

Shihpei Chen

# FEELINGS!

# 情绪与感觉!

Building Social-Emotional Resilience in a  
Reggio-Inspired, Mandarin Immersion Context

Presidio Knolls School  
San Francisco, CA





Thank you to the students, parents, and teachers of the Cedar class of Presidio Knolls School for allowing us to share your stories.

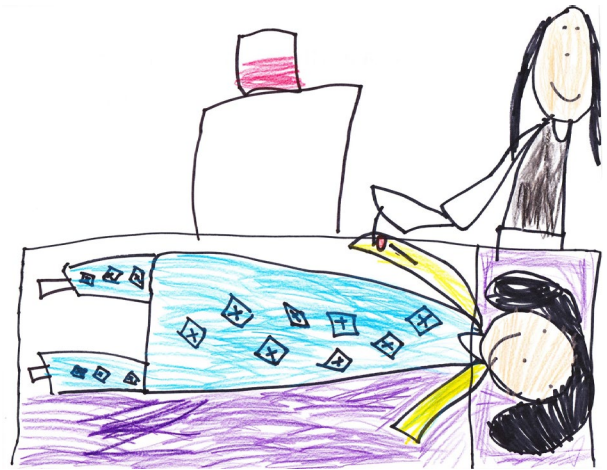
We honor the memory of Sybil's mother Jennifer Kollmer, who passed away in 2021, and this journey into feelings she helped inspire.

# INTRODUCTION

In my teacher training I saw that most Reggio Emilia-inspired projects are concrete, specific, local, of interest to the child, and have resources readily available. In this last regard, this Feelings project is perhaps not a common Reggio Emilia-inspired one.

However, and I believe most importantly, this project was indeed born from my students' interests. Reggio training instills in teachers the skills of careful observation and attentive listening, and I sensed this was a topic my students wanted—and needed—to explore.

The genesis was actually a project on doctors. I noticed that the act of visiting the doctor elicited strong feelings, both good and bad, in my class of four-year olds. Some students expressed happiness when doctors “did a good job” and



others were scared (especially of shots).

One particular child had stronger feelings than most—her mother was sick and in the hospital. At the end of the doctor project, she was still trying to process and express her emotions, and her friends did not know how to help her, although they clearly wanted to.

Given the children's interest in feelings, we decided to delve into this topic more deeply.

Talking about feelings, even for adults, can be hard. The topic challenged me both as a teacher and on a personal level, and I felt some trepidation as we embarked on it.

I grew up in a family that didn't talk about or acknowledge emotions, so I did not have personal experience to draw from. In addition, teaching in an immersion environment where students don't yet have the vocabulary in English or Mandarin to talk about feelings added another level of complexity.

Despite the unknowns and uncertainty, I am glad we pursued this project. The

students grew and I grew as well.

I hope that through our journey and study of emotions, you will be able to glean some new ways to help your students develop social-emotional skills, vocabulary, and mindsets like my students did.

–Shihpei Chen  
Instructional coach,  
former preschool teacher

## HOW THIS PROJECT CAME TO BE

Feelings grew out of the class's previous project on doctors. Students shared their feelings about doctors:

"I don't like to visit the doctor's office..."

"I feel hurt, but I am brave...to take the shot."

"My brother doesn't like the doctor, because he cries  
when he sees doctors."

"We get happy when the doctor did a great job."

"I feel sad when my mom is staying in the hospital."

The teachers felt this was a topic worth exploring, and posed some initial questions.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

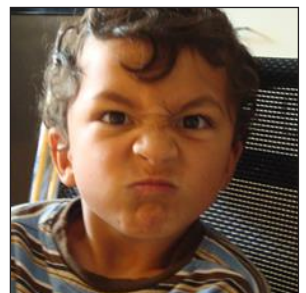
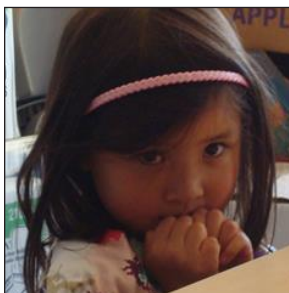
## *What do our children know about feelings?*

Isadora: It is okay to feel sad, my mom said...bad things happen, sometimes.

