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# positive CLASSROOM COMMUNITIES

Activities to Support Students'  
Emotional and Social Growth

TANIA CAMPANELLI AND STACY SIMONYI

*with Katherine Lee*

HEINEMANN • PORTSMOUTH, NH

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Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

ISBN-13: 978-0-325-17991-9

4500923381 r1.26

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## Introduction

### What does a happy, connected, and compassionate classroom look and sound like?

In classrooms that focus on connections, the class community (students, teachers, paraprofessionals, and all who work with the class) are able to see themselves in the space. In connected classrooms, the class community takes pride in their space, by helping to organize the classroom and being responsible for class materials. The class community also has the shared responsibility of helping everyone feel physically and emotionally safe. In compassionate classrooms, relationship building and prioritizing students' voices are key factors in making sure all community members feel seen and heard.

This might feel like a lofty goal; however, the purpose of this book is to help teachers use social and emotional learning (SEL) general practices and activities to create connected and compassionate classroom communities. This is an ongoing process. While focusing on building connections at the beginning of

the school year is valuable, it can't stop there; teachers need to intentionally plan lessons that focus on fostering community building and compassion throughout the school year.

## Why incorporate SEL into community building?

In her book *Thrivers: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine*, educational psychologist Michele Borba (2021) observed that more students than ever before are struggling. Younger and younger children are feeling stressed and dealing with mental health issues (like anxiety and depression).

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022), 11.8 percent of children in the United States aged 3–17 years (approximately 7.3 million) were diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression in 2020. This is a 25.5 percent increase from 2016, which indicated that 9.4 percent of children aged 3–17 years (approximately 5.8 million) were diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression. These numbers didn't include children who were not officially diagnosed.

Before we can even begin to think about academic lessons, we need to ensure that students are emotionally ready for the day. Which students need breakfast? Who needs a hug because they are feeling sad? Who needs to draw to help them feel more centered? Who needs help resolving a conflict with their friends that occurred during recess? Who had a nightmare and needs to talk about it? Who is worried because they got into an argument with a family member? That is a lot to think about and attend to before children can access their learning.

Sometimes, the answers to these kinds of questions are readily available. Some students who need extra support express their own needs, or they exhibit dysregulated behaviors and struggle to follow classroom expectations, and that gives us some clues that something deeper is going on that we need to look into and then provide the support the student needs. Other times, students who need extra support aren't so easily recognizable. Many students who are experiencing anxiety, depression, or are feeling oversensitive can't fully explain it, and because they may be following classroom expectations, we may not realize that they need support. Taking the time to mindfully incorporate SEL ensures that we are addressing both the known and unknown needs of students.

This is the first essential step in creating a community in the classroom: teachers seeing their students and trying to meet their social and emotional needs. The next step is to take the time to teach all students social and emotional skills. Once a connected and compassionate environment exists, students can thrive academically. While there are some very good SEL curricula, very few

schools support teacher learning and agency around addressing and supporting students' social and emotional needs themselves, not just through a program where the school counselor comes in once a week (if that). Educators are being told to incorporate SEL in their classrooms, but are often given very few, if any, resources. These programs often teach SEL through isolated skills; however, learning and practicing social and emotional skills are meant to be done with others for the purpose of creating a community.

We wrote this book to give teachers and other adults working with children an informed framework for supporting social and emotional development to create a connected and compassionate classroom environment so children can be ready to learn. We've put together a collection of SEL activities and general practices that focus on community building. Each activity and practice has been designed with teacher agency in mind; you know your students best, so make our suggestions work for your classroom. Many activities provide a jumping-off point as a way into a particular SEL component that allows for adaptation based on your needs and your students'. While we encourage you to research and create your own activities, this book provides a starting point for those new to SEL and new ideas for teachers who are already doing some of this work.

