5-2020

Fostering Social and Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Education

Allison Cawaling
California State University, Monterey Bay

Recommended Citation

Cawaling, Allison, "Fostering Social and Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Education" (2020).
Capstone Projects and Master's Theses. 734.
https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all/734

Fostering Social and Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Education

Allison Cawaling

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

Fostering Social and Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Education

Introduction

In early childhood education centers, children often lack the opportunity to learn about and develop their social and emotional skills. Without strong social and emotional skills, children may demonstrate behavior problems and low academic success later in school. Therefore I have created a three-day lesson on social and emotional learning for preschool aged children at the Cabrillo College Children's Center in Aptos, California.

Needs Statement

In early childhood, children have challenges in expressing and regulating their emotions. Good emotional regulation in preschool has been related to social and academic success later in school (Denham, Bassett & Zinsser, 2012). Children entering school with a lack of social and emotional learning skills (SEL) may have a hard time learning (Mcclelland, Tominey, Schmitt & Duncan, 2017).

In order for children to form strong, positive, long-lasting relationships and succeed academically, it is important that they receive SEL in early childhood education (Gunter, Caldarella, Korth & Young, 2012). SEL consists of three main components which include emotional processes, social and interpersonal skills and cognitive regulation (Mcclelland et al., 2017). Emotional processes provide children with the tools to accurately label and recognize their emotions. The social and interpersonal component of SEL is focused on guiding children toward having positive interactions with others by effectively recognizing and understanding social cues. It also includes effectively interpreting the behavior of others. Cognitive regulation skills refer to mental processes that allow children to focus and transition from one activity to another. In addition to being able to switch quickly from one activity to another, it allows them

to inhibit impulses they may have and also remember instructions they are given (Mcclelland et al., 2017). When these skills are taught and learned in early childhood education, they are more likely to be able to focus on academic tasks when asked. Therefore, making learning opportunities more beneficial given that they have the ability to focus and pay attention. (Rhoades, Waren, Domitrovich & Greenberg, 2011).

Children become increasingly proficient in labeling their emotional expressions between the ages of two and four and a half years old. Among one of the first social and emotional skills to emerge during early childhood is "basic receptive and expressive understanding of emotions" (Rhoades et al, 2011, p. 182). Research in 2012, by Denham et al., found that a child's learning environment has a strong influence on their social and emotional skills. Building skills in basic receptive and expressive emotions is useful because it is potentially enticing to a child's peers. When they are accurately able to label their emotions and understand typical responses to emotional situations, they are more likely to have positive interactions with others and are considered more prosocial by their teachers (Rhoades et al., 2011).

Children benefit from being able to identify and process emotional cues within their environment because it allows them to avoid negative and distracting interactions. Research in 2012 by Denham et al., indicated that when preschoolers are able to regulate their emotions it permits them to distribute more of their focus and energy to other goals both socially and academically. Children are more likely to benefit from instruction and achieve greater academic skills when they can focus on the material being presented.

Without the guided skills in social and emotional learning, children are likely to struggle with managing their feelings successfully. A study by Schultz, Richardson, Barber and Wilcox in 2012, reported that children who lack certain social and emotional competencies frequently risk

low academic success in the future, because they are more likely to demonstrate discipline problems in the classroom. When children do not have appropriate social and emotional skills they are also more likely to constantly misread emotions of those around them, causing them to be rejected. According to a study by Kramer, Caldarella, Christensen and Shatzer in (2010), the rejection of peers often results in the utilization of coping strategies that are maladaptive. Maladaptive strategies include withdrawal and denial, along with both externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety are considered less apparent when compared to behaviors that are more disruptive. However, they have been discovered to manifest a larger burden on mental health. These difficulties not only negatively impact academics, but they can also lead to several long-term negative outcomes (Kramer et al., 2010). Anti-social or violent behavior along with depression are some of the stated outcomes. Evidence has suggested that these behavior difficulties become less manageable without intervention after the age of eight.

Basic receptive and expressive understanding of emotions occurs between ages two and four. During this time, a child's learning environment has a strong influence on their social and emotional skills. Therefore, I created a three-day lesson plan on emotions for preschoolers at Cabrillo College Children's Center in Aptos, California.

<div align="center">**Theory**</div>

Developmentally, Vygotsky believed that all functions in a child's development first occur at a social level before they can later occur at an individual level. This process includes skills and knowledge which are essential for problem solving and learning. For example, being able to reach a goal by utilizing certain strategies (Stremmel & Fu, 1993). According to his theory, once these skills are developed through social interaction, the child can then manifest and

internalize the skills through independent activities. Ultimately, Vygtosky believed that children reconstruct their own understanding of the world through what they learn socially. Vygotsky's belief about engaging children on a social level before they can engage on an individual level applies to my project because I will be presenting children with a book about emotions and engaging them in questions about it. We will engage in social interaction about the concepts, so that they can then internalize that understanding to become their own thinking.

Vygotsky, in his theory, also emphasized the zone of proximal development which can be described as the distance between what children are able to do on their own, and what they are able to do with the support and guidance of others (Stremmel & Fu, 1993). Due to the age of the children participating, 3 ½ to 4 ½ years old, it is likely they already have a general understanding of the emotions being presented in the book. However, I will be utilizing the zone of proximal development to scaffold their learning in understanding what specific things or experiences may cause certain emotions in their lives. I will also scaffold their learning of tools that they can utilize when the emotions become overwhelming. Ideally, once they learn these techniques, they will be able to utilize them whenever needed.

Consideration of Diversity

I am conducting my project in the preschool classroom of the Cabrillo College Children's Center (CCCC). It is a state-funded program that provides child care services to staff of the college, students attending the college, or members of the community. Depending on their socioeconomic status, some families may qualify for subsidized tuition. There are currently twenty three children who are enrolled in the program. Out of these families, eight of them are bilingual. Three children in the center have a parent that is a staff member at CCCC and two children have a parent who is a staff member of the College. Fourteen of the children have a

parent that attends the College, and four are members of the community. Nineteen of these families qualify for subsidized pay while four pay full tuition. I would not expect my participants to be different from what the overall population of the center looks like because out of the three classrooms including infants and toddlers, the demographics are similar. Given that my curriculum is presented in English, participants will need to be proficient enough in English in order to understand the content and participate in the activities. My content is directed towards the particular participants because it is both age and developmentally appropriate. A change that could be made in order to address more children is by making the content bilingual. In order for my content to apply to children of different ages some changes can be made as well. For example, if there were children who were ages 5 to 6, I would ask more in depth questions about the material.

