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AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN A CLASSROOM

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Bernard Weiner, and  
Richard S. Prawat

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### Abstract

Video and audio recordings were made of individual children during a math class and immediately replayed to each child. The children were instructed to report all feelings they experienced. The vast majority of the reported feelings were achievement-related and negative. Angry, unhappy, anxious, and bored were the most commonly reported feelings. The emotional reports did not interact with demographic variables such as gender or ability. The advantages of this novel methodology are discussed.

## AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN A CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>

Ariel Anderson, Bernard Weiner, and Richard S. Prawat<sup>2</sup>

Parents and educators share a concern about affective experience in the classroom. Given the thousands of hours children spend in classroom settings it seems unavoidable that attitudes and feelings experienced in school spill over into the home environment. At school, student's affective experiences are likely to influence attendance, attention, willingness to try, and other motivational indicators that in part determine learning. Many teachers have expressed the belief that negative attitudes are the most serious impediment to school learning (see Epstein, 1981, p. 272).

As both home and school adjustment are influenced by children's affective school experiences, it is essential that school experiences be positive and that the school provide an environment students perceive positively. Furthermore, it is necessary to be able to measure, or to in some way accurately assess classroom affect, to determine whether or not the shared goal of parents and educators to provide positive classroom experiences is, in fact, being met. As yet, no fully satisfactory method of assessment has been found.

Both unsystematic and more precise attempts have been made to assess emotional experiences in school. Among the unsystematic efforts are typical parental inquiries such as, "How did you like school today?" Children typically give abbreviated responses such as, "It was fun" (or okay or bad). More

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<sup>1</sup>Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 1984.

<sup>2</sup>Ariel Anderson is project manager for the IRT's Socialization Outcomes Project. Bernard Weiner is a psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. Richard Prawat is co-coordinator of the Socialization Outcomes Project, associate director of the IRT, and a professor in MSU's Department of Teacher Education.

systematic approaches invariably make use of attitude measures that are presumed to be indexes of affect. For example, the "Quality of Student Life" questionnaire (see Epstein, 1981) measures general satisfaction and dissatisfaction with school. It includes items such as: "Teachers have a way with students that makes me like them" (followed by the alternatives of true or false).

The measurement procedures of the research psychologists as well as of the parents suffer from a number of shortcomings. Both rely on a composite response that supposedly summarizes a number of component experiences. These experiences may involve any number of qualitatively distinct positive and negative feelings, such as pride, excitement, and gratitude or shame, boredom, and anger. Thus, reported satisfaction with school might reflect pride in accomplishment (an achievement concern) or joy over new friendships (an affiliative concern). In a similar manner, dissatisfaction could indicate either boredom or anxiety, although these feelings are associated with disparate classroom environments (Csikszentmihalyi, 1979). In addition to this lack of differentiation, because the verbal report is retrospective it is subject to distortion caused by prior or intervening events that influence retention. Finally, to make a verbal report of an attitude toward school, a child must go through a number of mental processes such as assimilation and information filtering. A verbal report, then, is not an immediate assessment of emotional experience.

The study reported here introduces a novel methodology for the study of affective experience in the classroom. The general procedure is to have auditory and visual recordings of a particular child during a normal classroom period. That child is then immediately taken from the class and placed in a private room where the recordings are replayed. The pupil is instructed to

relieve the situation, stop the tape anytime that a feeling was experienced, and then report that feeling. In this manner, qualitatively distinct feelings are assessed and a differentiated analysis of emotional life is made. Problems of memory distortion are minimized, and affective experience rather than attitudes are the subject of study. While this method is not without faults (as will be discussed later), it represents progress in the attempt to measure and describe affective experience.

### Method

#### Subjects

Thirty-two fourth and fifth graders (13 girls and 19 boys) participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 9 years and 7 months to 11 years and 10 months, with a mean age of 10 years and 7 months. All the subjects were enrolled in one of two fourth/fifth-grade split classrooms in the same urban, midwestern elementary school. The subjects tended to be from middle-class families, representing a variety of racial and ethnic origins. They had no known cognitive or perceptual problems. Two classroom teachers participated in the study, one male and one female.

#### Procedure

Before beginning the data collection, the students in each of the two classrooms were informed by their teacher about the research project. They were told that the investigators were interested in knowing what kinds of thoughts and feelings children their age have in school. It was explained that if they chose to participate in the project, they would be videotaped during math class and would then get to see themselves on television. All students volunteered to participate.