It is also important to note that this book is not offering a program but rather a collection of activities and practices that can be used flexibly in any K–5 classroom setting. Reading this book does not replace taking an SEL course. The information and activities shared in this book are meant to enhance current SEL programs being used, provide an introduction for those new to SEL practices, and provide suggestions for how SEL work can inform classroom community building. We both identify as white, cisgender females of European ancestry, and we are aware that these identities inform how we think about social-emotional learning, in that our experiences as white educators shape how we interpret race, ethnicity, and language and how traditional schools situate those identities when they intersect with SEL work. This work is best done in conjunction with training about culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as training about strategies that disrupt systems of injustice within our education system.

## Getting Started

Trying new things in the classroom can be a scary endeavor, especially because SEL is nuanced; no matter how experienced you become, your teaching always depends on the needs of the students in front of you. It's difficult to always know exactly what those needs are because they can change quickly depending on situations between peers, within the school, at home, or in the community.

You will not have all the answers and may feel like a novice—which can be uncomfortable. To be okay with imperfection requires vulnerability. Brené Brown, in *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, equates being vulnerable to having courage (2012). We think this is necessary for all teachers—who experience vulnerability in countless ways every day—to hear.

There's power in being vulnerable, experiencing uncertainty, and making mistakes. Let us say that again for the people in the back, IT IS OKAY TO MAKE MISTAKES! Children don't need teachers to be perfect and have all the answers, they just need us to be "safe enough and healthy enough" (Souers and Hall 2016, 96). Educators who strive for perfection or delay action in order to attempt to have all the answers run the risk of breaking an established connection with a student. Don't take for granted the power of approaching a student and saying, "I see that you are struggling. I don't exactly know how to help you, but I'm here and we'll figure it out."

When we have the mindset of *I need to be the one who fixes this child*, it doesn't help the child. Children don't need to be *saved*; they need to feel *seen*. We will never be ready with all the answers, but we can be open, we can be curious, and we can listen. This is an important stance to come from as we work to build classroom communities that feel safe and inclusive. Remember, teaching is not done in isolation. Surround yourself with people who can support you and your students, help you develop your SEL teaching practices, and collaborate to determine students' needs and next steps. Your team should also include people who will help you recognize when a child needs greater support than what can be offered in school, such as some kind of therapeutic help or outside intervention. Also, keep close to colleagues who will hold you accountable with compassion, acknowledge when you make a mistake, and help you learn from it.

## How to Use This Book

Chapter 1 provides an overview of social and emotional learning in a connected classroom, as well as an overview of the checklist of social and emotional skills that we created. This checklist is based on the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) components and grew from a need that we, as practicing teachers, had ourselves. We noticed that while many schools may allocate time to go over math and literacy data, educators are not provided with that same time to focus on data regarding social and emotional needs. We wanted a resource to help facilitate conversations about children's social and emotional skill development, and to help clarify the goals we're supporting children with.



Following the initial chapter, there are five sections in which we provide overviews, general practices, and activities that support connected, compassionate classroom communities. Each section is focused around one of the five components of SEL, according to CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Figure I-1



- The **overviews** provide additional information about the overall CASEL components, extending each component into relevant subcomponents for teachers.
- The **general practices** are the ways we incorporate SEL through the everyday approaches we use with our students. They are built into the classroom culture; how we teach, organize our space, and establish relationships with students. These general practices are a good starting point if you are new to SEL.
- The **activities** are designed for all elementary-aged students; therefore, there are no grade levels attached to the activities. However, where necessary, activities include ways to modify them for the needs of the students in your class. There are many ways to adapt beyond what we suggest, and we trust teachers to use the activities in a way that feels best for them and their students.

# 2

## Self-Awareness in a Connected and Compassionate Classroom

### Overview of Self-Awareness

Self-awareness means understanding oneself, including personal motivations, emotions, and values. These *intrapersonal* skills are part of students' emotional development and become assets toward healthy growth as children become adolescents and grow into adulthood. Intrapersonal skills are essential prerequisites to building *interpersonal skills*, the skills we use when communicating, playing, and working with others. Any time a child is interacting with others, they are using interpersonal skills.