Learning Outcomes

I intend to provide three, fifteen-minute lessons to preschool-aged children enrolled in the Cabrillo College Children's Center in Aptos, California.

By the end of my project, participants will be able to:

1. indicate an emotion they are currently feeling.

2. indicate what makes them happy, sad, angry and calm.

3. demonstrate one calming technique.

Method

Day 1

I started by introducing myself to the five children at the table and telling them that I would be leading their small group for the day. I told them that we would first be reading a book and after that there would be an activity. I introduced the book *The Color Monster*, (Lenas, 2018) and explained that it was a book about emotions. After I finished the book, I introduced the

children to the coloring activity. For the activity, I created a page with an emotion from the book on one side, and a blank monster on the other side. See Appendix A. I asked each child what emotion they wanted to color and handed them that emotion. Three children picked love, one picked angry and one picked fear. Once children spent a few minutes coloring the monster they picked, I asked them if they could color the emotion they were feeling today in the blank monster. After children were done coloring the first emotion of their choice as well as coloring in the blank monster, they asked if they could color more. Some wanted to color the same monster again while others wanted to color a different one.

Day 2

Today, I started by greeting the children at the table and telling them that I was going to be doing another small group activity for the day. Then, I brought out the drawings from yesterday's activity. I used them as examples to remind them about the different emotion monsters that they colored from the book and the emotion monsters that they created themselves. Next, I explained we would be doing another coloring activity. I explained to the children that we were going to be drawing and talking about what makes them feel happy, sad, angry and calm. I handed each child a book with these four emotions in it. See Appendix B. I let the children know that they could ask an adult for help writing their idea if they would like.

Day 3

Today, due to the movement aspect of my activity, my circle took place in a different area than usual. We were in the block area where the morning circle takes place. I started by letting the children know it would be my last day doing a small group activity with them. Then, I asked the children if they can remember the monsters that we have been talking about. Next, I asked them if they could tell me their favorite. After each child told me their favorite, I told them

that my favorite was the calm monster. Then, I told them that the calm monster would be visiting us at circle and brought one out on a popsicle stick. I explained to them that we would be learning and practicing different ways to make our bodies calm. The first way is a breathing technique. I told the children to pretend they had a flower in their hand and smell it, as a way to take a deep breath in. Next, I told them to imagine they had a birthday cake in their hand and that they were blowing out the candle which is a way to let their deep breath out. We practiced this together three times. Next, I showed the children how they could lay down on their backs and stretch their bodies out as far and as long as they possibly could and we practiced together for about one minute. Lastly, I showed children how to put their arms straight out in front of their body, cross them over one another and wrap them around themselves. I told them that this is called a bear hug. Next, I told the children that I was going to play a song to get our bodies moving fast around the circle. I let them know that when they hear the music stop I want them to freeze and then choose one of the calming techniques we just learned. Before I played the music we reviewed each technique one time. I played the song for fifteen seconds then paused it to allow children to demonstrate a technique. We did this activity three times.

Results

Learning outcome number one was that participants indicate an emotion they are currently feeling. I believe this learning outcome was met. While participating in the coloring activity, most children were able to talk about the emotion they were coloring in the monster that was blank. Their responses are recorded in Table 1. Two of the children didn't participate in the activity by creating their own monster inside the blank one. These children only scribbled on the page. Children's drawings can be found in Appendix C.

Learning outcome number two was children indicate what makes them happy, sad, angry and calm. I believe this learning outcome was partially met. Since children were given booklets that I created for them, they had the ability to work at their own pace. For example, one child only focused on the coloring page "happy" and did not want to turn to any of the other pages and color. This child did not want to talk about what made them that specific emotion. She just wanted to color. Another child experimented by drawing faces that matched the emotions on the page. For example on the "happy" page, she made a happy face. On the sad page, she made a sad face. Children's drawings can be found in Appendix D. There was one child who didn't do very much coloring on her page but was able to describe what makes her feel the emotion when asked by an adult. Her responses are recorded in Table 2.

Learning Outcome number three was that children demonstrate one calming technique. This learning outcome was met. All children were able to indicate at least one calming technique that was taught during my lesson. I let music play for fifteen seconds and then paused it allowing children to demonstrate a technique. When the music paused, four children used the flower and cake technique and two children used the stretching technique. We did this activity a total of three times. Some children indicated multiple calming techniques. Results are recorded in Table 3.

Discussion

Overall, I believe this project was successful. Two of my learning outcomes were met and one was partially met. During my first activity while I was reading the book *The Color Monster* (Llenas, 2018), I kept the children engaged by asking questions about each monster. For example, "how can you tell this monster is sad?" and one child replied "because he is crying." Given the ages of the participants which range from three to five, I anticipated the levels of

participation to be different due to their different developmental levels. This was evident during the first activity when the older children were more engaged and talking about what they were drawing. The younger children, however, were not as engaged and only participated partially by scribbling on the page. Although their drawings consisted mostly of scribbles, when asked by an adult at the table what emotion they were feeling they were able to respond with short answers such as "sad" or "mad."

The same was also evident in my second activity when the children were provided with a similar coloring activity. When given the book of four different emotions and asked to draw what makes them feel that specific emotion, once again the older children were more engaged. They were able to focus on coloring and talk about what they were coloring. For example one child said "love makes me happy" as she colored. The younger children participated by coloring scribbles on the page. When asked by an adult at the table what made them feel the specific emotion that they were coloring, they were able to use their words to describe it. For example, one child said "when someone takes my toys" when she was asked what makes her sad. Despite the differences in developmental activities for these two activities, children were able to participate equally in the last activity which involved music and movement.