Sachin: I don't know what is feeling...you mean getting mad?  
Yeah, I get mad when my friend doesn't listen to me...

Ellie: 你可以跟他们说你很生气,但是你不可以大叫. (You can tell people that you are angry, but you can't scream at them.)

## *How do they handle and express these feelings?*



## THE INITIAL CONVERSATION

*The first discussion was prompted by one of our children's parents having to go to the hospital.*

Sibyl: I was scared when my mommy is in the hospital.

*Claire heard what Sibyl said, her facial expression became upset.*

Claire: 我很害怕,因为妈妈生病了...  
(I am scared, because my mom is sick...)

*Sibyl comforted Claire.*

Sibyl: Maybe she needs to go to hospital, and she will be fine, just like my mommy!

### TEACHER REFLECTION

During the conversation, I noticed that sometimes it was hard for the children to describe their feelings in English or Mandarin. Because we believe that verbal language is only one of the ways to express thoughts and feelings, I asked, "What else can we do to show people what our feelings look like?"

One child said, "We can draw it."



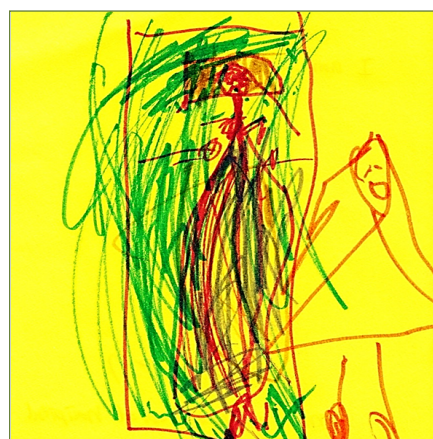
# SCARED

*Let's talk about feeling scared!* 害怕的感觉



I feel scared during the night, I am lying in the bed, you can't see me, because I am inside the blanket. I am scared, because there are monsters, they will eat me when I am sleeping. It is dark, the monster is dark too. (Madeleine)

When my mom is in the hospital, I am scared. (Sibyl)



很怕,我不见的时候,我在哭,然后风也在吹.

(I feel scared when I get lost. I am crying and the wind is blowing.) (Claire)

# HAPPY

Being scared was such an overwhelming feeling, that it wasn't easy for our students to continue the conversation. So we decided to give the discussions another try, from a different direction...

## *What do children know about the feeling 高兴 (happy)?*

Sachin: You can smile when you are happy...

Lucas: I am happy now.

Emilia: 我喜欢帮我的妹妹。(I like to help my little sister.)

Christoph: Everyone smiles when you are happy.

Sibyl: Can I draw it?





## What makes you feel happy?

Mia: I feel good when I help mommy.

Lucas: I like daddy when he helps me.

Lena: I am good in helping my mommy.

### TEACHER REFLECTION

As we talked more about what it means to feel happy, we noticed that many children shared their experiences of helping people.

“Helping others makes us feel good!”

帮助别人让我觉得高兴/快乐/开心

So we decided to help the younger preschoolers. Our students helped their younger peers get ready for nap time, read them stories, and patted them to help them fall asleep.



"I went to help the little kids, I helped them when they need to go to restroom.... I felt happy when I helped them, because I like to help people." (Keira)



我去帮小小子  
我觉得很高兴



(scan to hear audio)

## TEACHER REFLECTION

What truly amazed us was how empathetic and caring our students were. Instead of assigning roles and responsibilities, we asked students to look around and help where needed. We weren't sure whether they would be able to find ways to be helpful without guidance, and whether the younger children would feel comfortable with these unknown big brothers and sisters.

All our concerns were unfounded. The students took their responsibilities seriously, and the younger students loved having big brothers and sisters in the classroom. In fact, one child who seldom took naps was lulled to sleep by the gentle patting of a big brother during nap time.

# FROM HAPPINESS...TO LOVE

The children mentioned feeling “love” in our conversation when we talked about the experience of helping our little friends.