Self-awareness is an integral part of establishing a connected and compassionate classroom. The first step of community building is to be aware of yourself! Once you have awareness of yourself then you will have more awareness of others and be more equipped to begin to develop a community. When students have a strong sense of agency and independence, when they understand their identity and personal motivation, when they can recognize and ask for what they need, they are capable of making more meaningful connections with others, thus building a rich classroom community.

In this section, we include activities that help students develop self-awareness skills. The goal is for them to become more conscious of their thoughts, values, beliefs, preferences, and interests, which leads them to develop the skills they need to work with others. The activities and general practices in this section are organized based on the observable skills listed below from the Self-Awareness skills checklist.

## SELF-AWARENESS

- Student can recognize and articulate their emotions
- Student can identify and communicate their strengths
- Student can identify their individual characteristics (physical characteristics and personality traits)
- Student can identify and explain their values
- Student can explain their interests
- Student can keep trying new ways to complete a challenging task
- Student has confidence in their ability to take on a task or achieve a goal

## Subcomponents

There are many components under the umbrella of self-awareness. In this book, we focus on the subcomponents in which teachers have agency in helping to develop through activities and general classroom practices. These subcomponents are:

- Emotional literacy
- Identifying strengths of self
- Identity
- Growth mindset
- Self-efficacy

### *Emotional Literacy*

*Emotional literacy* is understanding one's emotions, including how and when different emotions are felt in the body. Emotional literacy is connected to emotional intelligence theory (Solovey and Mayer 1990), which posits that one must perceive, appraise, and express emotions before being able to regulate them to promote personal and intellectual growth.

Essentially, there are four primary emotions under which all other emotions can be categorized: glad, sad, angry, and afraid (Jack et al. 2014). However, there

is yet to be a consensus among theorists on the exact number of basic emotions. Ekman (1992) described six basic emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. Plutchik (1962), creator of the emotion wheel, described eight: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy. It is understandable that there is continued debate about emotions. First, emotions are internal, situational, and individual—what emotions are felt and how we feel them will be entirely unique. Additionally, emotions can be challenging to pinpoint. For example, a child outwardly expressing anger and frustration, such as ripping their worksheet, could internally be feeling sadness about the loss of a family pet. Open conversations with the class about feelings can help us better understand what might be behind a student’s dysregulation, which in turn helps us support individual students and the class as a whole.

Because of the ambiguity surrounding emotions, children can be overwhelmed by them and the feelings they create. Emotional literacy is essential to help elementary students begin to identify what certain emotions feel like in the body and understand that these feelings are not inherently good or bad but provide information (Brackett 2019). For example, if a student notices that they have a very fast heart rate, but haven’t done a lot of physical activity, this could be because they are feeling nervous or angry. The information is that when they are nervous or angry, their heart rate increases. This is not inherently good or bad, just something to be aware of to help decide next steps. We want students to develop a sense of curiosity about the way their body is feeling in relation to the emotion they are experiencing. Providing activities that promote emotional literacy can normalize emotional experiences; regularly talking about emotions means that children are more likely to become comfortable with doing so.

Building emotional intelligence also contributes to the well-being of others. The more a child can understand their own experience with emotions, the better they will be able to recognize—and empathize with—how others are doing. Emotional literacy work benefits everyone in the classroom community—adults *and* children.

It is important to acknowledge that the way emotions are expressed and talked about is dependent on many factors including geographic location, family dynamics, and peer groups. Teaching emotional literacy isn’t about teaching children how to express emotions or pressuring children to publicly emote or even share their emotions if they don’t feel comfortable. Instead, it’s about teaching children how to recognize their emotions, noting that doing so may look different for each individual. The goal of emotional literacy is for children to be able to notice and regulate their emotions in order to be functional and integrated members of the community.