I used Vygotsky's zone of proximal development throughout my project by presenting children the topic of emotions, which is something I know they already had a basic understanding of. When asking them a more in depth question such as what makes them feel specific emotions I was offering them the opportunity to extend their knowledge of emotions. Vygotsky's theory relies heavily on social interaction amongst children with their peers along with adults in order to construct their knowledge about a specific topic. It also emphasizes that quality interactions are important for a child in order to extend their current knowledge and skills

further. These themes are evident throughout my project because of the group setting aspect. For example, when engaging in conversation children were not just sharing their ideas with me but they were sharing them with their peers as well. This was also evident in the way the older children were able to participate more than the younger children. The older children were able to express more knowledge and ideas which the younger children could learn from.

Something I would do differently if I could do this project again would be excluding the love monster from the book and activities. The love monster was on the last page and was pink with a smile, pink flowers and pink hearts. The page has no words and was made for the children to guess the emotion which they all guessed right and enjoyed shouting "love!". However, the time when I implemented my project was around Valentine's Day. I believe this had an influence on my project because the children's interest in the love monster sometimes seemed to overshadow the other emotions I wanted to focus on.

Another thing I would do differently would be changing the way I did my second activity. Instead of giving children four monsters to talk about and discuss what makes them those specific emotions, I would just choose one. The reason I would choose just one is because four seemed overwhelming for the children. The one monster I would choose to focus on instead would be the calm monster. I would choose the calm monster because it is the focus of my last activity and I believe it would have been a fun way to incorporate a cohesive transition.

Despite the fact that not all children were able to participate equally, I still consider my project to be successful overall. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes that it is necessary for peers who are more capable to interact with others because it provides context for understanding. Therefore, the children who were not able to engage as much as intended still benefit from the activity by being present and interacting with their peers.

References

Bagdi, A., & Vacca, J. (2005). Supporting Early Childhood Social-Emotional Well Being: The

Building Blocks for Early Learning and School Success. *Early Childhood Education

Journal, 33*, 145-150.

Denham, S., Bassett, A., & Zinsser, H. (2012). Early Childhood Teachers as Socializers of

Young Children's Emotional Competence. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 40*, 137-

143.

Gunter, L., Caldarella, P., Korth, B., & Young, B. (2012). Promoting Social and Emotional

Learning in Preschool Students: A Study of Strong Start Pre - K. *Early Childhood

Education Journal, 40*, 151-159.

Kramer, T., Caldarella, J., Christensen, P., & Shatzer, L. (2010). Social and Emotional Learning

in the Kindergarten Classroom: Evaluation of the Strong Start Curriculum. *Early

Childhood Education Journal, 37*, 303-309.

Llenas, A. (2012). *The color monster: a story about emotions.* Little Brown and Company.

Mcclelland, M., Tominey, S., Schmitt, S., & Duncan, R. (2017). SEL interventions in early

childhood. *The Future of Children, 27*, 33-47.

Rhoades, B., Warren, H., Domitrovich, C., & Greenberg, M. (2011). Examining the link between

preschool social–emotional competence and first grade academic achievement: The role

of attention skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 26*, 182-191.

Schultz, B., Richardson, L., Barber, R., & Wilcox, C. (2011). A Preschool Pilot Study of

Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence. *Early

Childhood Education Journal, 39*, 143-148.

Stremmel, A., & Fu, J. (1993). Teaching in the zone of proximal development: Implications for

responsive teaching practice. *Child and Youth Care Forum, 22*, 337-350.

Table 1

Emotions represented in first activity

Emotion	Number correct/total number of participants
Happy	5/12
Sad	2/12
Mad	2/12
Calm	1/12
Love	2/12

Table 2

Responses from children in second activity

Emotion	Response
Sad	"When I fall down"
Angry	"When someone takes my toys"

Table 3

Results from demonstration of calming techniques

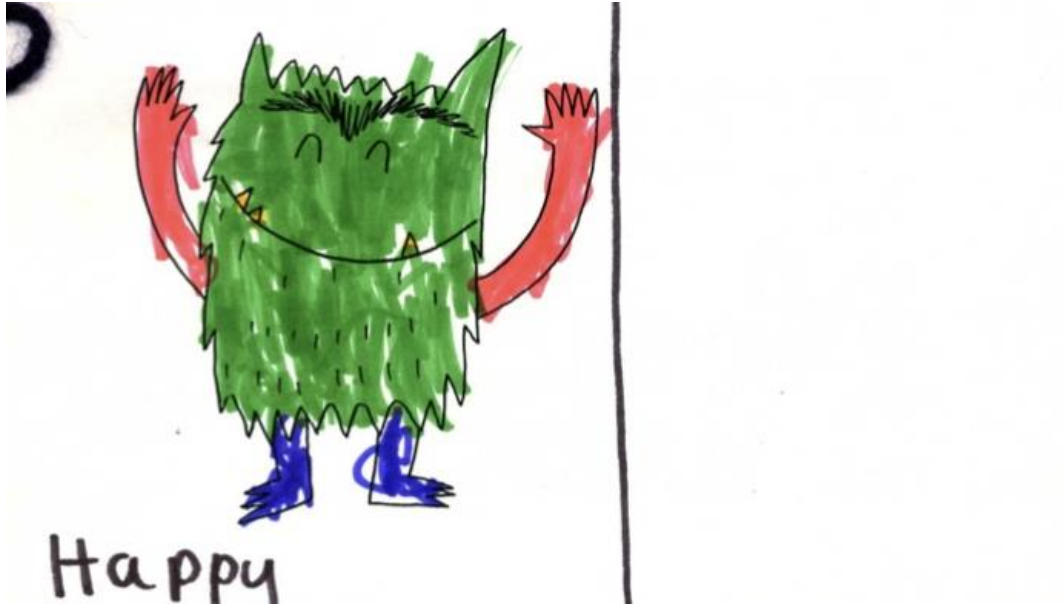| Technique	First round # of participants displaying techniques	Second round # of participants displaying techniques	Third round # of participants displaying techniques
Breathing	4	3	2
Stretching	2	3	1
Bear Hug	0	0	3

