Analyzing Self-Expression Through Art

Emily Fajt
1st/2nd Grade Multi-age Intern
Park Forest Elementary School
State College Area School District
eaf5050@psu.edu

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Abstract

In any primary classroom, students experience conflict. I wondered how teaching students new techniques to cope with their emotions and practice self-expression using visual arts, music, drama, and movement would impact our classroom atmosphere. I assumed my students would enjoy artistic activities but was interested to see if our classroom disagreements would lessen. Read on to find out how it worked!

Context

Park Forest Elementary School is located in State College Area School District. This district lies right next to the Pennsylvania State University. Park Forest Elementary, or PFE as it is commonly known, educates children from kindergarten through fifth grade. I work as a Professional Development intern in a first and second multiage classroom at PFE.

In my class, there are twenty-one students. Eleven of them are first-graders, four boys, and seven girls. The other ten children are second-graders, of these, six are boys and four are girls. Twenty of my students are Caucasian, and one first-grade boy is African American. All of my students have unique behavioral, social, and mental characteristics. One of my first-grade students recently transferred to PFE from the HEARTS program (Helping Elementary At-Risk To Succeed) and is
adjusting to PFE. A paraprofessional accompanies him at all times to help with this transition.

Four of the twenty-one students are above average in nearly every academic subject. Seven children, four second-graders and three first-graders, attend Response to Intervention (RTI) instruction, once each day. One first-grader attends speech therapy. One second-grader has been diagnosed with autism and is accompanied by a paraprofessional for the duration of the school day.

Our classroom has whole group instruction during writing, science, and social studies. The class splits, according to grade level, during both math and spelling, to suit the curricula of each grade. Each day Guided Reading is differentiated by flexible grouping based on each student's assessment of reading behavior through Running Records.

I notice two major cliques among the girls in my class, and one among the boys. Though most students have at least two, or more, close friends, there are at least three children that do not regularly interact with other kids, and tend to work/play individually when given the opportunity.

**Wonderings and Questions**

**Main Wondering:**

How does self-expression, through various art forms, such as: visual art, music, drama, and movement, impact children’s emotions?

**Sub-Questions:**
• How will giving students an emotional outlet be beneficial for both positive and negative emotions?
• How will this change the way students feel about themselves, if at all? Is this a change I will see in their journals, art forms, or both?
• Which art form will be most successful for each of my learners?
• How can I get these artistic, positive methods of self-expression to translate to real-life situations?

Data Collection

Before:

Before beginning the inquiry process I decided to gather some baseline data from my students. I interviewed four of my kids about their feelings during school and dealing with peers. I also surveyed my entire class to ask them their feelings about school, communicating with one another, and how they are best able to express their emotions (See Appendix C for a blank student survey). During the survey I decided to also ask my students what activity, if any, they prefer to do when upset and write it at the bottom of the survey (See Appendix D to view completed copies of students’ surveys).

During:

During my actual lessons, I videotaped two, and took pictures during all of the lessons (See Appendix E for pictures, see Appendix F for my lesson plan on drama). I also gave each child a personal, private journal to write in throughout the
course of my inquiry project. Students were sometimes asked to respond to prompts or write about a specific activity. The students could also write about their own thoughts or feelings whenever they wanted and, if given their permission, I was allowed to read them (See appendices G for journal excerpts). Additionally, I also have examples of student work from both the visual art and music activities (See Appendix H for examples of student work). In addition, I kept a journal myself and would ask students questions after each activity to see if they liked it, thought it was useful, or would apply the method in their day-to-day lives. I also took anecdotal notes on each activity to help me reflect if it went well and what I could change for future lessons. Lastly, to measure the amount of times there was an upset student in my class, I kept a chart every week, where I marked if any of the students cried and if so, how many times.

After:

After ending my inquiry project, I compiled my findings from anecdotal observations to compare them. In addition, I had the students write one final journal entry reflecting on the entire experience. I also interviewed the same four children from the beginning of my inquiry. Lastly, I re-surveyed the entire class once again (See Appendix I or blank student survey). This survey gave me great insight to my learners’ thinking and contained a great deal of valuable information (See Appendix J for completed student surveys).

