



Agassiz Elementary School,
2004-2005

“The Cumulus Kids: Students with Autism”



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•Through drama, music and literature this unit explores the ability of students with autism to better express their emotions both on the stage and in their everyday life. To do so students used illustrated stories, movies, songs and peer & teacher models.

•In collaboration with the artist and their teachers, students chose expressions and actions to match the emotions they were studying (i.e. someone who is bashful might cover their face). The class then took the emotions and accompanying gestures and added new verses to the song "If Your Happy and You Know It".

•The unit culminated with the students performing an original play at an all school assembly. The play highlighted the emotions that were studied as part of the CAPE unit.

Teachers: David J. Rench
Beth Beuthling
Steve Lutz

Artist: Jacqui Russell

Grade: Students with autism ages 7-15
yrs old.

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Students audition for a play which encompasses the emotions they studied in the unit.

Agassiz School, a public school committed to fine and performing arts as essential methods for engaging students from diverse neighborhoods, has enjoyed a long and mutually rewarding relationship with CAPE. Through this ongoing partnership, Agassiz students continue to uncover new and unexpected layers of creative talent and opportunities to demonstrate their vast capabilities. Each partnership enriches the entire school community. Agassiz School of the Fine and Performing Arts has been a CAPE school since 1993.

Student Demographics of Agassiz Elementary School

Caucasian	20%
Hispanic	40%
African American	32%
Asian	6%
Native American	2%

Agassiz Elementary School Mission Statement

Our mission at Agassiz is to develop a **unified approach to improving literacy** through professional development and community support while **utilizing common reading strategies** and **integrating fine arts and technology across the curriculum.**

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A student self-accesses how well she can demonstrate an angry face.

Special Education Strand Inquiry Question:

How does an arts integration project influence students' processing of information and how can teachers assess that learning?

Teachers' Inquiry Questions:

Can children with autism interpret the emotions of others in the classroom and on the stage?

Can they learn to use facial expressions, body language and voice to match their dialogue?

Artist's Inquiry Question:

Can drama games teach students with autism how to recognize and show simple and complex emotions by using and studying facial expression and body language?

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Group emotion practice

•Student's started by studying six emotions in November and in March six new emotions were introduced.

First Six Emotions

Angry	Confused	Goofy
Happy	Sad	Worried

Second Six Emotions

Bashful	Excited	Friendly
Impatient	Pouty	Teasing

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The Artist

Jacqui Russell of the Chicago Children’s Theatre has been working with the autism program at Agassiz for the past 7 years. Although she has worked with several different teachers over the years, many of the students have been working with her since the beginning.

Our Focus

Each year we plan our unit by looking at our past year’s assembly performance and looking to see how we can further challenge our students. While our students are at different levels academically, emotionally and theatrically we have expectations for them to build upon the gains they made in the previous year.

While many of our students excel at memorizing their lines they deliver their lines without the appropriate vocal or facial expressions (i.e. “I’m so upset” with a smile and excited tone). This year we hoped to improve on this.



Ms Russell advises a student actor during a dress rehearsal.

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October 2004- Finding Our Direction

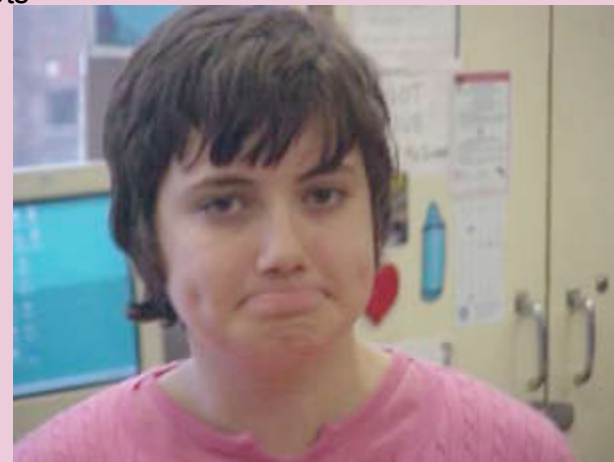
Our unit was broken down to approximately 40 minute sessions for 25 weeks. Since every year students travel in and out of the program, our first several sessions are usually spent assessing the students and deciding the direction for the year. This year 6 of our 22 students were new to Agassiz so just getting the students familiar with the “format” of our drama sessions was top priority. Students with autism often have a difficult time picking up the language cues normally used to begin and end a lesson, therefore, every session always began and ended with **our drama song**.

Ms. Russell brought the idea of working on emotions alphabet as a sub-theme to our unit (i.e. A-anger, B-bashful, etc). As a team we decided on our first 6 emotions: **Angry, Confused, Goofy, Happy, Sad and Worried**.

November- Establishing a Baseline

One drama warm-up activity involves pretending to open an imaginary drama mask drawer. As a group, the students are asked to “put on a happy face”. All the students plus the 3 teachers and the artist attempt to make this expression using their face and body. This exercise gives students not only an adult model from which to learn but also a peer model.

In later sessions we asked students to demonstrate each of the six emotions without giving them a model or explanation To establish a baseline, teachers photographed both successful and unsuccessful attempts



Student expressing a “sad” face.

