that it is true to neurodiversity depiction. McNicoll, as a neurodivergent herself, portrays Addie as a complete person, whose life is a combination of all the horrors of a condition and all its potentials. Instead of idealizing or simplifying her status, the novel provides the emotions of Addie, including her frustration, her confusion, her joy, her determination, etc., with a central place in her identity and development.

Her relationships, especially with her supportive older sister Keedie, serve her to make that sort of sense of her feelings, and seek strength in her difference. This type of representation allows neurodivergent readers a sense of validation and prompts neurotypical readers towards empathy and a better inclusive understanding of the range of emotions (Applegate, 2020, p60; McNicoll, 2020, p23).

Chapter 3: Emotional Intelligence in the Novel

3.1 Addie's Self-Awareness

One of the strongest aspects of Addie's character is her heightened self awareness. As a neurodivergent protagonist, she is connected with how she is feeling, especially when they are experiencing sensory overload or pressure from social situations. Addie tends to reflect on the perception that her actions are having on others and puts in a conscious effort to control her reactions, even though she may be misunderstood. This degree of introspection is central to Daniel Goleman's concept of emotional intelligence which identifies self-awareness as the foundation to be used in managing emotions and behaviors (Goleman, 1995, p. 43).

In literary terms, the narrative voice that has been assigned to Addie gives the reader direct access to her emotional processing which

reinforces the importance of inner reflection within a child's development (McNicoll, 2020, p. 14). Scholars like Denham (2006) emphasize the understanding that children who can name and even understand their emotions have a greater likelihood to develop resilience and mental well-being "all things Addie exudes throughout the novel", (Denham, 2006, p. 31).

3.2 Empathy Through Historical Reflection

Addie's emotional identification with the historical persecution of women accused of witchcraft is one of the dominant features of the novel. She finds similarities between their mistreatment and her experiences of marginalisation as an autistic girl which acts as a driver to her empathy and desire to act in order to campaign for a memorial. This story thread is not only so compatible with Goleman's confidence in the importance of empathy as a fundamental element of EI, it also also introduces young readers to the notions of social justice through an emotional element (Goleman, 1995, p. 97).

The history is used as a mirror to reflect Addie's experiences, which makes the reader appreciate the compassion and the emotional understanding in a way that both transcends time and context (McNicoll, 2020, p. 51). As Keen (2007) explains, writing that encourages readers to "feel with" other people-- particularly those from other cultures-- has the potential to make a significant difference in the development of empathy in children (Keen, 2007, p. xviii).

3.3 Social Skills and Relationships

Addie can only perform poorly in socially demanding situations at school, but succeeds in emotionally supportive situations – especially in her family. Of the significance to her is her relationship with her older sister Keedie who is of the autistic nature. Keedie provides self-advocacy and emotional regulation role models in order to support Addie in the challenging social processes. These are the interactions

which ascertain what is contained in the argument of Goleman of social skill, or the capacity to build meaningful relationships and preserve them (Goleman, 1995, p. 115).

The attempts of Addie to communicate with herself and to protest against the unsupportive teacher she has prove that she is evolving into a heartbeat even without her attempts being responded in a certain way. Brackett et al. (2011) support the above idea by stating that social–emotional learning is most effectively taught through modelling in trusted relationships – the theme of which emerges prominently in the path of Addie (Brackett, 2011, p. 781).

3.4 Facing Bullying and Prejudice

Among the greatest emotional barriers the life of Addie has to face is the problem of bullying by the peers she is at school with and the attitude of perceived prejudice by her teacher, Miss Murphy. These events highlight the emotional cost of excretion, and also reveal how Addie comes to know how to be tough. Instead of rolling herself into a ball, she opts to educate people about neurodiversity instead and defend herself. This is with the ideas put forward by Goleman whereby emotionally intelligent people can cope with misfortune and channel the emotions into positive action (Goleman, 1995, p. 108).

Psychologically speaking, emotionally mature people are those who despite the measure of prejudice, are able to react in a dignified and assertive manner (Salmivalli, 2010, p. 211). To the reader, these scenes allow not only to sympathize, but also to feel empowered (it shows that even the youth can rebel against injustice).