Data Analysis

Steps to Analyze Data:
Some of my data was much easier to categorize than others. Surveys and my record of children crying provided hard data that could be tallied. Anecdotal notes, art samples, and feelings journals were very valuable and informative in my inquiry, but were much more difficult to organize and analyze.

*Student Surveys*

I looked at the student surveys as a way to see the emotions and actions of my entire class as a whole. Since I conducted the first survey before I began implementing my art activities, it was a good way for me to see how students were able to express themselves when upset and how often they felt upset when at school. I used the results of this survey as baseline data and to compare what the students liked to do when upset after my inquiry was over.

*The Crying Log*

Though at first it may seem insensitive that I kept a crying log, I always helped and listened to my students when they became upset first. Additionally, I did not necessarily find it to be a bad thing that some of my students cried during class. To me, this showed that they felt comfortable enough with other kids to express themselves. I would much rather have my children be crying out of anger/frustration than hurting another person. Not to mention, as time went on it was nice to see other children comforting my students if he or she was upset and crying.

*Anecdotal Notes and Observations*

The notes I took as I observed my students and asked them questions about the different activities have been very valuable to me as I formulated my claims. I
looked at my observation notes to examine how certain kids reacted and participated compared to the rest of the group. Many times if he/she was not very involved in an activity I could look into his/her feelings journal to see why.

Art Samples and Feelings Journals

When I read the students’ journals and saw how much individuals enjoyed a certain activity, this was usually reflected in the quality of their artwork. Many of my children who do not usually take very much time on their art in the normal classroom setting really surprised me with their high level of focus on the activity and their finished products of artwork.

Explanation of Findings

Claim 1

Having a journal has been a positive outlet for student self-expression.

Evidence

When I first opened the journal on top of my heaping pile, I did not have that high of expectations. I assumed my children offered mostly short answers, if not one-word ones to my questions so that they could be finished with writing and do a different activity in my room. My assumptions were confirmed when I opened the journal of one of my high-achieving second graders who has quite a few friends in the classroom and his journal said “I feel hungry because I want pizza.” I am used to such comments so I was not surprised, but as I turned a few more pages I read on, (with some spelling adjustments), “I liked the activities because I like all the
feelings” and “I always get caught in the middle of stuff.” Both of these pages had illustrations to go along with them. I thought these were pretty powerful statements made and I was pleasantly surprised to see this child had taken advantage of using his feelings journal. Another one of my students, a girl in first grade, reflected on our Day of Drama by writing, “I feel scared and nervous.” As time went on she may have gotten more comfortable with the activities or liked the movement lesson better. For this lesson she wrote, “I feel ok in this activity” and included an illustration of her and a peer smiling. On several occasions, my students approached me during their free time and asked to write in their feelings journals. At first, I thought it would be a good way to log their feelings just for the duration of the inquiry project. However, in my final survey I asked children if they would want to keep their journals even after my lessons on different art forms was over. Almost the entire class said they would like to keep the journals and keep writing!

Claim 2

Though the self-expression methods taught and illustrated during my inquiry lessons were well received by my students they did not necessarily transfer into real-life settings.

Evidence

All of the children I interviewed said they enjoyed our “Day of Drama” where the students were asked to act out various emotions and also watched a short video called “Getting Your Angries Out.” I was pleased that even some of my shiest students were really engaged in the lesson and having fun. However, the next day I
had the children write in their feelings journals about the Day of Drama. I asked them if they felt the methods explained in the video would be something they could use in real life. 86% of my students said they thought the video was cool, but not something they would use in real life. I interviewed one student who said this, and also read in her journal, “I thought the video “Get Your Angries Out” was funny,” since the video was not meant to be comical, I assumed this meant that this particular student would most likely not take a strategy away from it. Though I have seen fewer conflicts in my class based on my anecdotal notes, I also have not seen children using any methods taught in my inquiry lessons to express themselves in ways that do not hurt others. In my end of the lesson survey, I once again noticed that only two students in my class of twenty-one children said they would be able to apply these methods of self-expression to their everyday lives. This lead to the creation of my last sub-wondering, “How can I get these artistic, positive methods of self-expression to translate to real-life situations?”