Appendix A
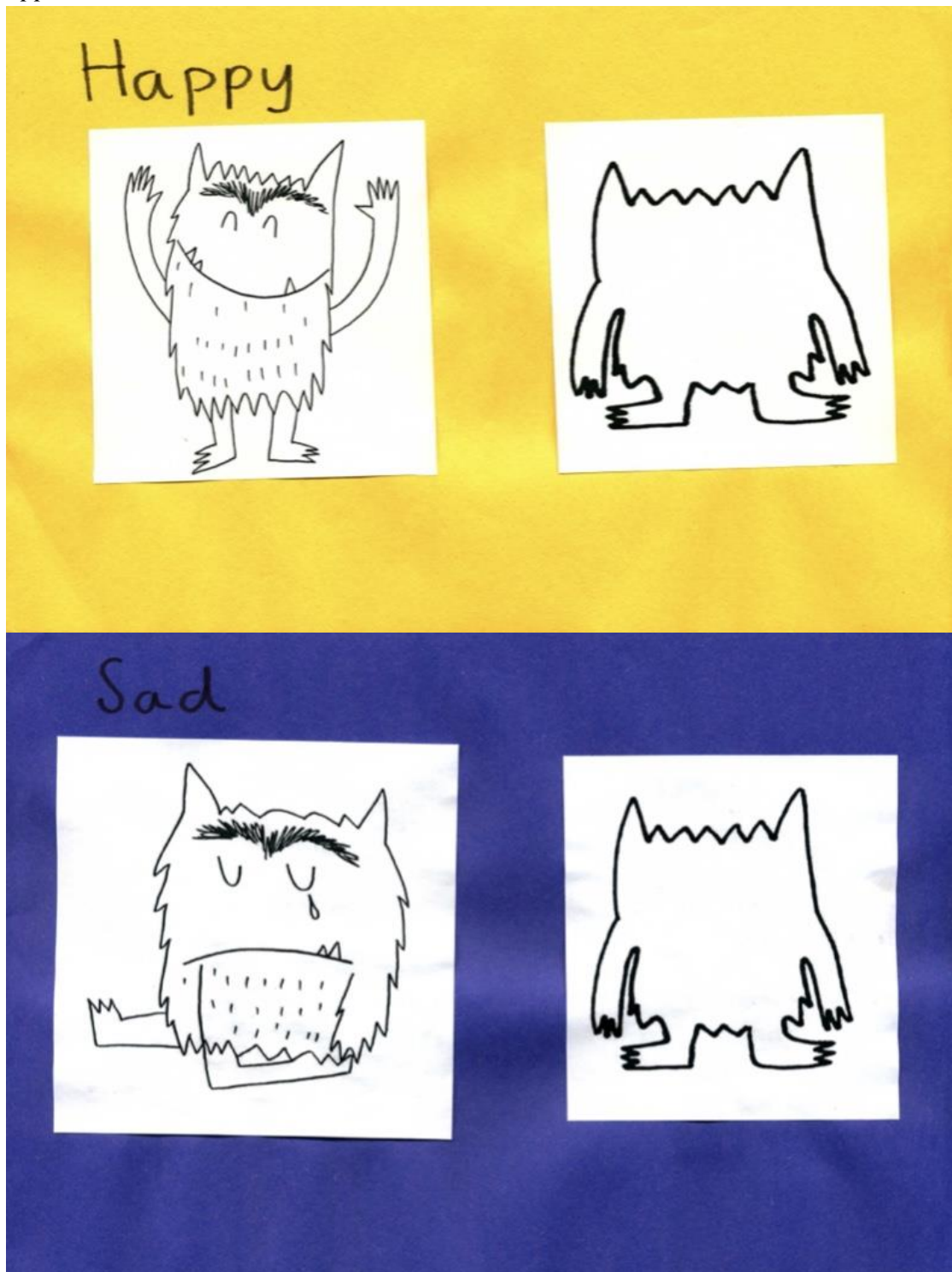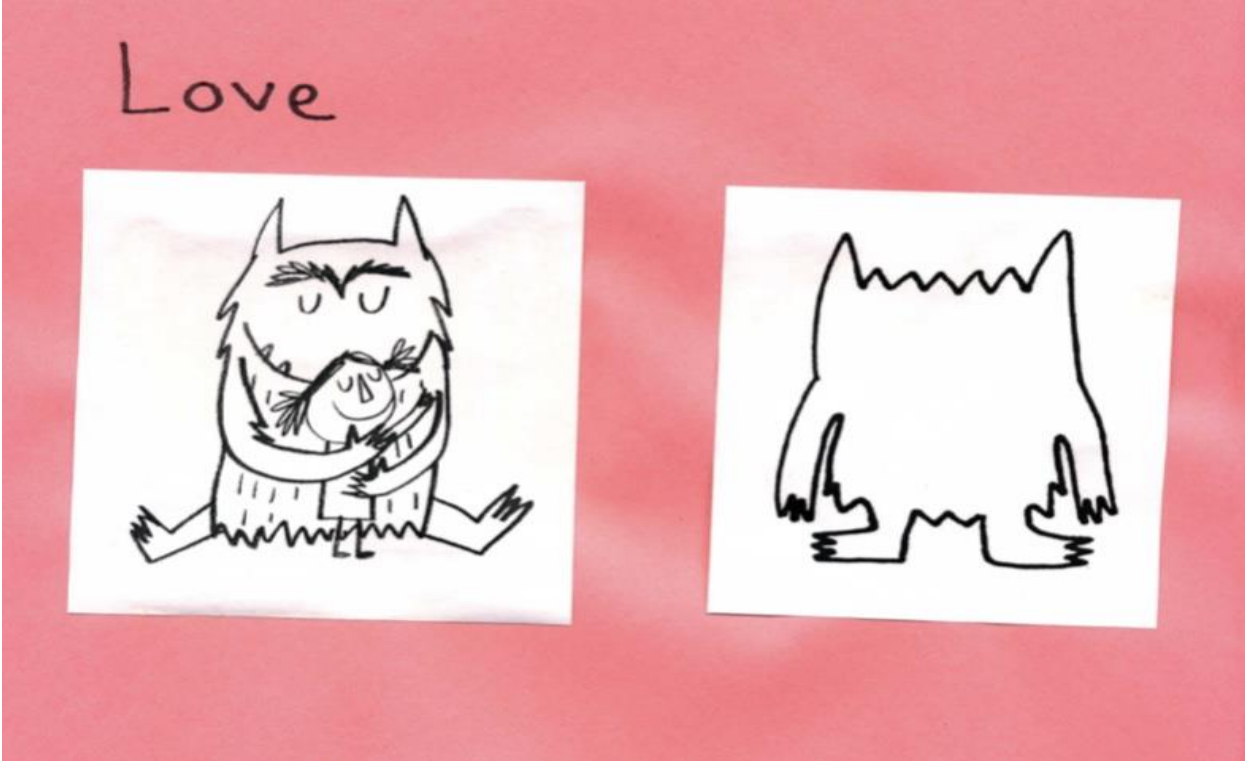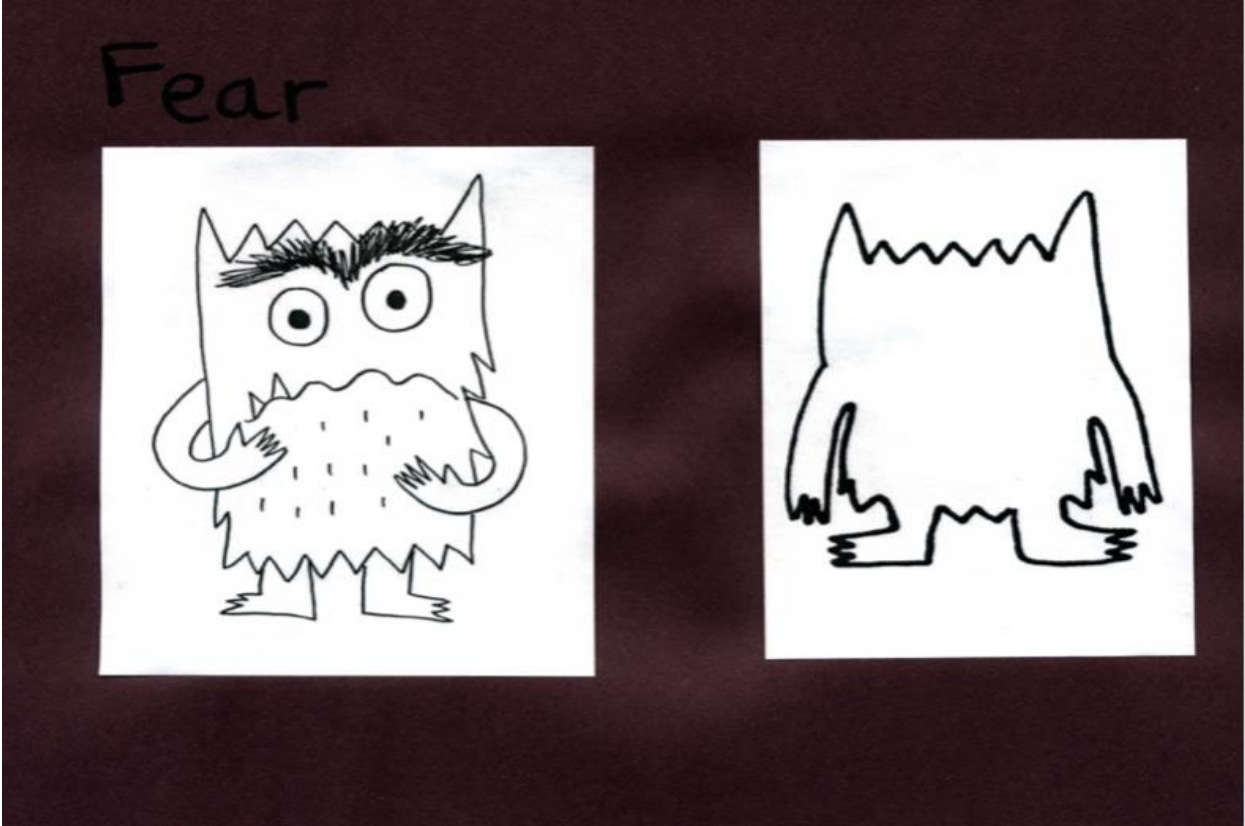
Appendix B

