

Spring, 1994

REFLECTIONS

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Experience and Self-Expression Building a Vocabulary of Feelings

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ABSTRACT

It is important for children to understand the myriad of feelings they experience on a daily basis so that they can express them and learn to manage them. This article describes a project through which students identify and express feelings as they build a vocabulary of emotions. The project incorporates elements from the arts, such as improvisation, role playing, and drawing, to make learning experiential and meaningful, and culminates in the creation and use of an emotion continuum—a physical structure which the children create and use to express their feelings.

One of the challenges and pleasures of teaching is the opportunity to experience and understand the world from the vantage point of children. I enjoy teaching most when my children share their insights and opinions and allow me to glimpse the world from their perspective.

Encouraging expression is at the heart of teaching. As teachers, we devote considerable time and energy to helping children develop writing and speaking skills through which they can effectively express knowledge or opinion. Yet, third graders come in from recess crying and, when asked what's wrong, answer, "I don't know. I can't explain it." A sixth grader, furious because a close friend betrayed a confidence, was unable to explain how she felt, "I just feel really bad." When faced with the everyday issues of growing up, many children feel helpless to do anything about their predicaments.

My students' frustrations and struggle to express themselves inspired a class project in which students learned to

identify and express emotions as they built an emotional vocabulary.

I have undertaken the project several times, with sixth graders and third graders. The quotes and pictures in this article come from my third grade class this year. With both age groups, it is important for children to come to understand the myriad of feelings they are experiencing so that they can accurately express them and learn to manage them. Once adolescents can accurately express their feelings, they are less likely to feel overwhelmed by them and more likely to be able to deal with them in a productive manner. As younger children learn to identify and explain feelings, they feel better prepared to face the issues that arise as they get older. Because the children base the project on their own experiences, it adapts easily to different age groups.

Children growing up in the nineties face many pressures. Making and maintaining friendships, dealing with pressures from school, home, and friends, dealing with conflict among friends, even accepting praise can be challenging and intimidating. When children share feelings in a safe environment they make two important discoveries: words exist which can enable them to communicate exactly how they feel; and many people experience similar feelings.

Through their investigation of feelings, students meet the following objectives:

Students will

- Increase their vocabulary of feelings and emotions
- Come to understand that everyone has feelings, and realize that reacting with emotion to events in one's life is normal
- Strengthen listening and communication skills
- Raise self-esteem
- Discover productive ways of showing feelings
- Explore positive ways of dealing with conflict
- Build and strengthen understanding of language
- Improve ordering and sequencing skills

To begin the project, children brainstorm a master list of feel-

ings. The teacher lists the feelings on chart paper. The list should remain visible for several days so that children may add new feelings as they think of them, or experience them. It is important to discuss the difference between an emotion and a physical feeling, so that children understand, for example, that hot, cold, and tired are not emotions.

Teachers can introduce emotion vocabulary throughout the year through spelling and vocabulary activities, literature, and conversation with children. When children brainstorm a list of feelings, I'm always surprised to discover that they already know so many words to express feelings. Often they do not fully understand the meaning of each word. The following improvisations help children understand each feeling through experiencing it in a role playing situation.

CAN YOU TELL WHAT I'M FEELING?

Create an acting space or stage. Choose four children to play the parts of students. Give a different feeling from the class generated list to each actor. (Whisper, so that each child's feeling is a secret.) Then choose another child to play the part of teacher. As each "student" enters the stage, the "teacher" greets him by saying, "Good morning." Each "student" responds in a way that shows how he is feeling. For example a "student" who is acting out "nervous" might respond by saying, "Hi, I wish I didn't have to give my oral report today." Then the children in the audience try to guess what the actor-student is feeling. Once they guess correctly, the next child enters and acts out her feeling. After the five volunteers finish, other children continue the improvisation, each with a new feeling.

Children tend to enjoy this activity because it gives them an opportunity to explore feelings without feeling vulnerable. Many children do feel self-conscious about showing feelings in front of their peers, even though they are in a role playing situation. The first few actors generally need to try their scenes several times to eliminate giggling. However when a student concentrates on portraying her feeling accurately, classmates respond with comments such as, "Wow, I could

really see that you felt surprised." These reactions inspire confidence in more tentative students.

ALPHABET IMPROVISATION

This activity uses the letters of the alphabet to show the intensity of a particular feeling. The children stand in a circle and choose one feeling from the class list, such as "excited." Then the group says, in unison, "A, B, C. . ." We become a little more excited with each letter. By the time we reach "Z," we are so excited we may be jumping up and down. (This is a great exercise to do outside!) Children quickly learn that they must increase the level of their feeling gradually. If they are jumping up and down by the letter "M," they can't build much more on the way to "Z." The exercise changes considerably when the children choose a more introspective feeling, such as "disappointed."

A variation of this activity involves children speaking the letters one at a time. One child says "A" and shows an "A" level of the chosen feeling; the next says "B," continuing around the circle to "Z." This exercise also works backwards, when the children begin by showing the feeling with as much intensity as possible, then decrease it as they go through the alphabet.

An interesting outcome of this activity involved a third grade student, known for becoming excessively upset during conflicts with classmates, who used the alphabet to learn to react more appropriately. After he had gotten "out" in a game at recess, I saw this child screaming at the child who had tagged him and pounding his fist into the brick post on the playground. Once the child had calmed down we discussed the incident. "I can understand why you're angry," I said. "You seem angry at about a 'Y' or 'Z.'" He agreed. We discussed situations in which one might feel anger at a "Y" or "Z" level.

