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Experiencing emotion: Children's perceptions, reflections and self-regulation

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22 children aged 4-11 attended sessions of Somatic Movement Education (incorporating developmental play and movement patterns). They were given the opportunity to express their emotions through movement, and to develop their understanding and processing of emotion through pair work, group work, journaling, mark-making and reflections as part of a phenomenological research project. The children showed that they were able to identify and express their emotions through movement and creative methods. In some cases they were also able to move towards self-regulating their emotions, and articulate their experiences of this clearly.

Keywords: embodied, emotion, movement, children, education

This paper explores how 22 children aged 4-11 were able to experience, express, recognise and self-regulate their emotions as part of a two year phenomenological research study using Somatic Movement Education (SME) in school time. The sessions were based largely around yoga, and developmental play, and were drawn from my background as a somatic movement therapist (Leigh, 2012). The project used creative research methods, and the children were able to express their thoughts through moving, taking and being part of photographs, drawing, mark-making and talking with each other. The children were also given the opportunity of reflecting on their experiences in the sessions one-to-one in an interview some months after the end of the study.

SME is “the educational field which examines the structure and function of the body as processes of lived experience, perception and consciousness” (Linden, 1994:1). It can incorporate developmental movement patterns, the emotional content present in

movement, the physiology of the body and the words in which we speak of and process movement (Bainbridge-Cohen, 1993). Somatic movement, whether it is educational or therapeutic, includes a diverse range of practices and methods. Practices such as yoga are many thousands of years old (Iyengar, 1966). Other practices have been developed by individuals within the last hundred years (Johnson, 1995). Three principles set somatic movement practices apart from other dance, sport or exercise forms:

The first principle sets out the ‘What?’ of somatic movement. The starting point is that the body and mind are connected and through movement we can increase our body’s intelligence and our mind’s embodiment.

The second principle answers ‘Why?’. Somatic movement is an on-going process, an exploration of self that is undertaken as a life-time commitment or path for many practitioners. It is possible to bring awareness to every movement and moment of our body. The belief that it will enable us to develop towards a higher sense of self is a reason for taking somatic movement off the mat, or out of the room and into every aspect of life.

The ‘How?’ of somatic movement is through conscious awareness, or the intention behind the practice. Not all somatic forms will look the same, nor will they necessarily feel the same. However each practice, therapy or technique will either have explicitly defined these principles or implicitly adhere to them. (Leigh, 2012, p. 13)

The core belief or intention behind these movement practices the desire to cultivate conscious awareness, which can lead to a greater health and wellbeing, creativity, choice and responsibility (Hartley, 2004). Moving the body through different positions, and using it differently, can affect our emotional attitude (Cacioppo, Priester & Berntson, 1993). If wellbeing and health are said to include the capabilities of life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, and practical reason among others (Nussbaum, 2000), and health is determined in terms of the bodily and mental ability to achieve vital goals (Nordenfelt, 2007), then physical activities that enhance the participants’ development of bodily control and awareness can contribute to

a flourishing life.

Emotions

The experience of emotions have been described as bodily changes, a feeling, a felt action tendency, facial expressions, the level of autonomic arousal, evaluative cognition, cognitive appraisals of the situation or bodily changes juxtaposed to an image of what caused the emotion (Lambie & Marcel, 2002). Totton states that emotional memories are stored within the body, and that they “appear as feelings, not as memories of feelings” (2003, p. 38). Emotions are not simple phenomena, when experienced or expressed: “emotions...implicate narrative, intentionality, appraisal, morality, and identity, but all typically include a marked somatic or corporeal component and this is what is meant by emotional feelings: the clenched gut of fear, the heavy body of sadness, the burning face of shame and so on” (Cromby, 2011, pp. 88-9)

When referring to emotions, it is possible to be detached from them, and talk or write about them as separate bodily functions, or as experiences of the whole somatic body (Lambie & Marcel, 2002). Lambie and Marcel report that non-Westerners have a more somatic experience of feelings like depression than Westerners. For example Chinese people are more likely to describe their experiences of fear, anxiety and sadness in terms of bodily sensations than North Americans who are more likely to use terms relating to thoughts or mental feelings (ibid). Many westerners are aware of their bodily sensations that are part of an emotion, although they do not perceive them to be part of that emotion (ibid). The language that is used to express emotions is important to the conceptualising of emotional experiences.