### *Identifying Strengths of Self*

*Identifying strengths* as part of self-awareness is the ability to name the assets one brings to the world—or to a specific place, in this case, the classroom. Thinking poorly of ourselves can lead to a sense of competition and comparing ourselves with others, which can increase feelings of anxiety and depression. It can also lead to biased thinking and holding grudges. In contrast, thinking about ourselves (and others) from an asset-based stance focuses on individual strengths, which builds self-worth. Supporting children’s ability to develop asset-based thinking toward themselves can increase their confidence and sense of self-worth, as well as celebrate the uniqueness of the self.

Deficit-based thinking not only applies to how children view themselves but also to how teachers view their students. As per Davis and Museus, “deficit thinking fuels a wide array of negative consequences that reinforce oppressive systems and inequities in society and education” (2019, paragraph 15). When teachers take an asset-based perspective and use strengths-based approaches in the classroom, the class benefits from greater happiness, engagement, and academic achievement (Huebner et al. 2009).

It’s always quite interesting to hear what students of different ages consider to be their strengths. When we asked some students about their strengths, they said:

“Playing games.”—*Berina, kindergarten*

“Being fast and doing push-ups.”—*Exodas, kindergarten*

“Gaga ball, football, kicking, and video games.”—*Prayan, second grade*

“Drawing and making up magic stories.”—*Solomon, second grade*

“Soccer, gymnastics, and math.”—*Elise, second grade*

“I’m good at drawing and art.”—*Melissa, fourth grade*

“Sports, math, and writing.”—*Reese, fourth grade*

### *Identity*

In *This Book Is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action, and Do the Work* (2020), author Tiffany Jewell writes that *identity* can be described through *personal identity* and *social identity*. Personal identity is everything about oneself, including physical characteristics, personal interests, and core values. While many physical characteristics are static and unchanging, other aspects of personal identities grow and change. Aspects of personal identity can be influenced by media, including online content, music, and books. Personal identity can also be influenced by the people we are around. Social identity is the aspect of identity related to an individual’s community and social interaction. Social identities are labels created and defined by society, often with

historical context. These include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, age, language, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, nationality, abilities, and family structure.

Identity is an incredibly important component to address in the elementary classroom because this is the age when students are beginning to build their individuality—and because we have the opportunity as teachers to work to create genuinely inclusive communities where all children are seen and see themselves and where all aspects of their identities are valued and celebrated. We can support children’s understanding of the normalcy of changing their minds about interests and values while also identifying what makes them unique.

**TANIA:** *While I was working in the United States, I openly talked about my identity as a multilingual learner. Whenever I visit my family in Canada, I speak French so when I would come home from a long break, I might accidentally misspell a word while teaching my students (i.e., environnement instead of environment) or forget how to say a phrase in English because I could only remember it in French. This is part of my identity—so whenever it happened, I was able to model simply being proud of who I was instead of being embarrassed.*

We’ve included practices and activities in this chapter designed to help students identify the values and characteristics that are important to them, and to celebrate their varied identities. Different age levels will perceive their identities very differently. For example, when we asked kids of different ages, “What makes you . . . you?” they said:

“Playing video games and playing with my brother.”—*Exodas, kindergarten*

“I’m a kindergartner and I play soccer.”—*Emmanuel, kindergarten*

“I like to learn, I like to be funny, and sometimes mischievous.”—*Solomon, second grade*

“Your personality makes you you!”—*Delia, second grade*

“People say I am pretty, but I don’t care because it doesn’t matter what is outside, it matters what is on the inside.”—*Savannah, second grade*

“My personality, my hair, my skin, and my lifestyle.”—*Aaliyah, fourth grade*

“My hijab completes my personality, and it is colorful, so I have many choices to pick from.”—*Fatima, fourth grade*

### *Growth Mindset (Productive Struggle)*

We would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge the problem inherent in linking growth mindset to effort. Doing this can carry the assumption that everyone has the same access to resources and opportunities to support growth, which isn't the case. In extreme cases, the term *growth mindset* has been used to blame individuals for their lack of success. The idea is that if they worked hard enough, they could be successful, the *pull yourself up by your bootstraps* mentality, which doesn't acknowledge the systemic barriers in our society that prevent some individuals from succeeding despite how hard they work.

