

How can I teach my Grade 2 students to consistently apply their emotional intelligence learned through the Roots of Empathy program (ROE) to their daily, classroom and school lives?



Biography

John Misener is a Grade 2 teacher at Central Public School in Brantford, Ontario. His class is participating in the Roots of Empathy Program, and John for a second consecutive year. Last November, he co-presented a research paper with Heather Knill-Griesser at The Ontario Educational Research Council at OISE, University of Toronto. John was presented the Researcher of the Year award at the November 2004 conference.

Abstract

Central Public School is a Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6 school with a population of 160. Last year saw the school pilot the Roots of Empathy Program through Kids Can Fly and the Spring opening of "The Launch Pad." A neighbourhood infant and her mother visited the classroom from October 2004 to June 2005. A certified Roots of Empathy Instructor delivered a program where students were coached to observe the growth and social development of a baby, celebrate the milestones, and actively interact with the baby to learn about its needs in comparison to their own growth and development. The author examines his educative influence as classroom teacher the question, "How can I teach my Grade 2 students to consistently apply their emotional intelligence learned through the Roots of Empathy program to their daily, classroom and school lives?" As a spin off from this program, I would like to broaden my emotional intelligence in my professional practice. Clearly teachers today require heightened levels of emotional intelligence as they practise their craft, especially with all the challenges that core schools bring.

Situating The Inquiry

With a school population of approximately 160 students ranging from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6, issues within the school encouraged us to continue to participate in the Roots of Empathy Program. Results from the program last year indicated that we were on the right track. We continue the vision to reduce aggressive behaviour in our school and increase desired behaviours (e.g.: helping, sharing, cooperating, showing empathy and inclusion towards others). John Misener's Grade 2 Class at Central was invited to participate in the program, along with Baby Chloe and her mother Cheryl. Chloe is the niece of one the Grade 2 students. Some students who participated in the program last year (when they were in Grade 1) experienced a continuum in the program. As we had the same instructor (Patty Bester), both the teacher and some of the students were familiar with her. Data was collected and the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy Program was reevaluated through the completion of an Action Research Project.

Building The Foundation

My goal was to foster a caring classroom community through the Roots of Empathy program where

students identified and labelled their own feelings and those of others, developing their “Literacy of Feelings.” Students learned to recognize temperament, how it sounded and felt like. Students learned to be detectives, looking for clues about the baby’s unique temperament, focussing on the baby’s body language and behaviour. The class needed to be introduced to the ROE instructor, mother and baby Chloe. Very quickly bonds formed and students frequently asked when Chloe was coming.

Constructing The House

Students needed a safe environment where they could freely and openly express their feelings. Rules needed to be established. Students needed to feel that they could answer questions and make comments without fear of being ridiculed.

Students needed a clear understanding of the hierarchy of our society within the classroom. Groups were named according to the concept of a traffic light. An elite blue group was added. The notion of graduated privileges for each colour group was explained.

Our Family: Developing Our Values and Areas of Focus

There was a core group of students who often were in conflict with other students within our class. Some students were constantly experiencing difficulty on the school yard and the halls. Students learned to matter of factly state how they felt, at the same time remaining calm.

When more emotional or sensitive issues arose, students learned and practised stating problems without naming students, often by using fictitious names. The class offered the student some suggestions. Occasionally students would reenact problems, displaying possible solutions.

Through the eyes of the mother (Mrs. Cheryl Smith), the mutual benefits of the Roots of Empathy program were very evident. In a June 2005 letter Mrs. Smith wrote: “As a mom, it was incredible to watch Chloe with the children, and even better to watch the students interact with her. We hope your students walk away with as many fond memories as we are.” She goes on to give positive testimony to validity and value of the program: “I strongly believe this program is such a benefit.”

Examining The Rooms: How The Roots of Empathy Program Has Affected The Author

The ROE program has caused me to reflect carefully on the feelings and needs of the students who are in my charge. By approaching students in a non-confrontational way, and letting students see a more sensitive side of me, students show greater trust and often disclose things to me that they otherwise wouldn’t have. As a teacher, I feel that a greater bond with my students is formed and that I know my students on a far greater personal level.

I try to deal with behaviours with a problem solving approach, relating back to lessons that were taught during the program. The ROE program becomes a powerful vehicle.

What Conclusions Can I Draw From The Evidence?

Many students were very cognisant of each others feelings. Their awareness came from their ability to recognize emotions that were displayed by body language and facial expression. It became almost a natural reaction to try to comfort a person who was feeling sad or hurt. Students' ability to read a person's feelings and emotions, their ability to put themselves in the place of others and their ability to comfort others enabled them to work more effectively in group situations.

Finishing Touches and Renovations

Mathew has been going through a period where he was experiencing difficulty getting along with other students during recesses. He complained that he had no friends and clearly was a very sad individual who was going through some emotional problems. Mathew even waited for these students after school at the end of the hall on Thursday, January the 28th. I was very concerned about Mathew and his well being.

On Friday a call was made to his house. The family was going through some problems. Arrangements were made by the school for the family to go for counselling on Saturday, January 30th.

After reflecting about the situation for a couple of days, I decided to talk to Mathew. On Monday, January 31st, I spoke with Mathew and put an incentive program in place. I made a chart for the week, dividing his days into quarters. For each quarter day he was able to get along with others, he received a stamp. If by the end of the week he reached a quota of stamps, he would be allowed to choose a prize. From discussions with him, I discovered that a wallet/key chain was important to him. Mathew had seen other students reward with a prize for completing homework. I told him that I didn't think that it was very likely that he would receive a prize for his work because he was not going to receive the help that he needed from home. Instead I told him that his job was to get along with others.