Movement can have emotional content, and it is the expression of this content that may form a basis for somatic education and therapy (Johnson, 1995): “emotion ...motivates memory, perception, thought and action” (Chodorow, 2009, p. 56). Body

movement and gesture can be used to decode emotions (Montepare, Koff, Zaitchik, & Albert, 1999). Movements, however, do not always have to be large. Expressive movements can be tiny, subtle gestures of the body (Hartley, 2004), and of the face. Emotions, in turn, “are not states of being but dynamic phenomena that are experienced in the flesh” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010, p. 124). Experiences and expressions of emotions have been linked to health. They have “been implicated in the etiology of coronary and cardiovascular disease, shown to impact on the workings of the immune system and to modulate multiple pathways and dynamics relevant to disease and ill health” (Cromby, 2011, p. 89). However, it is possible to have emotions, and yet be unaware of them.

If the experience of emotions are a combination of appraisal dimensions, felt action urges, and bodily sensations (Lambie & Marcel, 2002), then one aspect to how an individual perceives their and other’s emotions is how aware they are of all these components. For example, bodily feelings might include an awareness of changes in, and the quality of, the breath, the heartbeat, muscle tension or holding, sweating, sensations in the stomach or another part of the body, and temperature. An individual needs to have an awareness of herself in order to experience her own physical state, and to bring it into consciousness before she can be fully receptive to others: “feelings of all kinds are experienced and expressed in accord with acquired norms of using, holding and relating to the body” (Cromby, 2011, p. 86). Similarities in movement, or perhaps recognising another’s movements as a pattern of expression could result in a sense of common humanity, or increased empathy (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010). As self-awareness increases and norms change, the ability to empathise with others also changes.

Method

Children aged 4–11 attended sessions of SME within the school year over a period of

two academic years as part of a study exploring how they perceived, expressed and reflected on their sense of embodiment through movement. The sessions combined the embodied forms in which I have experience; primarily yoga (Pattabhi Jois, 1999), Authentic Movement (Adler, 2002) and Integrative Bodywork and Movement Therapy (Hartley, 1989). Each session, and the content over the whole study, was adapted to the needs of the children. The sessions included developmental play, yoga exercises, embodied anatomy, working with images or texts as inspiration for movement, and exercises specifically designed to explore the children's own emotions and reactions to others' emotions in pair and group work. There was an overall shape to the content, however, the intention was not to deliver a course of material, but to shape the content to the needs and desires of the children.

The research methodology, in keeping with the phenomenological tradition that "has taken a step on the path towards an ontology which combines the mind and the body" (Alerby, 2003, p. 18), was designed to be enjoyable and to ensure that the children were recognised as "the real experts of their lives...in this context the child is the authority, and can choose to reveal whatever s/he wishes" (Pearce & Bailey, 2010). The emphasis was on the children's own perceptions being valuable, and there being no correct answers (Punch, 2002).

Data were gathered in the form of my observational field notes, drawings, journaling and mark-making, photographs of and by the children, my reflective journal and interviews at the end of the study¹ (Leigh, 2017). They were analysed from a phenomenological perspective, which meant immersing myself in the data, and

¹ Details of the method and data generation can be found in the forthcoming paper 'Using creative methods to encourage reflection in children' (Leigh, 2017)

reflecting on the themes that I perceived to be important. NVivo, a qualitative computer software program, was used to aid the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Participatory research has inherent ethical issues. Firstly there is the issue of consent and assent to participation. Gaining consent on behalf of and assent from children has its own ethical considerations (Jago & Bailey, 2001). Because of the nature of my work, it also fell under the guidance of two of my professional organisations, the British Wheel of Yoga and the International Somatic Movement Educators and Therapists Association, and I chose to work within the ethical guidelines that they set in addition to the University's ethical guidelines for research. As well as gaining consent from the governing body of the school, teachers, and parents, I also asked the children to assent to take part, explaining about the work in the sessions and how I would use the data. All the data and quotations have been anonymised.

Findings

The findings presented here have been organised into three broad themes: the range of emotions the children experienced; how the children expressed and recognised their emotions; and how they began, in some cases, to self-regulate their emotions. The self-regulation of emotion is demonstrated primarily through a case study of one boy, 'M', incorporating his process through the sessions and his reflections on his participation in the study in an interview a few months after it had finished.