"I guess I'd feel that angry if someone tried to burn down my house," he decided. I asked him if he thought his situation was comparable. The next time he got out in a game he told his classmate who tagged him, "I'm mad at you for getting me

out, but not that mad, I'm at about a 'G.'"

EMOTION CONTINUUM

Once the students have explored and come to understand the vocabulary used to express emotions, they are ready to begin creating the emotion continuum. Although there is a series of steps to create the continuum, the value in this project lies in the discussion and reflection that accompanies each activity. As one student observed, "We saw how other people thought about things. There was a lot of long conversation—and debating."

There are a number of steps involved in creating the continuum:

1. The teacher types up the student generated emotion list, listing emotions in alphabetical order, and distributes one copy to each group. Children work in small groups to arrange all the emotions in order—from most positive to most negative. The purpose of the activity is to encourage discussion about each feeling. Students must employ problem solving strategies to reach compromise and make group decisions.

The children cut out each word, so they can physically arrange the words and make changes as they wish. Each group begins by dividing the feelings into three piles: good, neutral, and bad. Each group creates its own strategies for compiling a sequential list of feelings. One student explained, "Organizing was hard, especially keeping track of all the feelings, counting them, and getting them into a list."

2. Next the entire class works with the teacher to combine their lists and compile a master list of emotions—from most positive to most negative. When disagreement arises, each child involved must present a specific situation in which, for instance, feeling betrayed would be worse than feeling frustrated. One third grader expressed her opinion clearly, "Betrayed is if you tell your friend something really private and then she tells your secret to everyone. That's the worst

feeling."

3. Once the master list is compiled, each student chooses one feeling to write on construction paper. She chooses a color which she feels best fits the emotion she is drawing. Some students choose to make their letters reflect the feeling—for instance a student may write CONFIDENT in all capital block letters, whereas scared might be written in jagged, slanted letters. This year, my third graders suggested drawing faces to show each feeling. The expressions they created are included at the end of the article.

4. Once all the emotion words are on paper, the class puts them up, one at a time, in the order they determined. (A clothesline works best for this, but a bulletin board will do.)

5. Next each child decorates and puts his name on a clothespin. He attaches the clothespin to whichever word best describes the way he is currently feeling.

6. Students continue to move their clothespins on the emotion continuum throughout the year. We add new emotions as we discover them.

Students move their clothespins as often as they wish. They tend to move after important events in the school day, such as class presentations or recess. The continuum provides an ongoing and safe opportunity for individuals to share their feelings by publicly moving their clothespins to "frustrated" after a difficult group activity or "proud" after presenting a speech to the class. Occasionally I give the entire class an opportunity to move their clothespins, then use a class meeting to invite students to discuss their reasons for moving to a certain feeling.

I make and use my own clothespin. When they find out that I am going to share my feelings with them, the students, especially those who feel tentative about opening up, feel more comfortable sharing their feelings with one another. It

also helps them see that I'm human.

The spontaneous events which result from the improvisations, ordering the emotions, and using the continuum are interesting to observe. I've included highlights of discussions overheard while the children were working.

"Lonely feels like no one wants to be with you."

"Delighted is like happy except a little better."

"You can feel more than one feeling at a time. You would probably feel angry at yourself for being jealous."

"Someone could hurt your feelings by saying, 'I don't want you on this team.' Then you feel hurt. Hurt feels bad inside. Like falling down and getting hurt, but no blood."

"I hugged this man who was wearing the same jacket as my dad. He said, 'Who are you, kid?' I was so embarrassed!"

"It's good to be sorry isn't it? Wait, but if you're sorry it means you probably did something bad."

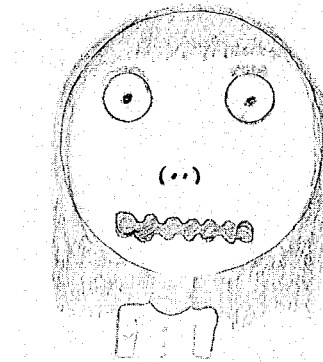
"When you're proud, it's even better than happy. You feel great!"

Children's natural curiosity about themselves and others leads them to these discoveries. Through the creation and use of the emotion continuum, children strengthen intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. This awareness of self and others enables children to become more sensitive and perceptive learners and friends.

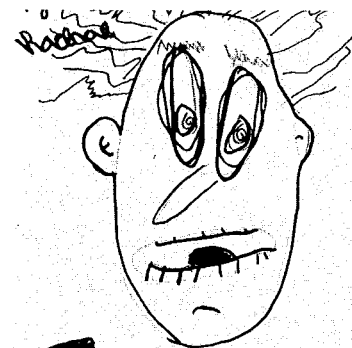
APPENDIX:

This list represents the third grade students' arrangement of feelings from most positive to most negative. This list is not meant to serve as a guide. Each group of students will create its own unique list of important feelings.

surprised
happy
delighted
excited
proud
glad
adventurous
confident
curious
comfortable
sympathetic
arrogant
sorry
nervous
worried
glum
upset
disappointed
lonely
embarrassed
uncomfortable
grumpy
grouchy
scared
envious
hurt
mad
sad
frustrated
betrayed
ashamed
disgusted
depressed
furious



Worried



Scared



This girl looks like she's surprised.

CONFUSED