Angry

Calm
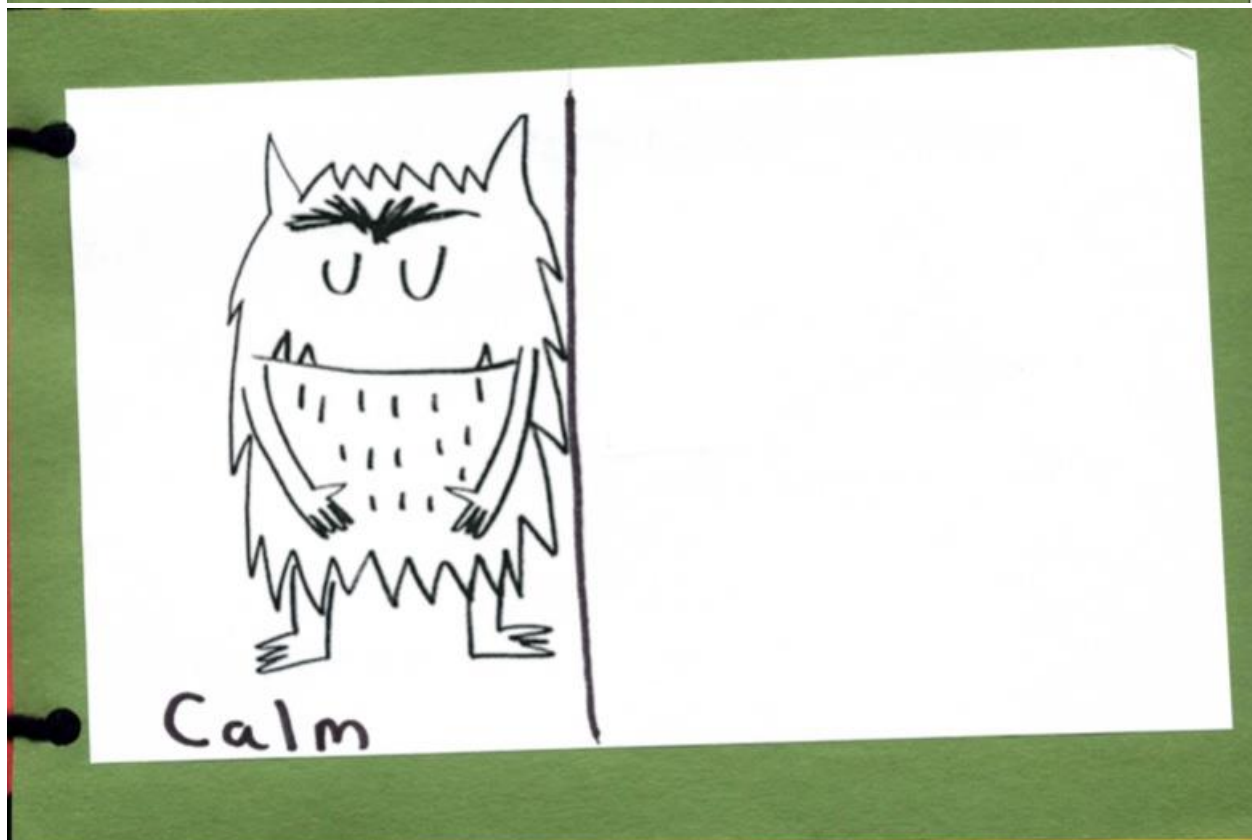
Appendix C

Appendix D

"When I fall down"