Each subject was taped for approximately 20 minutes. The video equipment was set up before the children entered the room. One subject was taped and



interviewed during each class meeting. The interviewer first informed the student that s/he would be taped that day. Then a microphone was placed on or near the subject's desk. Subjects were instructed to move around as usual while being taped, and were assured that the investigators would still be able to film them. Two experimenters were involved in the procedure; both were familiar and trusted figures in the classroom, having conducted other research projects on previous occasions.

The instructions concerning freedom of movement were particularly important, given the nature of math instruction in the two classrooms. In both classrooms, children worked from a variety of math texts ranging from the fourth-grade to the eighth-grade level. Assignments were made on an individual basis by the teacher for each child. Children worked on math at their desks and wrote their name on the blackboard if they wanted or needed to confer with the teacher. Children typically conferred with the teacher when they finished an assignment or had trouble with one. When a subject was called by the teacher, every attempt was made to keep the child on camera, and the microphone was moved to the teacher's desk.<sup>3</sup>

After videotaping was completed, the equipment necessary to play back the tape was transported to a room adjoining the classroom. This process required about five minutes, after which the subject was asked to view the tape. The subject was again informed that the interviewer was interested in the feelings experienced during the time of the taperecording. The interviewer emphasized that the subject should report any and all feelings and that whatever was said would remain confidential. The recall interview was audiotaped.

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<sup>3</sup>In the experimenter's opinion, the children were not greatly distracted by the taping procedure. They had participated in other research projects involving videotaping and were used to taking part in a wide variety of research projects. However, for a few subjects, movement around the room may have been curtailed. In some cases, the children expressed the belief that they should not move around too much or the camera would not be able to follow them.

The interviewer explained that the entire tape would be viewed, and that the subject should stop the tape whenever s/he remembered a feeling. The subject was then shown how to operate the pause button and was allowed practice stopping the tape a few times. Our pilot research suggested that letting the subject stop the tape was less inhibiting than having the subject ask the interviewer to do it. Each time the tape was stopped, the subject was encouraged to express his/her feelings. If a subject had difficulty in labeling the feelings, the interviewer used reflective listening techniques to aid verbalization. In addition, at each pause the child was encouraged to provide a reason for the expressed feeling. Probes varied, depending on the degree of assistance required.

### Results

The average number of affective reports was 17.73 (S.D. = 11.28). Of these, 63% were achievement-related (e.g., "I felt mad when I could not do the problem."), 17% were linked with affiliative concerns (e.g., "I was afraid I would lose her friendship."), 8% had elements of both achievement and affiliation (e.g., "I was mad at my friend because she was doing a different problem."), and 12% were unrelated to either achievement or affiliative classroom occurrences (e.g., "I felt terrible because my legs hurt.").

The feelings were classified as negative or positive and associated with the unambiguous achievement or affiliation classification (see Figure 1).

All but one of the subjects reported more achievement- than affiliative-related feelings ( $p < .001$ ), all but five subjects reported more negative than positive feelings ( $p < .001$ ). As revealed in Figure 1, negative feelings were particularly expressed about achievement-related concerns. These data were not associated with any of the assessed demographic variables, including