Claim 3

Students felt more comfortable around their classmates after participating in the inquiry activities.

Evidence

As I began developing lessons for my inquiry, even I was a bit nervous about some of the activities, particularly the drama and movement ones. Apart from having to be goofy in front of my kids, mentor teacher, paraprofessionals, and possibly a parent volunteer, I also was worried that the children would not like the
lessons and would not participate. Despite my nerves, I went into the lesson with tons of enthusiasm. It really paid off. The children, even some of my shiest students were very involved and wrote in their feelings journals that they enjoyed the lessons where they performed in front of the class. I also got a great deal of feedback from the final surveys that my children completed. Both the performance lessons, drama and music ones, were very popular as the favorite lesson on the students’ final surveys. Though all of the lessons were represented as the favorite, those two were certainly liked the most. In addition, my anecdotal notes and crying log were very instrumental in helping me come to this conclusion. Through observing my students I noticed that many of them were more comfortable as the semester went on. I could tell this by seeing children interact with students beyond their usual crowd of friends. Also, I noticed a lot more put-ups and positive comments shared among my children. Some of these were shared about artwork, acting abilities, and facial expressions, which not only pleased me but helped foster my classroom community. The crying log actually showed an increase in students crying. Originally, this disappointed me. However, after consulting with my peers I realized that this could prove that my children were actually more comfortable with one another, so comfortable in fact that they were not embarrassed to express themselves through crying. Also, though we had an increase in students crying, there was a decrease in classroom skirmishes and unwanted physical contact which was one of my major hopes in doing this inquiry.

Reflections and Implications for Future Practice
From the beginning, I have noticed a significant problem with my primary students taking out their anger on one another. Clearly, this is a behavior I want to discourage. At the same time, I think it is important to tell my students that it is okay to be angry and upset, they just need to be careful about what they do with those feelings. I chose to implement art forms in the classroom because I thought my students would enjoy all the different forms of art. I was right in thinking they, for the most part, would like the activities. In the survey we took after my inquiry lessons, I was glad to see that the kids chose a variety of different lessons as their favorite. This showed me that the differences really appealed to many of my learners.

Reading through the students’ journals really opened my eyes. I could understand their behavior so much better. Little things that were meant to be fun in the classroom made many of my students worried or nervous. I also saw that my children were a lot deeper of thinkers than I realized. For example, one of my high achieving students who excels in all subject areas feels she does very poorly in math, and gets really upset when she gets into a skirmish with one of my other students. I also noticed that some of my children feel caught in the middle of certain social situations. Others feel embarrassed when they have to speak or share answers aloud, even when they know the answers. Looking at these journals helped me see just how deep my learners’ feelings are. Though they are young, their emotions are just as strong as many adults. For the majority of my students, having this journal was a terrific outlet for their feelings. 71% of my students responded, “yes” on the survey for liking their feelings journals. I plan to return them for the students to
keep after this inquiry, and continue to write in them. 95% of my class said either “yes” or “maybe” on the survey about planning to continue writing in their journals. I was really happy to see my learners so keen on writing and journaling, especially since getting them to write is sometimes a challenge!

Though I may not have gotten the results I originally expected, I still learned a great deal from conducting my inquiry project. I became more in touch with my students’ feelings and inner thoughts. Not to mention, I saw many students really come out of their shells. I feel that these lessons strengthened my primary community and made all of us, myself included, feel more comfortable being ourselves in the classroom.
APPENDIX A

Inquiry Brief

Context:

Park Forest Elementary School is located in State College Area School District. This district lies right next to the Pennsylvania State University. Park Forest Elementary, or PFE as it is commonly known, educates children from kindergarten through fifth grade. I work as a Professional Development intern in a first and second multiage classroom at PFE.