Growth mindset as we define it in the classroom, and use it throughout this book, is the belief that making mistakes in the classroom is valued and seen as a step toward learning. It's a productive struggle where challenges within the classroom setting help us learn and grow so we can develop academic resilience. Making mistakes helps a child's brain grow because it helps build additional connected neural pathways. When a child views a mistake with a growth mindset, they can recognize that, right now, multi-step word problems are challenging, but they are more open to getting support until they can solve the problems on their own (even if that is three weeks from now). With a fixed mindset, a child assumes that because right now multi-step word problems are challenging, they will always be challenging, and the child may determine they are *bad at math*. The key factor here, especially in terms of community, is the guidance and support of others. Students who have a growth mindset (as we are defining it) will be more open to help from others. They can also recognize the strengths of others and understand that not everyone contributes to their community in the same way—and every community member is valued.

### *Self-Efficacy*

*Self-efficacy* is having confidence in what you are learning, believing in your ability to take action, and feeling that a task is within your capacity (Bandura 1997). Self-efficacy is important to instill in elementary students to support agency and purpose for their learning. Students with self-efficacy will ask for help more often, feel confident in their ability to complete a task, take on more challenging tasks, and believe that they can make a difference.

## General Practices That Promote Self-Awareness Skills

We can incorporate SEL through the everyday approaches we use with our students. These general practices are part of the classroom culture. It is how we teach, organize our classroom, and establish relationships with students. The

following general practices offer some ideas on how to incorporate ways to build self-awareness skills within the community through the lens of:

- Emotional literacy
- Identifying strengths of self
- Identity
- Growth mindset
- Self-efficacy

## Daily Greetings

Every morning, meet the students at the classroom door and greet them all individually. Create a classroom culture where identities are supported by inviting students to share their interests or information about themselves through greetings.

**STACY:** As part of a morning routine, I would have a whiteboard easel with a question for students to answer after they greeted me at the door. The questions were related to sharing things about themselves. For example, "What is your favorite choice time activity?" or "What are you grateful for this day?" Sometimes the questions reflected what we were doing in the classroom, such as "Add a tally mark under the yoga pose we should do at morning meeting today" or "Write a word that rhymes with your name." These questions allowed students to express their interests, therefore sharing parts of their identities.

## Check-In

There are different ways to approach checking in with students when they arrive at class. Some teachers may have a morning meeting where they ask students how they're feeling, others may have a circle, and so on. Checking in gives us a sense of how students are feeling, individually and as a group, as they come into class, and we can then adjust instruction and the way we respond to them as necessary. Frequent check-ins can also help give students a space for sharing feelings, normalizing feelings, and helping them understand that feelings can change quickly.

**TANIA:** I start every morning with a circle and the first prompt is always a check-in. Sometimes each student simply gets to share what's on their mind, other times we might do a silent check-in where students can show how they are feeling. Finding ways to respond to check-ins is important, for instance, a student once shared that they were worried because their parents were taking a flight. In response, I decided we should talk about fears. Students shared things they were afraid of, and I found a book to read about the effects of fear in your body and common fears people have. Another example is when a student shared that they were feeling really tired and that they didn't want to be around others, I adjusted their math expectations for the day. They still had to complete the work, but I gave them an alternative activity that they could do on their own at their desk.