Sad

Angry

Happy

Sad

Angry

Happy

Sad

fire, Lava

Happy
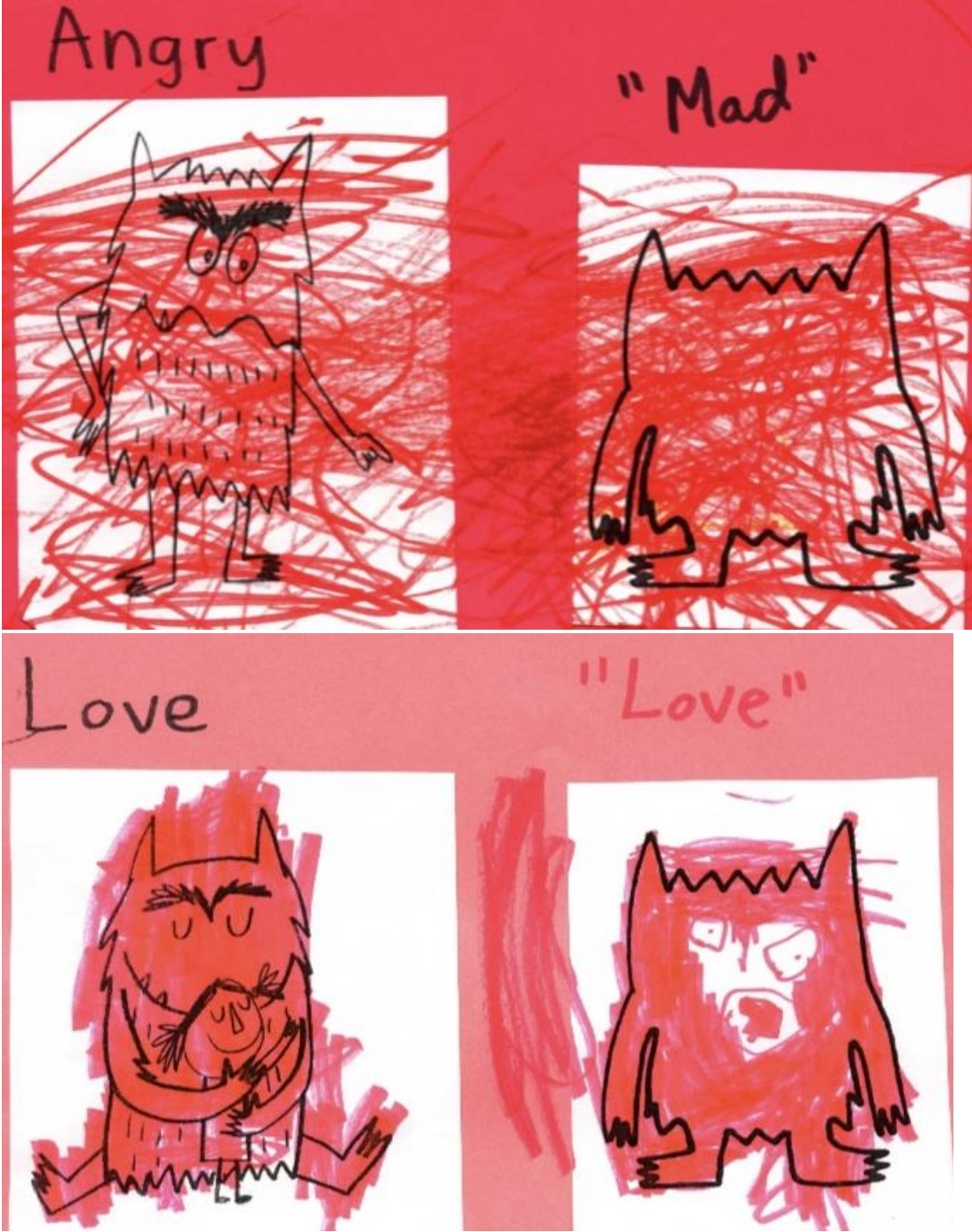
Sad