In my class, there are twenty-one students. Eleven of them are first-graders, four boys, and seven girls. The other ten children are second-graders, of these, six are boys and four are girls. Twenty of my students are Caucasian, and one first-grade boy is African American. All of my students have unique behavioral, social, and mental characteristics. One of my kids just transferred to PFE from the HEARTS program, Helping Elementary At-Risk To Succeed, and is adjusting PFE. He is having a paraprofessional accompany him at all times to help with this transition.

Four of the twenty-one students are above average in nearly every academic subject. Seven children, four second-graders and three first-graders, attend Response to Intervention (RTI) instruction, once each day. One first-grader attends speech therapy. One second-grader has been diagnosed with autism and is accompanied by a paraprofessional for the duration of the school day.
Our classroom has whole group instruction during writing, science, and social studies. The class splits, according to grade level, during both math and spelling, to suit the curricula of each grade. Also, the class experiences differentiated instruction, based on ability grouping for reading each day.

I notice two major cliques among the girls in my class, and one among the boys. Though most students have at least two, or more, close friends, there are at least three children that do not regularly interact with other kids, and tend to work/play individually when given the opportunity.

Rationale:

My class frequently has issues with social cliques. My students often complain of verbal, and sometimes physical squalls, as well as students being left out or called names. When I confront the conflicting parties, the “bullies” seem to have seen no alternative outlet for their emotions.

My mentor and I deal with conflict resolution nearly everyday. Regardless of how much we teach children to use I-messages, or talk about their feelings, this does not seem to be working. I am interested to see if setting expectations to handle this problem, by giving students a different way to express their emotions before conflict happens, would nip this problem in the bud.

Potentially, equipping my kids with such skills could create more of a utopia within the classroom and relieve some responsibility from my mentor and myself.

Major Wondering:
How does self-expression, through various art forms, such as: visual art, music, drama, or dance, impact children’s emotions?

Sub-Questions:

• How will giving students an emotional outlet be beneficial for both positive and negative emotions?

• How will this change the way students feel about themselves, if at all? Is this a change I will see in their journals, arm forms, or both?

• Which art form will be most successful for each of my learners?

Data Collection Ideas:

Before:

• Interview a few select children about their feelings during school and with their peers

• Survey students and ask them their feelings about school, communicating with their peers, and how they best are able to express all emotions, in particular anger or sadness. (Do they ever feel violent when angry? Do they ever act on those feelings?)

• Interview PFE’s Music and Art teachers, as well as our Emotional Support counselor regarding their knowledge about students using the arts to outlet their feelings. Also, I will ask if there are any students in particular, who shine during these classes.

During:
• Videotape at least two lessons where the students are able to try a new art form

• Consult students’ emotional journals, with permission, about how the kids are feeling with this new method as an emotional outlet. I plan to have them write in these at least once a week.

• Take anecdotal notes on the activities, paying particular attention to those interviewed

• Do another survey evaluating the kids feelings about this new center and if they are having the same emotional feelings.

• Write journals reflecting on my questions and sub-questions

After:

• Compile findings from anecdotal observations and compare

• Re-interview the students from before, and ask many of the same questions, with a few more in addition

• Re-survey the entire class, using the same questions and a few more in addition

Timeline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th><strong>Feb 8-12</strong></th>
<th>Begin “before” data collection, begin interviews of both my students and adult interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td><strong>Feb 15-19</strong></td>
<td>Introduce my new center to students, begin “during” data collection, complete reflection that relates to sub-questions, take anecdotal notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td><strong>Feb 22-26</strong></td>
<td>Continue “during” data collection, videotape one or more of my lessons, continue taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>Dates</td>
<td>Task Description</td>
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<td>--------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>March 1-5</td>
<td>Survey my students on how they like the new center, ask a few questions about if they think it is fun/useful, videotape one or more of my lessons, continue taking notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>March 8-12</td>
<td><strong>SPRING BREAK!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>March 15-19</td>
<td>Read through my students’ journals about their feelings on the new center, continue taking anecdotal notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 7</td>
<td>March 22-26</td>
<td>Videotape another lesson, continue taking anecdotal notes, reflect on my sub-questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>March 29- April 2</td>
<td>Read through my students’ journals about their feelings on the new activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>April 5-9</td>
<td>Continue taking anecdotal notes, complete reflection that relates to sub-questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 10</td>
<td>April 12-16</td>
<td>Read through my students’ journals about their feelings, draft due!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 11</td>
<td>April 19-23</td>
<td>Work on my inquiry final and my inquiry presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 12</td>
<td>April 26-30</td>
<td>Work on my inquiry final and my inquiry presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 13</td>
<td>May 3-8</td>
<td>Prepare for inquiry conference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Annotated Bibliography