### Emotion Check-In on Students' Desks

After teaching about emotions (for activities to teach about emotions see the Mood Meter, Feelings Dictionary, or Class Book of Emotions activities later in this chapter), create mini check-ins for students' desks. Students might use a mini laminated mood meter to indicate their emotional state, an emotion wheel that spins to show the emotion, an emotion scale with a bead attached to a chenille stem that can be moved alongside the emotion, or cards with visuals or tactile representations of emotions that students can use to indicate how they're doing. It's important to include a variety of ways for students to participate to ensure that all students are included and empowered to communicate their emotions effectively. Desk check-ins allow them to communicate how they're feeling in an individualized and private way. With a glance around the classroom, you can identify students who might benefit from a conversation with you.

### Modeling and Think-Alouds by the Teacher

When teachers use modeling, especially by thinking aloud, it provides students with a demonstration of skills as well as language that can be used when they encounter similar situations. Think-alouds commonly happen as part of academic work—modeling a writing strategy or modeling the thought process behind solving a problem in math using different strategies. We can also model emotional literacy by naming our emotions and what we are feeling as we

experience the emotion. For example, you might say, “I’m feeling so proud right now as I watch you sharing ideas with each other in your partnerships. I know I’m feeling proud because I’m smiling, my shoulders are relaxed, and I’m taking happy sighs.”

**TANIA:** *It’s definitely happened before that I perceive student disruption to a lesson as off-task behavior when I’m already not feeling my best, and I’ve become dysregulated. When I catch myself doing this, I stop the lesson and tell them how I’m feeling, modeling strategies I might use to calm down: “I’m feeling frustrated, because I want to help you understand this material, but I’m not sure I’m explaining it well enough. I don’t like teaching when I’m feeling frustrated, so I’m going to take a minute—once I’m feeling more regulated, let’s talk about ways to tackle this together. I’m going to start by taking some deep breaths to calm down, then I’m going to pick my favorite color and try to find it around the room. Then I’m going to listen to the clock for thirty seconds. I think these strategies will help me calm down and get ready to dig back in.”*

## Normalize Effort

Through teacher language, modeling, classroom expectations, praising effort, and normalizing making mistakes as part of the learning process, we establish a culture of focusing on the learning process over the final product. When normalizing effort, focus on students’ progress and allow for *redos*—not just of assignments but of small behaviors.

You might say:

“Thank you to those of you who are participating, I know it might be hard right now. It’s the afternoon and it’s hot.”

“Oof. This lesson didn’t go according to plan. I tried my best. We’ll try this again tomorrow.”

“I see that some of you have written several pages, and others are focusing on getting all the details right on one or two pages. Both strategies are great, and I’m impressed!

“You’ve all been working on your math problems for a full fifteen minutes. Keep going but I just wanted to say great job!”

## Feedback Conversation

It is helpful, both for you and your students, to find out how each individual in your classroom likes to get feedback from their teachers. You can give students a quick survey asking them their preferred way to receive feedback. Options might include quiet individual praise, shout-out in front of the whole class, written praise on work, and so on. Acknowledging children's preferences creates a strong relationship between the teacher and the students; thus, adding to the sense of community. It's helpful to give this survey multiple times a year in case a child's preference changes.

**TANIA:** *I did a survey at the beginning of the year and discovered that Levi really likes being recognized in front of his peers because it keeps him motivated. During writing lessons, I make sure to give him shout-outs: "Everyone look at the work Levi did! He hasn't finished yet, but he's already written two full pages about turtles!"*

## Normalize Mistakes

It's important to tell students that making mistakes is not only okay, but also encouraged, as it helps brain development. It's important to model this as well—make sure students see you comfortably making mistakes across the day.

**TANIA:** *I am a horrible speller, and I occasionally take the opportunity to show my students that I need support by asking another adult in the room to help me spell a challenging word.*

## Asking for What We Need

Teach each student to identify and ask for what they need to get back on track when they're dysregulated. Part of this is teaching students about their options. Taking space is a good strategy if students are overwhelmed. Having some time to themselves before interacting with others is sometimes beneficial when students are dysregulated. Working on a different activity that is still academic based but of high preference for them (i.e., one child might love working with multiplication charts, another might enjoy word searches, another might prefer to work with manipulatives for math problems) is another option. For these to be effective

strategies, it's important to follow up with the student later, asking if the space, time, or an alternative activity helped—and then come up with a plan for them to complete any missed work.