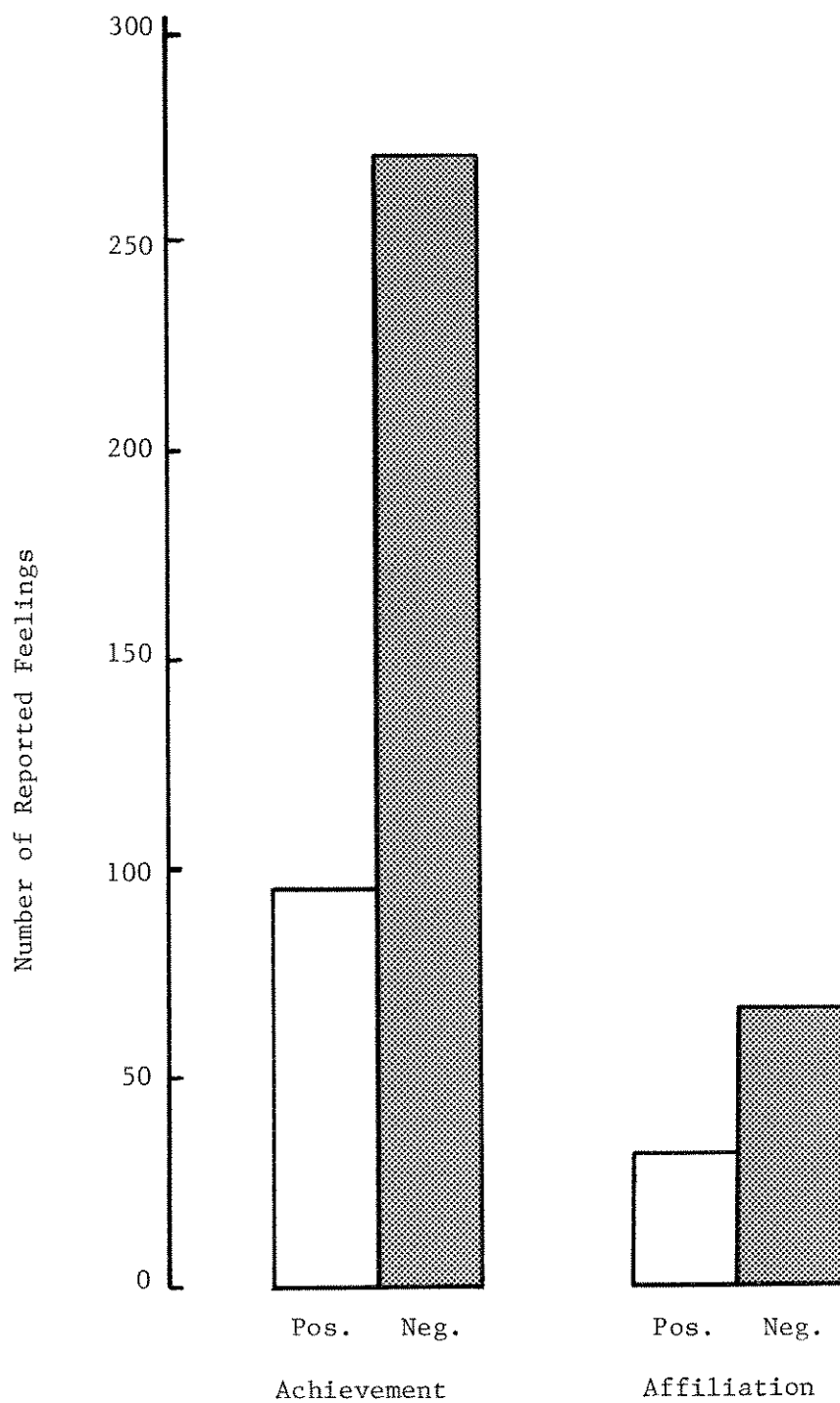


Figure 1. Number of reported affects as a function of the motivational domain (achievement versus affiliation) and direction (positive versus negative) of the affect.

achievement ranking, age, or gender of the students. Neither were they associated with either of the two classrooms.

All the positive and negative feelings reported were classified into 5 and 10 categories, respectively, with 91% inter-rater agreement. The categories with greater than 3% representation are shown in Table 1. Table 1 indicates that the predominant negative feelings were anger (angry, mad, annoyed, fed-up), unhappiness (unhappy, bad, terrible, frustrated), anxiety (anxious, afraid, worried, nervous), boredom, and dumbness (dumb, stupid, slow).<sup>4</sup> The clearly dominant positive feeling was happiness (happy, good), followed by amusement (amused, funny, laughing), hopefulness (hopeful, confident), and relief.

Table 1  
Affective Categories with Greater than 3% Representation

Negative Feelings	%	Positive Feelings	%
Anger	38	Happiness	61
Unhappiness	20	Amusement	10
Anxiety	14	Hopefulness	9
Boredom	10	Relief	6
Dumbness	4		

<sup>4</sup>The categories were in part guided by prior research (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978). Thus, frustration was linked with unhappiness because prior research had revealed them both to be outcome-dependent feelings, that is, linked with failure but not with any specific causal attribution.

Table 2 indicates the situational determinants that generated these feelings for all situations reported more than 10 times. It reveals that anger is preceded by failure or the negative behavior of friends; unhappiness is associated with lack of understanding, incompleteness, and failure; and anxiety is linked with not being able to complete a task and with the video procedures.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2  
Situational Determinants of Classroom Affect

Affect	Antecedent
Anger (125)	Wrong answers (67) Friends were teasing (21) Friends were disturbing (15)
Unhappiness (88)	Don't know why I am wrong (33) Can't complete my work (19) Wrong answers (16)
Anxiety (70)	Want to finish (25) Video procedure (25) Math is too difficult (12)
Happiness (75)	Finished problem (24) Got problem right (19) Fun with friends (11)

Note: Number in parentheses equals number of responses.