妈妈爱我  
我喜欢



“Me and my mommy sleeping together, I feel mommy loves me... together (I know) mommy loves me!” (Ryder)

## *Ideas about love:*

“Something I like.” 我喜欢的

“When others treat me nicely.”

“When my mom let me watch TV/iPhone.”

“Play with me.” 跟我玩

“Do my hair.”

“Read book with me.”

“Lie down next to me.”



"Momma and me sleep together, I feel mommy loves me." (Isadora)



"Me my daddy, mommy and brother in this picture, my daddy and mommy kiss me, love me, I love them so much." (Ellie)



"I feel mama loves me. I was seated on her lap, nice and cozy." (Marlow)

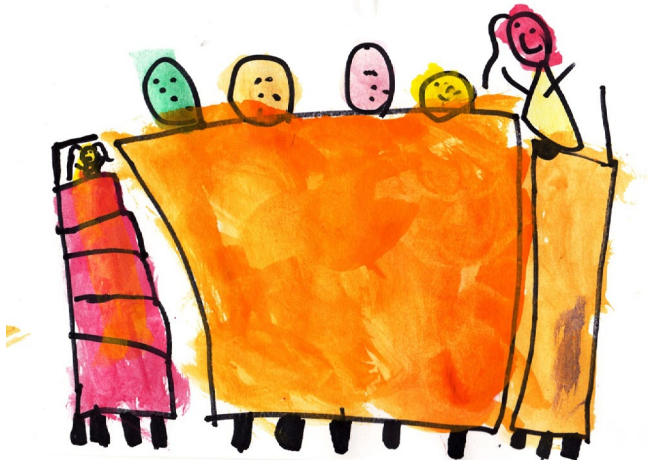




"When I am cooking with daddy and mommy, I feel daddy and mommy love me." (Christoph)



"When my mommy eat breakfast with me, when she likes me, I feel she loves me, mommy I love you" (Emilia)



## TEACHER REFLECTION

It is natural for children at this age to be self-centered, focusing primarily on the "me." Over the course of this project, however, our students developed a stronger awareness of others and grew as compassionate, empathetic human beings. Helping their younger brothers and sisters also helped them feel empowered and confident enough to step outside their comfort zone.

We decided to keep their helping tasks as a regular part of the daily flow. Our children would sign up in the morning meeting time, and then go to the younger children's classroom after they finished lunch.



# THEN ONE DAY, SOMETHING HAPPENED

It was such a happy project, until... 我们从此幸福快乐, 直到...

One day one of our frogs was “not living” anymore.

## TEACHER REFLECTION

Death is often a hard topic for adults, but we were not sure how the four-year old children would react. Should we address this topic with the students? Do we even need to? Perhaps we could just buy a replacement frog? But the next day we discovered the other frog was also “not living” and we knew we could not skirt the topic of death anymore.

### *What happened to the frogs, why are they “not living” anymore?*

Christoph: There was too much chlorine, so it is dead.

Justin: The water is too dirty 很脏 and the frog is allergic to the green things.

Madeleine: 睡觉, The frogs kept sleeping, and forgot to breathe.

Lena: They did not have enough water under the big rock, so they crashed by the rock.

Christoph: (disagreeing with Lena)  
If they be crashed, there must have blood, but there is no blood.

Claire: 可能有太多石头, 所以它们呼吸不了。(Maybe because there are too many rocks, so they can't breathe.)



### ***How does it make us feel?***

Kevin: It is sad for the other frog, because the other brother died.

Christoph: The dead one is going to watch another one. Because if it does good stuff, it goes up there [pointing skyward], if it does bad stuff, it goes down there [pointing downwards].

Lena: I want to bury it next to the 六角恐龙鱼... so they can be friends. (Note: this was the class pet of some children in the previous year.)

Sibyl: I will miss it... we can say hi to it when we pass by, everyday.

# THE FROG FAREWELL COMMITTEE

The children suggested having a ceremony for the frog, and several of them formed a “farewell committee” to make sure that “we are doing the right thing to help others remember it.”