3.5 Advocacy, Resilience, and Growth

The fight of the memorial becomes the mark of emotional maturity and agency of Addie. She puts her anger to work and takes the initiative to make a serious difference in her community. This form of advocacy is directly associated with the problem of emotional intelligence – that is,

empathy, motivation and social responsibility. Goleman emphasizes that emotionally intelligent people are driven by inner purpose and they are able to inspire change (Goleman, 1995, p. 125). Addie's ability to be resilient is also indicative of what Durlak et al. (2011) describe as "emotionally competent behavior" including being able to stand up for oneself, dealing with disappointment, and standing up for others (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 410). Her journey provides youthful readers a model of bravery and emotional leadership.

3.6 Narrative Techniques That Foster Empathy

The first person narration of the novel is a vital part of its emotional impact. By putting readers inside the mind of Addie and her experiences, McNicoll builds a strong connection between the character and the reader. According to psychological and literary research, narrative perspective is a pivotal factor for overcoming the root cause of empathy. When readers get into the mind of the protagonist, they are more likely to understand and have similar emotional experiences (Mar, 2006, p. 707). It is especially useful in books with neurodivergent characters, with the inner world being distinct from that of the reader. *A Kind of Spark* succeeds in managing to do so, as it does not just give an interesting story, but also a lesson in emotional perspective taking (McNicoll, 2020, p. 63; Keen, 2007, p. 9).

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Mapping Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Components in the Novel

In *A Kind of Spark*, Addie's emotional journey can be clearly understood through Daniel Goleman's five components of Emotional Intelligence: **self-awareness**, **self-regulation**, **motivation**, **empathy**, and **social skills**. Each is reflected in Addie's internal development and interpersonal relationships. For instance, her **self-awareness** emerges

early in the novel, as she consciously recognizes how her autism affects her interactions and sensory experiences.

She is aware of her emotional triggers, such as noise or confusion, and articulates how these make her feel (McNicoll, 2020, p. 17). According to Goleman, recognizing one's emotional state is the basis for all other EI competencies (Goleman, 1995, p. 43). This reflects what Saarni (1999) refers to as *emotional competence* and it is particularly important to children in coping with unique neurological experiences (Saarni, 1999, p. 21).

Addie also demonstrates self regulation as she begins to regulate her frustration at her teacher and schoolmates. Instead of acting impulsively, she uses her emotions for her campaign of justice. This helps to support Goleman's importance of manipulating disruptive emotions and adapting to change (Goleman, 1995, p. 56). This capacity is further affirmed by research in the field of child psychology, which establishes the relationship between emotional regulation and long-term social functioning (Thompson & Meyer, 2007, p.272).

Addie's emotional motivation – and particularly her sense of justice and personal meaning – fuels her resolve to fight for the memorial, so it fits in with Goleman's case for inner values as, rather than rewards, being central to emotionally intelligent motivation (Goleman, 1995, p. 123; Schutte et al., 2001, p. 17).

4.2 Empathy, Exclusion, and Reader Impact

One of the most effective themes in the novel is empathy. Addie identifies with the witches that were persecuted in the past, and her past experiences of social rejection can be considered as similar to those of the women in the history. Her emotional expression of time and identity is an example of an extreme level of cognitive and affective empathy (Keen, 2007, p. 10).

Researchers like Nikolajeva (2014) have come up with empathy in fiction, especially in children literature as a requirement in inculcating perspective-taking and moral imagination in young readers (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 90). In addition, the first person narration enables the readers to be in the mind of Addie, a technique that has been known to foster empathy particularly with downtrodden identities (Mar et al., 2006, p. 705).

This experience is fortified by the fact that Addie is emotionally strong to deal with bullying and exclusion. She is courageous and loving instead of shrinking away or showing aggressiveness. Her toughness provides a role model to young readers where they learn that emotional strength has its weaknesses and also its endurance.

Zins et al. (2004) state that the literature describing children as overcoming adversity contributes significantly to the development of emotional and social skills (Zins et al., 2004, p. 18). Addie is not only a character, but a kind of *emotional mentor* of the readers who learn to cope with the diversity and misunderstanding.

4.3 Social Relationships and the Growth of Emotional Intelligence

Although Addie has problems socially, especially during school years, her interaction with her sister Keedie is the key of her emotional growth. Keedie is an example of an empathetic person with self-regulation, who assists Addie to overcome challenging times and accept her value as a person. Such mentorship indicates the fact that emotional intelligence can be reinforced in favorable social conditions (Brackett et al., 2011, p. 784). Addie starts to develop conditional friendships and defend herself as well, learning how to express needs and boundaries, which are other key social skill factors in the Goleman model (Goleman, 1995, p. 115).