**TANIA:** When a student let me know they didn't sleep well because they had nightmares all night and asked if they could just sit and listen to the math lesson instead of more actively participating, I recognized the self-awareness they exhibited and let them take the time to sit quietly. I followed up later to make sure they understood the lesson. Another time, when a student checked in saying they were feeling sad because their pet hamster died and asked for an alternate assignment because they were having a hard time focusing on the work, I praised them for recognizing and asking for what they needed, and we made a plan.

## Student Work

Post all students' work around the classroom or on a bulletin board in the hallway. Seeing their work being displayed helps students develop a sense of belief in themselves and in their capabilities. It's not about work being compared, it's about all student work being recognized and celebrated as an achievement. Never display just the *best* or neatest. It's also helpful to share student work from a wide variety of subject areas. This allows them to see their accomplishments, provides physical proof that they are capable of completing tasks, and honors every student's way of approaching an assignment or project.

**STACY:** To help rotate student work frequently, and to give students a sense of agency and pride for their work, I have a *Look What I Did!* bulletin board where I display students' work on clipboards that have been tacked to the bulletin board—one clipboard for each student in the class. As students complete a project they are particularly proud of, they clip it to the clipboard with their name. The bulletin board is frequently updated with work the student chooses for themselves, and I don't have to remove any staples or change the background.

## Closing Circle Show and Tell

Unlike traditional show and tell where students bring in objects from home to share with others, a closing circle show and tell focuses on academic work students are particularly proud of. This might be a math problem, a story, or an art creation. After students share their work, classmates comment or ask questions. This practice helps students identify their personal strengths. It can also promote social awareness as students recognize the strengths of others.

**STACY:** *As my students had more experiences with this process, I saw them begin to respect others' academic work in new ways, as well as develop an understanding that there are many ways to approach an assignment or complete a task. Students began to cheer their classmates on and to celebrate the work they shared. I also noticed that their comments and questions became more focused—at the beginning of the year many comments were of the "That's really cool!" variety. But by the end of the year comments were more directed, such as "I like the way you found two ways to solve the math problem" or "The colors you used in your picture make it realistic."*

## Activities That Promote Self-Awareness Skills

The following activities are provided to help students build their self-awareness skills. Each activity includes an explanation of how it relates to self-awareness and community building. While we have provided general plans for the whole class, feel free to modify to meet the needs of your students—you might use the activities in small groups or with individuals, either planned or responsively.

# Feelings Dictionary



After a whole-class discussion about emotions, each student will create a dictionary page that helps them define, illustrate, and share how and where they feel an emotion in their bodies.

## Subcomponent

Emotional literacy

## Observable Skill(s)

Student can recognize and articulate their emotions

## Length of Activity

10–15 minutes

## Materials Needed

- Each student will need a copy of the feelings dictionary template provided in the Online Resources: OR 2–1, My Feelings Dictionary
- You will also need chart paper, a large whiteboard, or a presentation slide separated into four sections labeled with the categories: happy, sad, mad, and scared



## How This Activity Supports Self-Awareness and Community Building

This activity provides a way to make emotions less abstract by having students reflect on how different feelings show up in their bodies. Identifying feelings can be a difficult task, even for adults. When children can connect a bodily sensation to an emotion and use language to name it, they will be better able to manage the emotion. Emotions present differently within each individual. Through this activity, students can learn about the uniqueness of their individual experiences. A feelings dictionary allows students to develop the language of emotions by collecting words derived from the basic emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. Developing this versatile language for feelings can make feeling big emotions less overwhelming.

Repeat this activity as needed so students can add to their personalized feelings dictionaries. The dictionaries can also become helpful reference tools for sharing their feelings with others. You might also refer to it in conversation with students who need support recognizing emotions.