## *How do we mark a passing?*

“We need the grave stone.”

“It can tell us who is the person inside the grave, and how the person looked when he was alive.”

“Bury it in the sand box.”

“But people might dig it out accidentally... it is not a good idea!”



## ***What does “not living” mean to our students?***

Lena: A pencil is a living thing, because it is made by wood tree and the tree is alive.

Teacher: 我们可以想一想,你认为铅笔还会继续生长吗?  
(Let’s think about it, will the pencil continue to grow?)

Lena: No, it is like this forever.

Teacher: 记不记得我们曾讨论过,铅笔是怎么制造的?  
(Remember when we discussed how pencils are made?)

Christoph: Cut down the tree, and it became wood.

### **TEACHER REFLECTION**

Talking about death was challenging because we did not know where the conversations would go. Would the concept of death be overwhelming for the children? Would they want to discuss what happens after death? Were parents ready and comfortable for us to be having these conversations? How would we be able to navigate the personal and religious beliefs of each family?

Our Reggio training helped us focus on documenting the children’s reactions and discussions about what had occurred in the classroom. We were able to talk about death in a neutral way, because they knew it already happened to our frog.

## WITH DEATH COMES SADNESS

"I was sad when I lost my toy."

"I had a sad story, too, my grandpa is dead."

"The frogs are dead, it is 伤心 (sad), because I can't see them any more."

### *What makes a story sad?*

Justin: 我的 dad 的 dad, died 了, 他死了, for real life. 因为他死了.

Amelia: When somebody gets 痛痛 (hurt) it makes the story sad, too.

Sibyl: Staying at school forever, away from daddy and mommy.

Justin: A tiger chasing you...

Keira: 我的朋友不跟我玩的时候 (when my friend does not play with me).

The children continued to share ideas, and had no shortage of things they thought might be sad!

Death 死亡. Getting hurt or sick 受伤. Missing someone 想念. When somebody is not nice 有人对我不好的时候. A bad thing happens 不好的事情发生了. Being away from parents 跟爸爸妈妈分开了. When something scary happens 可怕的事情. A bad dream 恶梦. Monsters 怪兽.

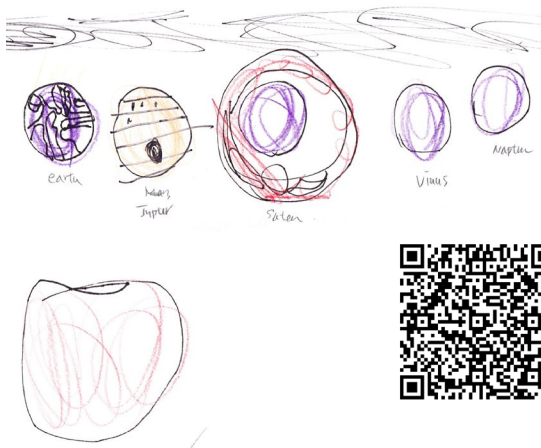
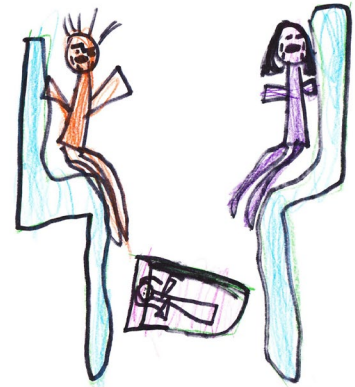
## A truly sad story, by Amelia



"There were two babies in auntie Bibi's tummy. The bigger one is healthy, the little one is not healthy."



"Clara is in the coffin, because it is Clara who died. Daddy and auntie Bibi were crying."



"This is the sky, and heaven right here, the baby is right in the heaven."



"This is the earth, this is my cousin's house (green roof), this is mine (black roof), my grandpa and Clara are together, my grandpa is taking care of her, they are happy with each other."



## REVISITING "SCARED"

Had anything changed in how the students processed being scared, now that they had been talking about and discussing feelings for the past few months?