Range of emotions

The children explored the range of emotions they experienced. They were given time to come up with a list of emotions and feelings. This exercise was explored with children

of all ages, as this piece from a 5 year-old child demonstrates:

[figure 1 about here]

Within each group we would take one emotion or feeling at a time, and then explore how it made them feel, how it made them want to move and then they would show me how they moved in that way. I would ask the children to describe their experiences as well as give them time to draw, mark-make or journal. I observed how one child, E. (age 4), moved through different emotions.

“I asked them to move softly– and to think about if it was different to slowly. E. said that softly was different because it was calmer. She had been lying down, stretching, rolling and twisting her body.

I asked them how they were feeling (happy) and asked if they could move happily– very bouncy– lots of jumps (still on the mat). Then sad, E.’s whole body slumped and withdrew into the centre, head forward, slouch down, face passive. (Field Notes, class 1)

After moving as described, E. chose to express her emotion and movement through drawing ‘angry’.

[figure 2 about here] “I am krose [cross]”

The older children wrote about how they might move when feeling certain emotions, before exploring this with their bodies:

[figure 3 about here]

Here, EL. (age 9) chose to separate her emotions into two columns she perceived to be positive and negative. She also chose to identify how she felt when she stretched with the positive emotions.

[figure 4 about here]

P. (age 11), chose to draw how he might express various emotional states. Some he felt were expressed through facial expressions only, and others such as lost, sleepy and thinking used the whole body.

[figure 5 about here]

The children in the study showed a variety of emotions through movement and expression. They felt able to share their experiences both verbally and through reflective drawing and writing. Within the sessions, as well as becoming more familiar with the ways in which they and their peers demonstrated their emotions, they related the work to drama exercises, in that they were able to portray a character's emotion through their body. The children utilised awareness and sensitivity to pay attention to their own emotional state, and to pick up on others'. They were increasing their emotional vocabulary and repertoire (Thom, 2010). This was particularly important when we were working in pairs and in group work, when each child had to be responsible for their own safety, and that of their friends'.

Expressing and recognising emotion

The use of the body and facial expressions to show emotion was something that was noted by many of the children in this study “I’ve learnt how different people use their different emotions by showing it with their body and their face” (E. age 10), although not all found it easy to show their emotions that way: “it feels hard to show some body (sic) how you feel” (A. age 11). Some of the children in the study found it naturally easy to ‘read’ others’ emotions from their movements and faces, like L., age 9, “very easy if you look carefully at other people”, whereas others seemed to need to practice and learn. However, they appreciated the point of the exercise “because I wouldn’t have known what would have made them really excited but I would now” (N. age 11).

P., age 9, recognised the effort that her partner put into showing his emotions. “It was really (sic) easy to tell D.’s emotions, he put a lot of effort into it”. She was also clear about which emotions she enjoyed seeing “I like seeing peoples (sic) emotions if they are happy”. P. implied that she did not enjoy seeing other people’s emotions if they were not positive, which could be because she did not enjoy the feelings that were evoked in her own body as a result. Her partner, D., age 11, did not find it as easy to show his emotions, nor to see his partner’s: “it was more easier to take a photo than pulling an expression...It was harder to pull a expression of your feeling...It was very hard to see what someone else was (sic)”. The idea of how they felt when they moved particular parts of their bodies, and where they felt it was also explored. Some of the children chose to draw where they felt their bodies as they moved.

[figure 6 about here]

Several of the children chose to write and draw about emotions in posters they created

for display within the school: how they showed them, and how they shared and perceived them. As they were allowed to choose any aspect of the work they had explored over the past two years, this could have indicated the value that they placed on exploring and identifying emotions in themselves and in others, and the importance they placed on sharing this with their peers “emotions and feelings can be treated as elements of embodied process that feed into and through social interaction” (Cromby, 2011, p. 87). It may have been because this was one of the more recent areas that had been explored, however, the sessions also covered movement and yoga asanas each week.