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December 2004- First Six Emotions

Students were introduced to 2 books *Yo, Yes!* by Chris Raschka and *Clarice Bean Guess Who's Babysitting* by Lauren Child. Each facial expression in the book was covered encouraging students to use the characters body language to guess the correct emotion. As the teacher read aloud, students were asked to look at how each characters body looked (i.e. "look, his arms are crossed") and to guess how they thought the character felt. Once the emotion was revealed the students were asked to imitate the character's facial expression and body language.

January 2005-High Rollers

Session 1: A giant die was created with each side representing one of the six emotions: **Angry, Confused, Goofy, Happy, Sad and Worried**. Students were broken up into 4 manageable groups, each being lead by an adult. Students rolled the die to determine what emotion to imitate. At this point, the only models the students had were their teachers, their peers and the pictures on the die. Approximately half of the students had success learning some of the new emotions. During the next few sessions each group was given a hand held mirror to self-monitor if their expression matched their teachers or the picture on the die.



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February 2005-Screen Test

Session 1: Students are introduced to the song “If Your Happy and You Know It”. Ms. Russell lead the song and added our six emotions to it. The students were asked the corresponding gestures for each of the emotions. Collaborating with the teachers they came up with the following original ideas:

Goofy - stick out your tongue **Worried** – bite your nails
Sad - say “wah, wah” **Confused** – shrug your shoulders

Session 2: Ms. Russell asked for student volunteers to run our weekly warm-up as described in the November sessions. From this point forward the students were the ones choosing which body part we would warm up first and which imaginary masks we would pull from the drama mask drawer.



Student lead the drama warm-up by asking other to put on an angry face from the drama mask drawer.

Session 3: Students were reassessed on how well they demonstrate the six emotions they had been working on. The eight chosen students were asked to show the six emotions as a teacher video tapes them, they receive no model or explanation.

Video Post Test

March 2005- The Magic Wand

Students were photographed to assess on how well they are able to demonstrate 6 new emotions: **bashful, excited, friendly, impatient, pouty and teasing**. Teasing and pouty were chosen because students were having difficulty labeling them when they occurred in the classroom. Ms. Russell lead an activity in which she had students start of with a “students ready to work face” and then she changed their emotions using a toy magic wand.

Magic Wand Button

Idea of incorporating a “wizard” into our play, who uses his magic wand to change others emotions, is born.

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April 2005- The Cumulus Kid

The six new emotions replaced the previous emotions on the dice. Students used all the same tools to practice the new emotions. Students and teachers collaborated to add some of the new emotions to “Happy and You Know It”

Bashful – hide your face **Teasing** – say “nah, nah”

Impatient – tap your foot

Ms. Beuthling and Mr. Rench wrote an original script *The Mixed Up, Very Emotionally Confused Cumulus Kid*, and incorporated many of the 12 emotions studied this year. The characters and setting were chosen to highlight student gains.

May 2005 – The Auditions

Students heard the adults perform each scene from the play and volunteered for the parts. Students were cast and began learning their lines. There were non-speaking roles for those students with limited speech. Every student had a role in the play. Besides memorizing their lines, a strength for many students with autism, their challenge was to match the correct emotion to their lines. At the end of May, the students learned the staging of the play and how to interact with props.

One student took photos of his regular education peers as they demonstrated 6 of the emotions in our unit. The photos were projected at the end of the play as the students sang “If You’re Happy and You Know It”.



June 2005 – Opening Day

Students perform their play twice; once at an all school assembly and again for their family and friends at a special education potluck luncheon.

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We used several books throughout this unit to study the body language and facial expressions of the illustrated characters.



Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.
By Judith Viorst

Clarice Bean Guess Who's Babysitting?
By Lauren Child

Sometimes I Feel Like a Mouse.
By Jeanne Modesitt

Yo! Yes?
By Chris Raschka

During language arts students read *Sometimes I Feel Like a Mouse*.

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We used many tools, including their own photos to help our students appropriately model each emotion.

Impatient



Bashful



A covered tissue box became our die. Each side contained a photo and label that represented that emotion.

Students were photographed at the beginning and end of the unit to see their gains.

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Students photographed one another displaying one of the 12 emotions. A large bulletin board display was created in the main hallway which asked the student's peers to "Guess how I feel?"



Student used markers to write down how they *thought* each student was feeling. Several weeks later the emotions that the student was *actually* conveying were posted

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Younger students matched pictures from magazines to the corresponding label to make a collage.



The bulletin board display was brought inside the classroom so the students could try to match the correct emotion with the label.



The older students created a "Emotions Alphabet" and added magazine pictures to illustrate each emotion.



A digital camera was used to take pictures of each other as the learned each emotion and to photograph their regular education peers for the slide show.

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ILLINOIS STANDARDS - FINE ARTS CONTENT

26.A.1b Drama: Understand the tools of body, mind, voice and simple visual/aural media and the processes of planning, practicing and collaborating used to create or perform drama/theatre.

26.A.2b Drama: Describe various ways the body, mind and voice are used with acting, scripting and staging processes to create or perform drama/theatre.