## How to Do This Activity

1. With students, generate a list of emotion words. You might ask, "What emotion words do you know?" or "What emotion words have you heard before?" As students share each emotion word, discuss which basic emotion category it best aligns with, and add it to the appropriate place in your happy, sad, mad, or scared chart. Some emotion words, like joy, are easy to categorize under happy. But others are more difficult. *Surprise* can be thought of as a happy emotion (like when you get a surprise party!) but the initial emotion can sometimes be fear, even if just for a few seconds.
2. Explain to students that each person's body experiences emotions in different ways. If we can identify how emotions show up for us in our bodies, and determine when they are most likely to happen, it can help our brains understand what's happening in our bodies and then we're better able to know what to do. Model this process for the students by choosing one of the generated emotion words and filling out your own template as you think aloud. For example: "I'm going to choose *frustrated* for my first dictionary word. I'm going to illustrate it like a smiley face but with a jagged line for the mouth. I remember being frustrated when I forgot my coffee this morning (because you all know how much I love my morning coffee!). I remember that I was frowning, and my muscles were tense. In my dictionary, I'm going to write that under *Where I feel this emotion in my body*. Forgetting something is a time I notice being frustrated. I'm going to write that under *I notice this emotion most when . . .* Can you think of another time you've heard me say I was frustrated? When I don't feel I'm being heard. I'm going to add that to my list here."
3. Give each student a copy of the template. Have them choose an emotion word from the list generated together (or come up with their own) to use for their dictionary page.
4. As students work, if you notice them getting stuck
5. Illustrating an emotion word: You could have them look in a mirror to see what the emotion looks like or have another student model. But also, the emotion doesn't have to be represented as a facial expression! You might prompt students to think of a color, place, or object that represents the emotion (for example, mad could be represented as red or a drawing of fire, while relaxed might be a drawing of ocean waves).
  - Determining where they feel the emotion in their body: You might have them think of a time they felt an emotion word and ask if they remember any body sensations from the memory. This might not be appropriate for all students as memories can trigger big feelings. Another way to prompt this section could be to have the child think of the word (not an associated memory) and see if they notice anything change in their body. If they are still having difficulty, you could have them interview other students or suggest some common ways that the emotion might present itself.
  - Determining when they feel the emotion most: You might prompt them to think of a time they felt the emotion last. They might also talk with a partner to get some ideas flowing.

6. To wrap up and reflect on the activity, students can share with the class or with a partner or small group. You might create partnerships/groups with the four corners strategy: assign each corner of the room (or different tables or spaces within your classroom) to each of the main emotion categories—happy, sad, mad, scared. Have students go to the area that represents the emotion word they worked on and find a partner or two to share with.

7. Because students' dictionary pages are likely going to vary, especially around where or when they notice the feeling most, you might wrap up with a whole-class discussion focusing on how each individual can experience the same emotion uniquely.

Figure 2–1 Fifth graders' feelings dictionary pages



## Adaptations

Instead of using the templates provided, you can use hole-punched index cards clipped together with a binder ring or a paper folded into thirds. You can also modify the template to use sentence stems or other prompts. For example, with early readers, you might use the sentence stem: When I am feeling \_\_\_\_\_, my body feels \_\_\_\_\_.

If your students need support coming up with specific emotion words and sorting them into the basic categories, this activity can be completed as a whole group. You might focus on one emotion word at a time, discussing as a class where in their bodies that emotion presents. A visual can be helpful—you might just draw a stick figure on the board, or use clip art, or a large gingerbread person cutout, though it's important to be mindful of defaulting to dominant body types, identities, and skin tones if you are visually representing the human body. You might then invite multiple students to identify where they feel each emotion by circling or drawing on the image, with each child using a different color to demonstrate the uniqueness (or similarities!) of the feeling. Then lead students in a discussion about when they notice the emotion.