Self-regulation of emotion

In a session on self-regulation, where we looked at what things made us feel happy in a way that could be seen physically (e.g. eyes shining, shift in facial expressions and posture), one girl chose to write about what she did when she felt sad, rather than how she moved or where she felt it: “when I’m sad I go to my bedroom and cry lots, and lots. If I’m at school I usely [sic] keep my sadness inside me, not many things cheer me up just my animals” (ML. age 10). Although the instructions for the task had been to think about things that we do that make us happy, excluding people and animals (as according to trauma experts (Rothschild, 2000) ideally happiness should not be dependent on others), this particular child said that nothing in her life made her happy except for her cats. As I talked to her, she described how they also walked away from her when she was sad, and she became more upset. This is one reason why the task was to find actions that we do to regulate our emotions, so we become more self-reliant and are not basing our happiness on others’ actions. Within a therapeutic setting this is something that could have been explored further, so she could begin to find and recognise emotional states other than sadness. However, in the classroom setting there was only room to reassure her, to regularly check on her, and talk to her teacher.

M' – A case study

I began working with M in movement sessions when he was 8 years old. I noted: “M apparently has a diagnosis of ADHD but TA [teaching assistant] very unhappy with how medication has affected him– put him back a long way” (Reflective Journal). The TA felt that that he had changed. His behaviour tended to be worse in class, so that he would arrive to the sessions already in trouble for disrupting lessons. During the sessions with me initially M. worked well. He joined in, and though talkative, was not particularly disruptive. For example, the first session was on finding shapes to be still. The group was asked to find ways to be still by themselves, and with a partner.

M. talked a lot, really enjoyed the being still. In pairs he and MI. chose to sit and hold hands and lean back. (Field Notes)

A session with M.'s group on balance included playing and exploring ways to balance and to fall out of balance. We did not explore any movement patterns in depth, but played at falling to the side, to the back and to the front and allowing ourselves to right and to find equilibrium. This kind of movement play allows a sense to be developed of what comes easily and feels ‘natural’ and what does not. The informal approach I used to work with balance, righting reactions, and equilibrium responses was based on work by Bainbridge-Cohen (1993). She developed this as a response to a frustration with the traditional approach of viewing these as static, isolated reactions rather than as integrated and efficient movements. In the traditional rehabilitation approach the reactions are studied in their pathological states with children and adults with brain dysfunction as well as in normally developing infants. By working with fully aware and able-bodied adults as well as skilled movers (dancers, athletes) and children a more detailed study was able to be made. Bainbridge-Cohen believes that “underneath ALL (my emphasis) successful, effortless movement are integrated reflexes, righting

reactions and equilibrium responses” (1993, p. 122). Later in this session the children worked in small groups to find balances. I noted that “B. and P. and I.–made M.’s image” (Field Notes), which I commented at the time, pleasing M.

[figure 7 about here]

M. found it difficult to balance and to fall in the ‘normal’ pattern. This is an indicator that his development had been, for whatever reason, also outside the ‘normal’ range. Although there is an ‘ideal’ spiral of developmental patterns and movements that we all move through, it is never too late to go back to and integrate a ‘missing’ pattern (Brook, 2001). Those of us with developmental differences (for example with autism spectrum disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) may need more support and encouragement to fully embody and integrate the missing patterns (ibid). Observing how an individual moves through this type of exploration, and verbalises it afterwards gives the practitioner a clue as to how and where they are most integrated and most in need of support. “M. observed that it was hard to be still standing up because he felt like he was losing his balance” (Field Notes). One principle of integrative bodywork is to start from a place of support, so rather than initially tackling a difficult movement, instead we would work from the preceding place.

In the final stages of the study M. was in the final year of primary school, aged 11. Although very bright, he was getting into more and more trouble in class, and was presenting to me as a very unhappy child. In a session on recognising and learning to regulate emotion I noted:

I used the example of walking. For me, going for a walk doesn't work, but walking by the sea does. I gave them 3 minutes to think of 5 or 6 things that made them feel happy...

M. did not want to join in said the only thing that made him happy was dying. I said it was about being able to tell when someone else was happy.

I checked in with the class teacher and told her that M. wanted to die. This isn't unusual for him. (Field Notes and Reflections)

Obviously, it is not healthy for an 11 year old boy to speak of dying as the only thing that would make him happy, and this, along with his other behaviours, marked him out to me as a child that would benefit from one-to-one therapeutic intervention.