This book is an excellent resource for me because it incorporates all the elements of art I plan to use in my inquiry: visual, music, dance and drama. Though this book focuses primarily on incorporation of the art into various academic subjects, I can employ the methods on engagement with my own students even though we will be using for self-expression. Diaz examines the aesthetic experience at the individual level, which, again, is useful for me because my students will undoubtedly react differently to my new center, and being able to help each individual work through his or her feelings will be imperative.


This book is focused on getting students to open up about how they are feeling. Gutteridge writes about creating an emotionally healthy classroom where children feel valued and confident about managing and responding to feelings. Some of the emotions discussed will be really beneficial to my inquiry, including confidence, hope, resilience, disappointment, sadness, frustration, etc. There are some great ideas that I can use for my centers. They include ideas for all abilities.


This book has a lot of excellent ideas for dealing with unruly children. Leaman concentrates on giving meaningful consequences when student do not meet expectations. She also focuses a great deal on student individuality. Since my inquiry will affect each of my kids differently, this is very important for me. I want to discover which art form, if any, is effective and fun for each
student. I believe if I am equipped to deal with any negative or resistant behavior that I will be better prepared for my inquiry. So far, I think I am going to insist that each student tries my new activity, at least once, before decided that he/she does not like it and want to participate.


Martin describes art as a pragmatic resource that teachers can employ to get through to those hard-to-reach students. This book will help me to organize an atmosphere for my children that will allow them to feel comfortable expressing their emotions. The book will have many suggestions for providing such sensory support for autistic students. So, the better teacher I can be for my students with special needs.


This dissertation is similar to my own wondering of how children express their emotions through artwork. Minam mentions that students typically will make “happy” or positive drawings, even when they are not feeling that way. Though this is not necessarily a bad thing, in my inquiry I want to focus on the children being able to express all emotions, good or bad. Minam writes about a Korean student she has who expresses all her emotions, good and bad through drawing. Studying Minam’s methods for data collection will help me see how I can do this with my own students.


This source defines exactly what art therapy is, who it helps, and who it can primarily help. It also delves into deeper uses for art therapy and how
it can help individuals work through various emotions. This will be helpful to me because art therapy is essentially what I am attempting to do with my children. I want to equip them with the tools to outlet their feelings in a safe and responsible way, rather than fighting or hurting another person.


This is an excellent resource for teachers having issues with control in their rooms. Much like Leaman, Savage advises against pointing a finger or judging others for problems, instead he recommends employing logical consequences. This book will help in my inquiry because I want to control my own emotions and actions toward student behavior. If I can do this, perhaps I can model for my kids to do it as well.


This article will be fabulous for me because it really discusses all the art forms I want to focus on in my inquiry: visual, music, dance and drama, though the focus of their research was on visual arts. These authors examine how allowing children to draw and explain a solution to a problem, in this case a problem in a storybook, can help get many more creative and unique answers than simply asking kids to write their thoughts. The two discuss how teachers can get kids to enter another world by appealing to multiple senses. Soundy and Drucker write about the “all-important connection between imagination and engagement.” I want to channel this into my students so that they can be immersed in my activities and find one they enjoy and would use on their own. Also, this article had a good idea for going about data collection, which I might employ.