Since that week was short, due to a Friday P.A., this seemed to be the perfect timing to ease him into the system. The system was put into place by Tuesday and he reached his 3 day quota of stamps. For his efforts he did receive a wallet/key chain.

The next Monday [February 7th], I decided to have further discussions with Mathew. During our discussion, he admitted to bothering others students and threatening them because he didn't have any snacks.

He would badger others for food and tell them that if they didn't give him some food, he wouldn't be their friend. Mathew started taking things further. He started threatening to beat up some students because they would not give him their snacks.

I decided to provide him with snacks for his recesses. Incidents involving him were drastically decreased. To date he has always received the required quota of stamps to receive a prize and has handled difficult situations much better. He has developed a much happier outlook on life and appears much happier.

My Educational Assistant [EA], Traci Torti observed “Mathew doesn’t seem as tough. He seems more sensitive.” Journal Entry February 11, 2005 Mathew indeed had been showing his feelings as he gave me a hug on after I had returned to the school after a workshop Thursday and the following Friday.

I had hoped that Mathew’s success would continue, but it was not to be. External circumstances played a large role. Mathew became an angry person with many social issues. He went from crying and complaining about problems to becoming very aggressive and verbally abusive to fellow students.

In late March, Mathew told me that had no snack and asked if he could have one. I told him that he could if he promised to try to have a good recess, as he had had problems during the morning recess. After I had given him a snack, he went outside and promptly threw the snack in the garbage. When I found out about the incident, I told Mathew that I could no longer give him any more snacks.

Mathew’s behaviour escalated to becoming a controlling individual, who forced students to lend him items which they required and forced them to do without. On May 10th, students were completing a cut and paste activity. I asked students to raise their hands if they required scissors. Devon raised his hand. I had noticed that Devon had had scissors a few minutes ago. Devon told me that he had lent Mathew his scissors. I suspected that Mathew may have used threats or fear to force Devon to “lend” his scissors.

My suspicions were confirmed later at lunch. Mathew had stolen a snack from Haily. Mathew admitted to stealing and eating her snack. I told him that he needed to make restitution. After I had finished speaking with Mathew, he threw his sandwich on the floor, put his head down on his desk and waited for lunch to end. On his way out, he threatened to beat up Haily. Haily was afraid to go outside, so I walked her out and had Mathew sit by the office.

On the way inside, Mathew hit the glass on the door hard, and yelled that he hated this school. Now Mathew is resorting to violence. I am convinced that I can not encourage him to behave appropriately.

In an attempt to counteract some negative behaviours and encourage positive behaviours, I established a community within the class. Graduated groups were established: red group, yellow group, green group and blue group. The red, yellow and green groups mirrored a traffic light. A chart was maintained to track behaviour for the week. To graduate to a higher level group, students required four good days for the week. In order to maintain their current level, students required three good days per week. Students who failed to meet these requirements were demoted. Any conflict would result in a demotion.

The students in the red group were granted few privileges, other than they may have paper to draw on or take out a book upon completion of their work. Students required permission to leave their seats and must return immediately to their desks, the reason being that these students were a high risk for getting into conflicts.

In addition to the privileges enjoyed by the red group, students in the yellow group were allowed to be monitors and help around the classroom. These students tended to have some conflict resolution

skills and could be trusted to get along with most students. They could share materials with others, provided that student was in the yellow group or higher.

The first three students who arrived early at entry times and requested them, were granted “drink tickets”, provided that student was in the yellow group or higher..

The green group enjoyed all of the privileges granted to the yellow group. They were permitted to take out activities when their work was completed to my satisfaction. These students could take part in activities with other students provided said students were in either the green or blue groups.

The blue group was the elite group. Members of this group enjoyed all the privileges of the green group. In addition, they could use “special activities” and take part in special projects.

Clearly most students bought into this society and respected the system. Within a month, only four out of the 21 students were in the red group. Twelve were in the blue group, three in the green group and two in the yellow group. Though the numbers in the aforementioned groups fluctuated, the blue group continued to be the largest. The red group remained constant in numbers and its membership.

This caused me to think that these students needed a greater reason to wish to be in a higher group or that they required assistance and an opportunity to interact in a positive way with other students. These students were allowed out for recess, but had to sit in a shady area, far apart from each other. They could read a book, draw or talk with one friend who was either from the yellow, green or blue group.

Baby Chloe’s May 26th visit to our classroom brought a huge surprise. Chloe, though she could not crawl, was much more mobile and aware of her surroundings. Most students were watching her most intently. Brady, a boy who often experiences social difficulties, was sitting near Chloe and her mother. As her mother was picking her up, Chloe leaned towards Brady. Brady said, “She’s trying to kiss me!” His face was glowing. On that particular day, Brady showed me greater sensitivity than I had ever seen from him before. Clearly, the ROE program has made an impact on Brady.

Storytime is very revealing, exposing the profound effect that the ROE program has had on my students. While listening to me read to them, students frequently express their feelings and react to what they have just heard me read to them. Haily, who often is at the centre of a problem, makes very sensitive comments such as “That’s so cute!” Often students will put themselves in the place on characters in the story and express how they would feel or what they would have done if they were in that situation. Students share friendly, emotional dialogue that is very relevant to the story. Many students, both those who are often in conflict and those who are rarely in conflict, display their sensitive side.