It has been the focus of educators and scholars to make children aware of the role of books in the growth of these skills. According to Koss (2015), emotionally vivid stories in middle-grade fiction make children

experiment with emotional limits and learn more about interpersonal awareness (Koss, 2015, p. 38). The story of Addie gives us such an account, but it is more in the nature of real, and even hurtful relationships, which require the development of emotions without the utopian concord.

4.4 Promoting Emotional Education Through Narrative

Pedagogically speaking, *A Kind of Spark* is not any story, but some of the emotional education tools. Through the story of Addie, the children will be exposed to the range of emotional experiences which are equivalent to the real life struggles. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can be nurtured by use of literature especially when written in an authentic and emotional manner when applied in educational settings (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 407).

The novel is in line with the SEL objectives: it promotes empathy, emotional control, and making social responsibility important.

Besides, the novel is significant as an inclusive emotional education due to the autistic identity of Addie. It also disrupts the normative emotional systems, demonstrating that neurodivergent people have emotional intelligence, but in new forms. This brings a critical viewpoint to the Goleman model demonstrating how EI can be manifested differently in neurotypes– a subject that is currently being talked about in the current EI literature (Baron–Cohen, 2010, p. 6).

4:5 Addie and the Dynamics of Double Empathy

Although the framework by Goleman (1995) provides a valuable measurement tool of assessing emotional competence, the detailed review of the experiences of Addie could also be viewed in the context of the so-called "Double Empathy Problem" (Milton, 2012). This theory holds that the societal problems faced by autistic people are not caused only by the fact that their emotional intelligence is somehow deficient, but as a result of a mutually generated breakdown in communication

among people of different neurotypes. McNicoll (2020) does not depict this dynamic as a weakness of the empathy of Addie, as it is an inability of neurotypical characters, especially Miss Murphy, to empathize with the unique sensory and cognitive experiences of Addie in *A Kind of Spark*.

By making comparisons between her own difficulties and the victims of the witch hunts of Juniper, she demonstrates a subtle kind of associative empathy that is not confined to her own social world. This aspect has been foregrounded by the given analysis, which argues that the novel does not aim at teaching neurotypical readers to be sympathetic towards Addie, but to realize that empathy is a mutual and mutual responsibility. Thus, the pedagogical value of the text changes to lessen the supposed social lacks and more to act as a manifesto of neuro-cosmopolitanism, according to which the various ways of feeling and being are given equal status.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the ways in which *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll portrays and encourages emotional intelligence using its characters, plot and emotional undertones. Through the analysis of the novel in terms of the Emotional Intelligence of Daniel Goleman, we have found that the main character, Addie reflects the essential elements of EI, including such aspects, as self-awareness, empathy, motivation, social skills..

These are not introduced as abstract psychological characteristics but just manifest themselves naturally as she goes through living her life as a neurodivergent child facing misunderstanding, prejudice, and social difficulties. The emotional development of Addie is very personal but at the same time it appeals to a wide audience as it can be applied by people who may have encountered some kind of trouble in self-expression, in getting heard or defending what is right.

The results of the current study reveal the idea that the literature available to children, particularly the contemporary and inclusive stories such as those presented by McNicoll, are very important in developing empathy and emotions in young readers. The novel lets the reader get into the mind of a person who perceives the world in a different way through the voice of Addie, and this prompts one to look at the world in a new light. This develops emotional understanding, promotes compassion and contributes towards the building of resilience and advocacy in children. This kind of literature serves not only to the literary involvement but also to the emotional education providing the arena in which complicated emotions can be discussed and justified.

Considering these findings, the future research could further extend this study by focusing on other studies on neurodivergent protagonists or emotional themes in other cultural settings through the analysis of more novels. Teachers and curricular developers can also reflect on adding emotionally intelligent literature in the classroom activities to assist social and emotional learning of students.

Overall, the strength of *A Kind of Spark*, in general, allows it to convey not only the stories to entertain, but also to stir the feelings, dismantle the stigmatization and make the readers more informed..

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