M was sometimes excluded by the other boys in the class, and his behaviour meant that he was also excluded from some activities. However, at other times they did include him. He was not the only child to misbehave with me and with other teachers. I worked with the class for their last lesson on Friday afternoons during the final stage of the study, and at times found myself in the middle of an on-going situation. One time, I talked to him after the session.

M. had written how much he liked stretching and doing the moving and, remembering how much he had got out of it last year, and focused so well and worked so hard I went to talk to him. I told him that I had read what he'd written and remembered how much he had liked it last year, particularly the fast bouncy stuff and asked him if he knew what he could do so that he could do it lots again this year. He told me that he wished he was normal, that he had problems and was stupid and silly. He wished he would die, every one hated him, he was a prat, he lost golden time every week and began to get upset repeating again and again "I've got problems (pointing at his head) I'm not normal." He got up and stormed out. In fact golden time was cut short and the class sat in a circle as behaviour was not ok-towards M. in particular. It was said that although it was all right for someone to be upset, it was not all right for them to run out the room. My presence meant that the teacher could go out, but in some cases she can't. They also talked about the type of behaviour that made people want to be a friend, and the type of behaviour that was unkind. Interestingly M. said that he got wound up when he

was sad and people thought he was strop-py-interesting considering the work in the class on showing and sharing feelings and emotions. The topic tied into class politics although this had not been intentionally planned. (Reflective Journal and field notes)

[figure 8 about here]

M. was able to use drawing time to help process his emotions, and so I adjusted the sessions to allow him more time for this, taking a much more intentionally ‘teacher’ approach. “More hands up taking it turns—maybe also let the children make notes as they go—particularly M., so rather than saying out loud his thoughts he can write them down” (Reflective Journal). The final three sessions were focused on producing posters for a display board. M. chose to work alone, as did one other girl. “M. worked very well on his own-drawing poses, talking about it, I awarded him a flying cow at the end and made sure his effort was recognised” (Field Notes). As well as producing a poster by himself, M. verbalised and shared to the group his experiences of the things he liked best from the previous day. “I liked mouse pose. It’s hard in the beginning like for the first 20 seconds then I sort of settle and really like it” (Field Notes).

[figure 9 about here]

M. chose to talk to me at the end of the project, to share his feelings about the work over the previous years. He seemed to appreciate the emphasis on every child’s view being valid. He talked about the exercise we had used to identify things that make them happy. Because of the difficulties the class had been having as a group, they were able

to use this exercise to impact positively on their friendships. M. identified that listening to music made him happy. In his interview he spoke about this.

Me: Was that a useful thing, so that if you're feeling sad you could do something that would make you feel...?

M.: Yes.

Me: Do you still use that?

M.: Yes. (M. age 11)

He seemed to get a lot out of the work on feelings, although it had been hard work at times for me.

M.: I wish we had done more of the emotion stuff, because I quite liked that.

Me: Okay. Why did you like that?

M.: Because it made me understand about other people's feelings and stuff.

Me: Okay. That's quite a big thing to be understanding. How did it help you understand about other people's feelings?

M.: Because sometimes I just do stuff and don't realise I'm hurting other people's feelings. So that sort of helped. So I knew to try not to do something that would hurt someone's feelings.

He verbalised how he found the drawing and journaling aspect of the work.

I quite liked drawing about it because I liked doing drawings to explain my emotions and stuff...I enjoy doing drawings and when I draw it sort of calms me down.

The moment when the client takes responsibility for her own process rather than rely on direction is often the aim of the practitioner or therapist, and is called self-regulation. A client who is aware of what she needs and how to ask for it, is one who is developing their own sense of self and resources. M. illustrated his understanding of this concept whilst speaking at the end of the sessions. When asked what he felt he'd learnt with me, M. was again eloquent.

M.: I learnt how when we'd...whatever we do, how much we stretch, we always need to be careful of ourselves and everybody around us and if it's...if you're asking us to do something that's stretching us too far, we should always just do it as far as we can but not so much it hurts.

Me: That's really useful, you have to take control and be responsible for yourself, don't you?

M.: Yes.

Me: That's a good thing to learn. Is there anything else you want to say about the stuff that we did?

M.: I found it very, very fun.