On the other hand, happiness is the result of goal attainment, problem solution, and positive interpersonal experiences. Thus negative feelings primarily were linked with perceived task incompleteness and failure, while positive feelings were tied to task completion and success. The individual

<sup>5</sup>The video source of negative affect would not be part of a typical classroom. Figure 1 includes only the achievement- and affiliative-related feelings and thus does not include feelings generated by the experimental procedure.

feelings and their situational determinants were not associated with any of the demographic characteristics of the sample.

### Discussion

Our data show that the feelings students experience in the classroom, particularly those related to achievement strivings, are primarily negative. These feelings are predominantly characterized by the words "angry," "unhappy," and "anxious."

Belief in the validity of these data and the generalizability of the results, however, must be tempered for a variety of reasons. The replay methodology, although overcoming a number of shortcomings as outlined earlier, has apparent limitations. For example, perhaps general attitudes, evaluations, and/or feelings are not determined by an unweighted sum of component experiences. Rather, affective tone might be regulated by reactions to one or two events of major significance. We were unable to take into account the relative importance of the particular events, which is likely to influence the intensity and duration of individual affective experiences. Further, inasmuch as the index of affect is a self-report, it might be invalid because of response withholding or exaggeration, dissimilar meanings given to the same verbal label, and so on. And the children may have been more likely to have a verbal label for the negative than the positive feelings, so that the self-reports do not reflect actual experience. Prior research has shown that there are more negative than positive labels for achievement-related emotions (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978). Finally, affective reactions were assessed in two particular math classes among fourth and fifth graders. Other students studying other subjects in other schools could exhibit different patterns.

In spite of these cautions, there are reasons to believe that the results are both valid and general. The data are in accord with other findings

indicating that students perceive the classroom as aversive (see Epstein, 1981). Similar findings also were obtained in a study by Prawat (1980), in which teachers were asked to describe affectively significant events occurring in their classrooms. Nearly 80% of the affect attributed to students by teachers was negative, with most falling into a "dislike/anger" category. In addition, in the math classes under study, students spent the majority of their time at their desks, engaged in a difficult task. Research has documented that in elementary math classes students spend approximately 75% of their time working independently at their desks (see Denham & Lieberman, 1980; Rosenshine, 1980). Thus, the classrooms under study have some close similarities to other math classrooms.

The question that remains is this: "Why are the affective experiences in the classrooms we studied so negative?" A number of possible answers come to mind. In these particular classrooms, each student worked alone on individualized materials. Thus, there were many instances of temporary failure or uncertainty regarding problem solution. Inasmuch as task incompleteness was the main determinant of negative affect, unpleasant feelings were often experienced. The individualized program also might have been responsible for the absence of affective interactions with pupil characteristics such as ability.

Another source of negative affect could have been the characteristics of the teaching method. It has been found that students are more involved in classrooms where teachers circulate among students, monitoring their progress (see Denham & Lieberman, 1980). The teachers in the two classrooms under study did not do this. They expected students to write their names on the board and then wait for help. This might have led to more frequent experiences of frustration, failure, and withdrawal from the task. Classroom variables such as the difficulty of the assignments or the teaching procedures

can, of course, be modified and ought to produce change in students' feelings (but at the risk of having other, negative consequences).

Going beyond the confines of classroom variables, perhaps any activity that is not under volitional control or is labeled as "work" results in predominantly negative feelings. What would be the moment-to-moment affective life of a college teacher, for example, or individuals engaged in any constrained activity? If work is the source of negative affect, then classroom affective experiences would benefit from a construal of the activity as play rather than work and as under the student's control.

And going beyond the general category of "work," perhaps the majority of affective experiences in life are negative. It has been suggested by Freud and others that memories are generous, and thus people's construals of the negative past are relatively positive. Clearly, the greater the situational specificity of the unpleasant feelings documented in the present research, the more likely that those reactions can be altered.

A myriad of research questions are amenable to investigation given the methodology reported here. Perhaps the procedure will aid the study of affective experience, an area of research in which conceptual thinking has moved beyond the current methodological sophistication.



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