ILLINOIS STANDARDS - ACADEMIC CONTENT

State goal-2 CAS 2B

Read, comprehend, and interpret works of literature representative of various cultures, time periods, traditions, experiences, points of view.

State goal 3- CAS 3A

Produce documents and other written works that adhere to Standard English conventions.

State goal 4- CAS 4A

Listen and respond appropriately to oral message.

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Teacher Reflection



The Warm-Up

Not only were students willing and able to take over the beginning warm-up activities but often the students were more responsive to their peers than they normally would be to the teachers or artist. While more experienced students were first to lead the warm-up by the end of the unit a several first year students lead it.



Mirror, mirror

What we found was that some students really didn't know how their face looked until they saw it in the mirror. Showing them "angry eyebrows" didn't help them execute it. It wasn't until they looked at their own face and realized their face was not the same as the model that they then tried to imitate the expression.

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Teacher Reflection



“If You’re Happy and You Know It”

While half of the students learned the facial expressions and body gestures from strictly using the games and drama exercises, the other half had success due to the song. In a post unit activity, students were asked to demonstrate the 12 emotions we studied. Several of the children were unable to demonstrate the teacher specified emotion until the question was asked in song form (i.e. if you’re bashful and you know it...? “hide your face”)



Auditions

About half of the students are significantly below their grade level in reading ability and those who are near grade level are not fluent readers so reading their parts is not the best alternative. An audio tape of the play was made by two of the teachers. For three weeks prior to their performance, students listened to the tape during their lunch time. The leads were sent home with a copy of the tape to listen to as homework. By show time most of the students in the class not only knew their lines but could recite the entire play from memory.

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Teacher Reflection

Illustrated Characters



Students appeared more focused when we used literary characters to study body language. When using peer or adult models it was difficult for students to always recognize subtle cues but with literary characters the expressions were exaggerated and produced a more exciting model to imitate. Throughout the unit students were exposed to story book illustrations not only during our sessions but also during language arts, story time and silent reading time. This gave teachers many opportunities to have students look at illustrations and ask “how does he feel?”



Photography

Students not only took pictures of one another but one student took pictures of his regular education peers to be used in a slide show. The slide show was projected after our play and was accompanied by our students singing, “If Your Happy and You Know It.” The song incorporated the emotions: happy, goofy, excited, confused, bashful and friendly. As the student took pictures of his regular ed. peers he often had to advice them on how change their expression or their body. In turn, he was taking the skills he learned in class and using them to teach his peers

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As our unit progressed we began to notice our students incorporating the skills they learned into their everyday life.

“We are going to the zoo. I am so excited”

Student with autism on a fieldtrip

“He’s over there. I think he’s a little bashful.”

Student with autism upon being asked where his little brother was.

“Why are we waiting? I’m getting impatient just like in our play.”

Student with autism upon waiting for the bus.

Their parents noticed too!

“He is much more aware of people’s emotions then in the past. If he’s watching TV, he might say, ‘Wow! She’s upset!’ or ‘Is he being silly?’”

Parent of a student with autism

“He is more aware of an emotion by looking at a person’s face”

Parent of a student with autism.

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Student Reflection

When asked, “What were you working on in drama with Jacqui this year?”, the students were able to tell us exactly what they did.

“We were working on our feelings. Oh, like happy, sad, angry and silly like goofy”

“We try to think of what the play would be. Trying to do drama mask drawers.”

“Drama mask drawers and just a mask like happy and mad face and students ready to work face. We did Very Mixed Up, Confused Cumulus Kid.”

“Feeling sad, happy, glad, excited, mad, angry, silly, lazy, confused, sleepy, bashful, goofy, teasing, upset, disappointment, embarrassed and surprised.”

“We sang ‘If Your Happy and You Know It.’”

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Final Thoughts

Artist's Thoughts:

These students never cease to amaze me. Their ability to take on new challenges from year to year keeps this work fresh and relevant. When we first began our work with these students 7 years ago, it was a challenge just to get them up on stage to “act out” a very simple children’s book with a teacher reading the narration.

Today, the work is completely student performed. The students audition for their parts, memorize lines, and perform the entire play without any adults on stage performing with them. This year we used theatre games and songs to help the children make connections between physical and facial expressions to feelings and emotions. This year they worked to not only memorize their individual parts, but to convey the appropriate emotion behind the words they spoke on stage. I think we took a huge step this year in accomplishing this goal. I am looking forward to diving deeper into this work again next year.

Jacqui

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Final Thoughts

Teacher's Thoughts:

Students with autism struggle with finding the words to express how they feel. Our students ability to learn dialogue was never a concern but their ability to match their facial expressions to the dialogue remained a challenge.

This unit encouraged our students to use words to describe their feelings as opposed to acting out inappropriately. Now, many of the students are able to generalize emotions from the play to character's emotions in the books they read, the shows they watch and the people with whom they interact. Creating an opportunity for the students to perform and show their talents as actors has helped many of the regular education peers and teachers see them in a whole new light. Rather than reacting to them their interacting with them and praising them on their performance.

"They're really acting up there!"

general education teacher