This article is a teacher’s reflection of her own emotions and the best ways she has found to deal with them. It was helpful to me in that it discusses the importance of self-reflection and redirection of energy. If this works with adults then I think I can definitely employ it in my own
classroom. I am also anxious to see if in using it as a teacher I can be more ready to help my students deal with conflict without getting frustrated, or even if I can model for them how to calmly talk out a problem.


This was my only resource that focused on drama. This article was helpful in that it told me that my kids will gain experience working with others, and self-confidence, two things I think could really benefit my students, through drama. I was nervous about using this in my inquiry, because compared to some other areas of the arts, I am not as experienced with acting. However, after reading the benefits for all students, I am really ready to give this a go! Watson, also points that the arts are a great way to “‘distract young minds away from all things electronic and get them socializing.’” This could really be a first step in having my students effectively communicate their feelings with one another and get along better as a community.
APPENDIX C

“when I am feeling upset I [like to] be by myself”
Being angry or sad at school happens to me:

A lot
Sometimes
Not a lot
Never
angry
sad

I can express my emotions when I am feeling upset:

A lot
Sometimes
Not a lot
Never

When other kids take out their feelings on me by yelling or hitting I feel:

I take my feelings out on other kids by yelling or hurting others:

A lot
Sometimes
Not a lot
Never
yelling
hurting

Go up stairs and play.

“Go upstairs and play.”
APPENDIX D

Students creating masks to fit certain emotions for our movement lesson
APPENDIX E

We will begin with a game called, "Everyone's Face". It is a good way for kids to get to know specifics about one another and feel comfortable for the day of drama!

Add Comment

1. First, we will begin our acting with an activity on pantomiming called " anonymously. I will read the following while the kids act it out:

   Start now: your face is completely closed. Your arms and legs are raised from a single piece of wood. You can't move any part of yourself at all.
   The main goal is to keep your face straight. However, you can use your hands to act out your emotions. Try and move your eyebrows.
   The spell keeps moving. Now you can move your eyes! All your lips you've been marching straight ahead, and now you can look in the sides.
   The spell goes to your head. You can move your head to the left and right. You can move your hands, and you can move your feet.
   The spell goes to your neck. You can move your neck. You can move your head to the left and right. You can move your hands, and you can move your feet.
   The spell goes to your body. You can move your body. You can move your arms and legs, and you can move your feet.
   The spell goes to your hands. You can move your hands. You can move your arms and legs, and you can move your feet.

Add Comment

To bring the kids up for computer lab, I will play a song that goes from calm, to loud and quick, and back to calm. I will tell the students to move as the music inspires them to move.

Add Comment

Kneewalks: The kids will take lots of walking, basically this whole lesson involves movement.

Verbal: During the beginning exercise the student in the middle will be speaking, they will also talk to guess one another’s emotions.

Auditory: The students will need to listen to my instructions throughout. They will also be listening to one another to know what to do for our warm-up. Also, they will need to focus on hearing the music to warm up.

Add Comment

Writing in their feelings journals during center on Friday.
"I liked when we painted the fireworks. My favorite was the (unknown)"
"I felt embarrassed I did no like to dance no because I just go and play"
APPENDIX G

![Image of a child's drawing with the word "silly" written above it.]

![Image of another child's drawing with the words "WOW! HAPPY!" written below it.]
APPENDIX H

Student Survey

1.) Did you feel comfortable doing the drama and movement activities in our classroom?

Yes            Sort of            No

*Why?________________________________________________________

2.) Do you think you will be able to use the methods taught to you for drawing or using movement to “Get Your Angries Out” in real life?

Yes            Maybe            No

3.) Which lesson did you enjoy the most:

- Drawing Lesson
- Drama Lesson
- Music Lesson
- Movement Lesson

*Why did you like this lesson the most? __________________________

4.) Did you like having a feelings journal?

Yes            Sort of            No

5.) Would you like to keep writing in your journal when I return them to you?

Yes            Maybe            No

*Is there anything else you would like to share?
APPENDIX I

“I was sort of nervous”
“I was embarrassed dancing in front of the class.”

“I like to draw because it makes me calm.”
“because I felt a little embarrassed.”

“because I liked listening to the Pinocchio story” (from drama lesson)