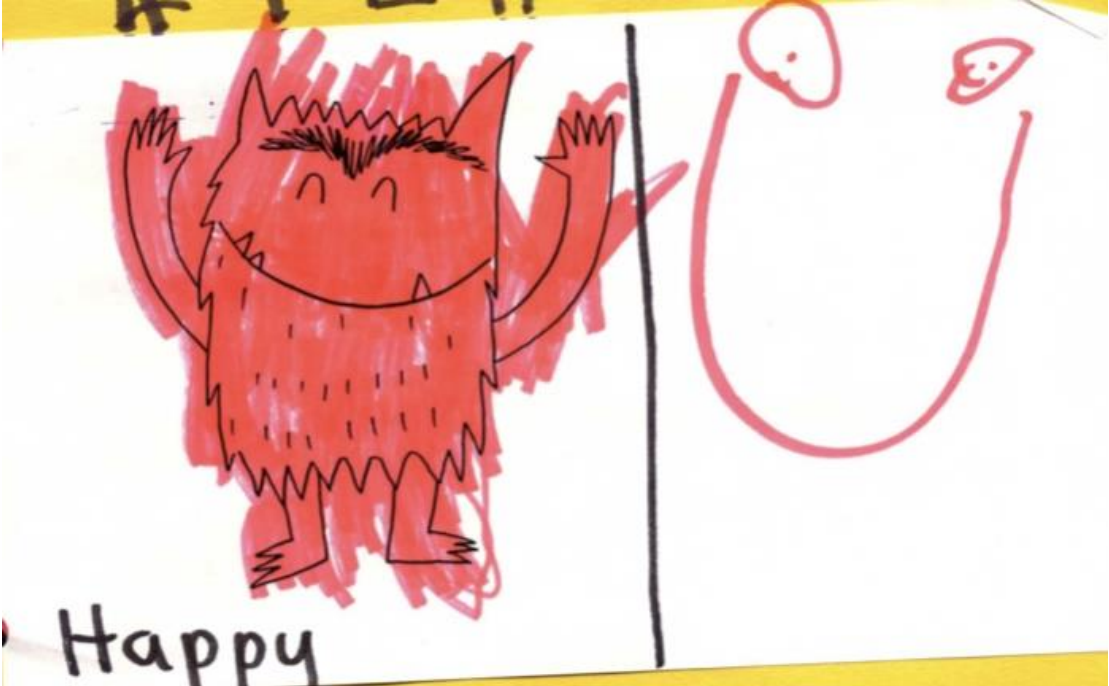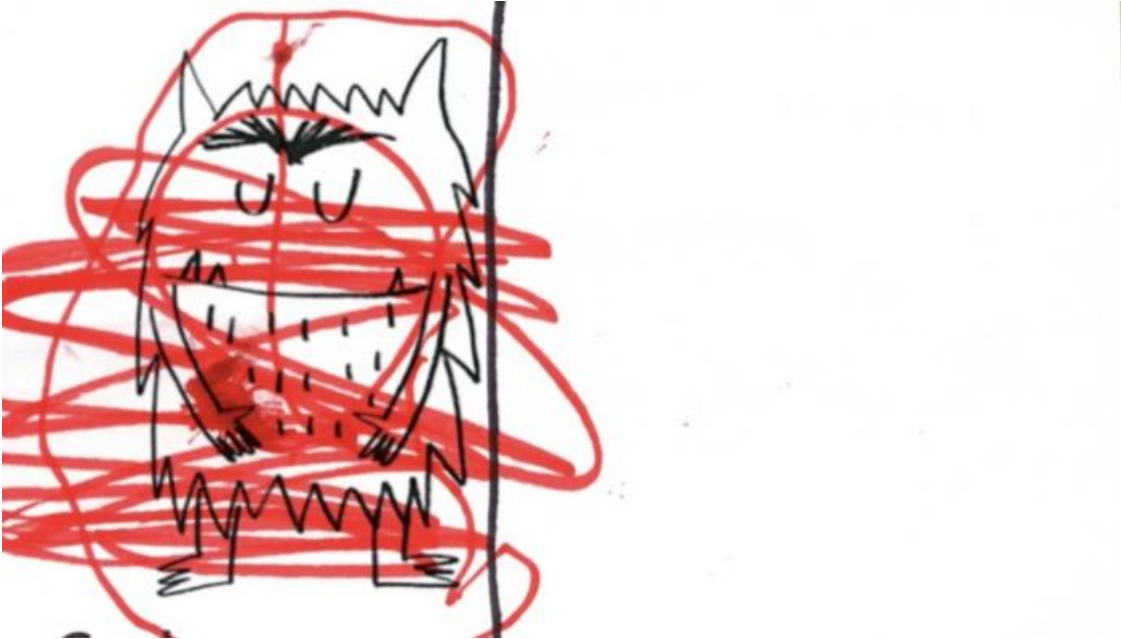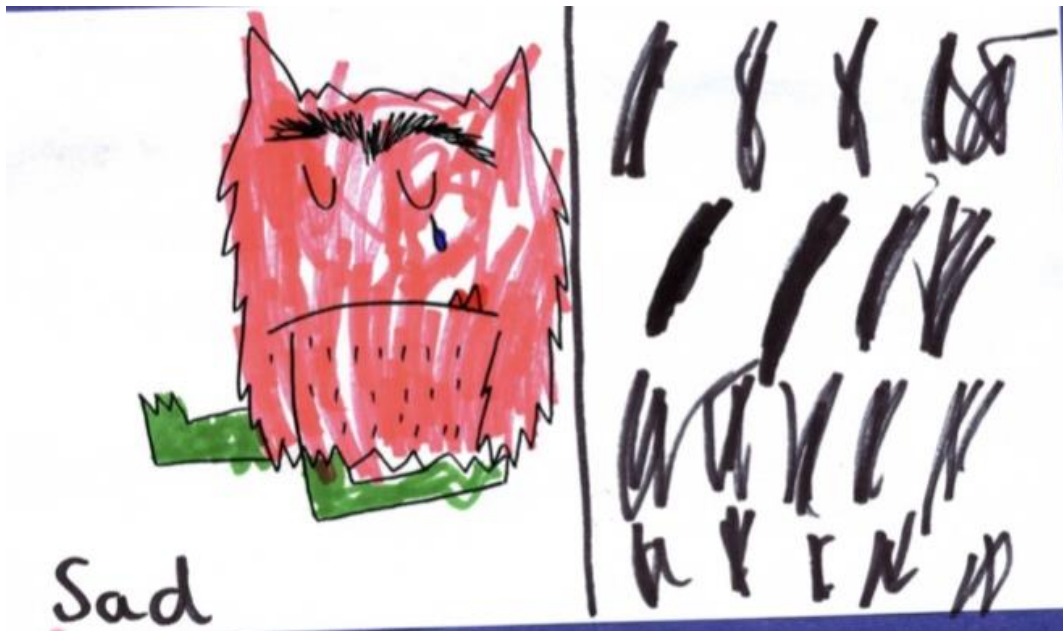
Calm