I was very touched by M.'s responses. Although I had perceived him to be getting something positive from the work with me, the extent to which he had internalised his body awareness, the responsibility for regulating his own feelings (by listening to music, quoted previously) and becoming aware of others' maps well onto Fogel's (2009) principles of therapeutic bodywork. He was able to use his experiences within the group for his own therapeutic process. He used the sessions as a resource, allowed himself to slow down and become more aware of his body, to verbalise his experiences, make links and boundaries with those experiences and the rest of his life. As can be seen he was also starting to self-regulate and re-engage.

Discussion and conclusions

Research has begun to show empirically what the somatic practitioner, the meditator and the intuitive mover reported through experience; that the mind, emotions and bodily processes are not separate, and that each influences the other through subtle and complicated interactions. In a discussion of principles for the therapeutic treatment of lost embodied self-awareness, Fogel defines eight stages; resources, slowing down, co-regulation, verbalisation, links and boundaries, self-regulation, re-engagement, and letting go. Somatic movement can be used therapeutically as a tool to rediscover lost

embodied self-awareness (Fogel, 2009). It can also be used educationally, however, as can be seen, SME may also have therapeutic benefits (Hartley, 2004). It must be noted that the sessions with the children at the school were not intended to be therapeutic, but educational. These were not children deemed in need of an intervention, but an ordinary mix of individuals. SME would not seek explicitly to explore why an individual wished to increase their embodied sense of self-awareness, although a practitioner might choose to follow up any insights gained through sessions in personal therapy (Hartley, 1989). As “every educator...has some implicit understanding of what education is or what it should be like” (Biesta, 1994, p. 299), it must be stated that my training and experience as a therapist had implications for my view of what education should be. My intention was educational, however when working with the children I held myself in the mode of therapeutic practitioner, and as such, similarities with therapeutic process occur. This was the boundary of educator/therapist, of which I was aware of throughout my time in the school². I do not see this to be the same as the therapeutic education described by Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) who speak more of a ‘therapeutic turn’ that they see education to have taken.

SME is concerned with the idea of integrating movement patterns and bringing into visibility and consciousness unseen ways of moving and being in the world so that the individual has more choices of how they wish to act and to react. The teacher of embodiment then, has to be more than ‘one page ahead’ of the students. She has to integrate and embody embodiment and make the intention behind the work clear, as “human experience cannot be fully fathomed unless we are fully embodied” (Sills, 2000, p. 8). The intention behind the work helps to give a “clear realization that there is

² This is the subject of a forthcoming paper.

no separation between the mind and the body. Intending something is the beginning of doing it” (Linden, 2002, p. 7). In addition the teacher has to be able to use a combination of approaches whilst allowing the students to fully imitate and participate and construct their own meaning of embodiment from experience.

Within the sessions I encouraged the children to relate their emotional experiences and awareness to the physical and moving sensations of the body. This was in order to ‘ground’ the emotions. By ‘ground’ I mean that the emotions were, when possible, associated with a particular movement or sensation within the body, and as such remained tangible and ‘real’, potentially making them easier to express through language: “emotion and feeling are being treated neither as wholly biological nor as simple manifestations of language” (Cromby, 2011, p. 82). This method works within the framework of Authentic Movement, where the moving experience (of emotions, sensations or images) is expressed through language both verbally and written (Adler, 2002). The aspects of the sessions that were most commented on by the participants in the follow-up interviews were that the children were able to be aware of the perspectives of others and the impact of views on other people, and to increase their empathy (Cromby, 2011; Sheets-Johnstone, 2010), by remaining open not only to their own interpretation of the world, but also those of others. The children began to be aware of how they felt when they moved, both physically and emotionally. They were able to express and share these feelings, and articulate them, as well as show empathy towards others based on seen movements and expressions.

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FIGURE 1 J.'S RANGE OF EMOTIONS

FIGURE 2 E. DRAWING 'ANGRY'

FIGURE 3 HOW V. MIGHT MOVE WHEN FEELING EMOTIONS

FIGURE 4 EMOTIONS AND HOW EL. FELT

FIGURE 5 P.'S EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS

FIGURE 6 "I FELT IT THERE"

FIGURE 7 M.'S BALANCE PICTURE

FIGURE 8 M. 'MAD' AND 'LOST'

FIGURE 9 M.'S POSTER