### *The time I felt scared, by Madeline*



"My brother and me are sleeping. Mommy came to wake him up and bring him to use the bathroom."



"After mommy and my brother left, it is dark. I am scared that the monster will come. It is long...I am scared."



When my brother came back, the monster ran away. "I do not feel scared any more. So my brother and me can sleep now."



## The time I felt scared, by Sybil



"I am sad, papa is sad, mama is sad, we are sad, this is my Henry. Mama is in the hospital."



"I am scared, papa is driving, I am very scared, I cried."



"I am reading a book in the car, papa is driving the car. Mama is going to doctor, she is smiling and papa is smiling...Reading book makes me feel better (when I feel scared.)"



My mama is coming back home. I hug her, Henry hugs her. Mama is happy."





## The time I felt scared, by Claire



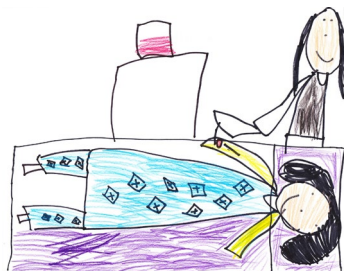
"Daddy is staying home with me, because mommy is going to the hospital. Because her heart is not functioning well. I feel scared about it."



"Mommy is lying down in the bed. The doctor is checking on her. Her heart is not feeling good."



"We gave her flowers, tulips. Daddy gave the tulips to mommy. We are happy, daddy, grandma and me, we all went to see mommy, so mommy is happy."



"The doctor was giving mommy a shot, so her heart can function better. After she take this shot, she then could go home."



"I am very happy, mommy came home and hugged me, I hugged her back. I am very happy to see her back, she is happy to see me. My whole family is happy, mommy doesn't need to go to hospital any more, I do not feel scared now."



# CONCLUSION - TEACHER REFLECTION

This journey through feelings taught me so much about being an educator, but also about myself. It reinforced how important it is to acknowledge feelings, to look at the whole child and attend to their social-emotional needs. The lessons I learned continue to influence me in the classroom and as an instructional coach.

## **Lessons learned about teaching**

As teachers, we understand that challenging behaviors such as seeking attention or control can be caused by emotional needs.

When children experience negative feelings, they are unable to access higher level thinking. By supporting their emotional needs first, teachers create the conditions for students to learn and engage.

Acknowledging feelings allows students to open up and share, and for educators

to build deeper and stronger connections with students.

Teachers can be investigators, detectives who observe carefully to find emotional clues. In the preschool setting, this might simply start with wondering what does “I miss my mom” really mean, as I came to learn.

## **Lessons learned about children**

Talking about feelings helps children process difficult emotions like frustration, anger, and sadness, and learn how to cope with challenges like missing someone, or feeling scared.

Talking about feelings is part of solving the problem. It allows the healing process to begin.

Often, after children talk about their emotions, they are able to calm down, to communicate, to solve an underlying problem, to find solutions, and to relate to how other people feel.

We can see in our classrooms that when one child opens up about their feelings, others often feel safe to do so as well. The shared experience of listening to each other creates stronger bonds between children and helps develop empathy. I believe children are fundamentally positive creatures, always capable of finding a silver lining.

### **Creating the right environment**

A few precepts continue to guide me in supporting children's feelings, and to build trust and a sense of emotional safety in the classroom:

- Stay calm.
- Be intentional when asking questions, or responding to children's questions and behaviors.
- Remember that tone of voice is more powerful than content; consider what happens, for example, if you say "I am not

angry" in an angry tone of voice.

- Validate and name emotions, and set clear boundaries ("It is okay to feel angry, but it is not okay to hurt anyone!"). Expectations around behavior are part of the learning process.
- When different opinions lead to conflict, involve both sides to find a solution so they can validate each other's emotions.
- Be consistent, and follow through. Words followed by actions become real, meaningful, and powerful.

These guidelines, of course, also apply more broadly to our role as teachers. However, my journal of this Feelings project allowed me to connect my personal practice with my teaching practice in a new and meaningful way.

–Shihpei Chen