Angry

Appendix E

Fostering Social and Emotional Learning In Early Childhood Education

By: Allison Cawaling

Need

Opportunities to recognize, label and understand their own emotions as well as others

Positive interactions with peers, which leads to greater academic success later in life

Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

- Children construct their understanding of the world through what they learn socially

- Interactions with teachers and peers play a strong role in development

Zone of Proximal Development

ZPD: Distance between child's current developmental level and their potential developmental level with scaffolding

Scaffolding: limited guided support for child to reach a desired goal

BEYOND REACH AT PRESENT

ZPD

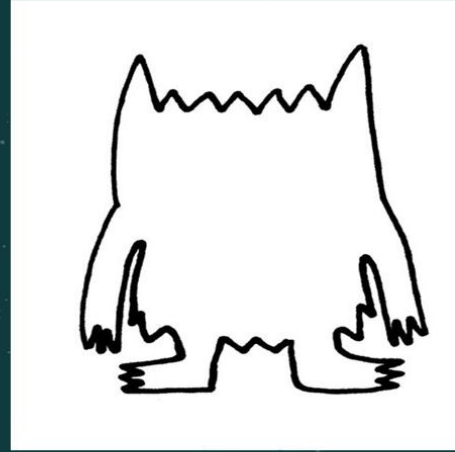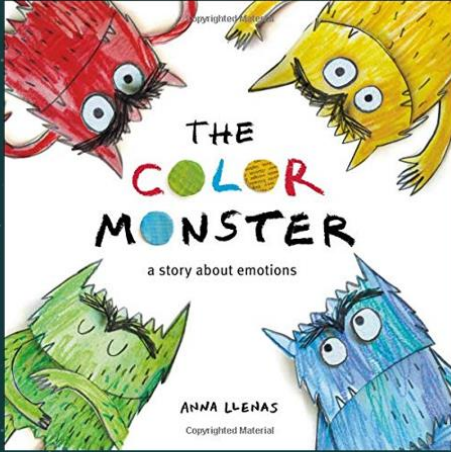CHILD'S CURRENT ACHIEVEMENT
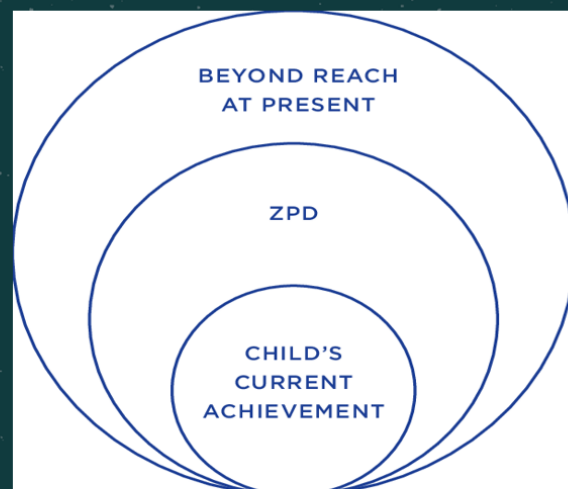
Location & Participants

- Cabrillo College Children's Center in Aptos, CA

- 3 day lesson plan

- 6 participants between ages 3–5

Learning Outcomes

By the end of my project participants will be able to:

1. Indicate an emotion they are currently feeling

1. Indicate what makes them happy, sad, angry and calm

1. Demonstrate 1 calming technique

Method: Day 1

Method: Day 2

Method: Day 3

Modeling techniques for children to utilize when they are in need of feeling calm

- Breathing
- Stretching
- Bear Hug

Results

Results: Learning Outcome #1

Indicate an emotion they are currently feeling

"Happy" "Love" "Happy"

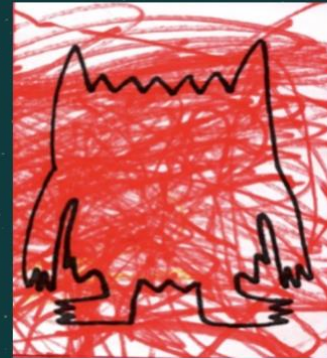## Results: Learning Outcome #1

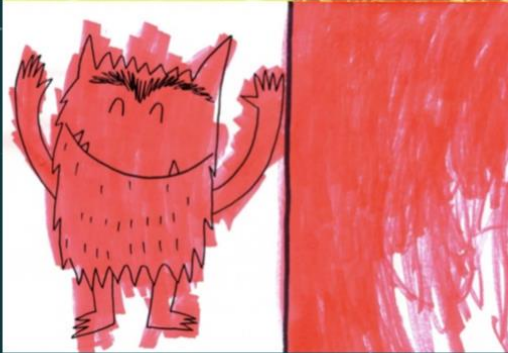Indicate an emotion they are currently feeling

"Happy" "Sad" "Mad"

Learning outcome was met

Results: Learning Outcome #2

Indicate what makes them happy, sad, angry and calm

"Love"

"Crying"

Evidence: Learning Outcome #2

Indicate what makes them happy, sad, angry and calm

"Mad"

"When someone takes my toys"

Learning outcome was partially met

Results: Learning Outcome #3

Demonstrate 1 calming technique

Technique	First Round # of participants displaying techniques	Second Round # of participants displaying techniques	Third Round # of participants displaying techniques
Breathing	4	3	2
Stretching	2	3	1
Bear Hug	0	0	3

Learning outcome was met

Discussion

Overall
- Project was successful
- Participants enjoyed characters introduced in the book and talking about them

What I would have done differently
- Limiting the number of characters included in my activities