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The Irony of Self-Expression

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By placing familiar American early childhood educational practices such as sharing time and process writing alongside unfamiliar approaches used in Japan, this article attempts to deconstruct the pedagogy of self-expression. The article argues that the pedagogy of self-expression is (1) conceptually confused and internally inconsistent, (2) insensitive to class and cultural differences within American society, and (3) a symptom of the malady of postmodern emptiness.

My hunch is that many of you would agree that teaching children to express their thoughts and feelings first in speech and then eventually in writing is the cornerstone of early childhood education. As a parent, I urge my sons to tell me what they are thinking and feeling. As a preschool teacher, I ask the young children in my care to "use their words." I encourage them to narrate the events of their lives ("show and tell"), to verbalize their hopes and fears ("sharing"), and, of course, to settle disputes by talking instead of hitting or biting. As an instructor in elementary education courses, I introduce my students to pedagogical approaches such as journal writing and peer conferencing that emphasize self-expression.

These forms of self-expression are so central to contemporary American middle-class cultural beliefs and practices that it can be difficult for us to see them as anything other than natural and desirable. Yet when viewed from outside the world of our taken-for-granted assumptions, self-expression as a central goal for early childhood education becomes exotic and problematic.

For example, writing from the perspective of an African-American educator, Lisa Delpit raises troubling questions about progressive developments in language arts instruction. Delpit's explication of the cultural and class assumptions of the whole-language movement calls

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into question the pedagogy of self-expression. Arguing for the importance of teaching writing skills, Delpit (1986, 1988) suggests that many African-American teachers disagree with the writing-process movement's disdain for explicit skill instruction and its emphasis on unfettered self-expression and personal voice.[1]

Cynthia Ballenger makes a parallel point about cultural and class differences in attitudes toward self-expression in her article "Because You Like Us: The Language of Control" (Ballenger 1992). On the basis of her experience working in a Boston day-care center where most of the children and staff are Haitian immigrants, Ballenger describes her gradual enculturation into Haitian views of classroom management. For Ballenger, as the "Do you want your parents to be ashamed of you?" Haitian approach to dealing with misbehavior became familiar, the "talk about your feelings" American approach gradually became strange.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1979) Michel Foucault deconstructs contemporary sites of self-expression including elementary education and psychoanalysis by locating both within a narrative of repressive disciplinary practices. Foucault places self-expression alongside self-surveillance and self-control and sees all three as participating in a quintessentially modern form of self-inquisition whose roots can be traced back to confessions extracted on the rack.

In this article I will add to Delpit's African-American, Ballenger's Haitian-American, and Foucault's poststructuralist critiques of self-expression pedagogies a cross-cultural critique from Japan. My strategy will be to use fieldwork vignettes to introduce a Japanese approach to dealing with children's expressions of feelings, and then to use the Japanese case to launch a critique of our taken-for-granted assumptions about the meaning and value of self-expression. By the middle of this article I hope to have made the term "self-expression," like a word you say over and over again, become strange. I hope that this sense of strangeness, in turn, will work in the second half of the article to reveal how the forms of self-expression taught and practiced in American early childhood settings are a highly conventional discourse

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that is more familiar and attractive to some groups of Americans than to others. The article closes with a discussion of implications for practice, and with the recommendation that we drop the term self-expression from our professional lexicon. I suggest that we focus instead on the problem of how in our early childhood educational settings children from varied class and cultural backgrounds can acquire forms of verbal and written expression needed for success in particular educational and social contexts.

Teaching Self-Expression in Japan

A society that is simultaneously like and unlike us in crucial ways, Japan is a most useful Other, a valuable mirror-self for American educators. Like us, the Japanese believe that formal early childhood education is crucial to preparing children for later success in school and in society. Like us, the Japanese are preparing children to succeed in a world that is competitive, urbanized, and postindustrial. Like us, the Japanese believe that a central function of preschools is to give children the opportunity to learn to express their feelings appropriately. But, as the following vignettes suggest, the Japanese are unlike us in their notions of what constitutes appropriate modes of expressing one's feelings and needs.

Mister Carrot.—The children in a Japanese day-care center are sitting down to lunch. Their teacher, circulating around the room, notices that many of the children have finished their meat and rice and dessert but have left their carrots untouched. Speaking to a boy in a theatrical voice loud enough for the whole class to hear, the teacher says "Poor Mr. Carrot! You ate Mr. Hamburger and Mr. Rice, but you haven't eaten any of Mr. Carrot. Don't you think he feels sad!"[2]

Big sister.—A researcher, visiting the home of an Osaka family where she expects to find only one child, arrives bearing only one cupcake.[3] But it turns out there are two children in this family, sisters aged five and three. When the single cupcake is set out on the table, the three-year-old grabs it and starts eating. As the young girl nears the halfway point, her mother asks here, "Are you going to eat it all? Your big sisters says she wants some too" (*ooneesan wa, watashi mo keeki ga tabitai, to yutta*). What strikes the visiting researcher as most interesting about this statement is that the older sister had not said a word. If the older sister did not speak, in what sense did she express her desire for the cupcake?

Babies.—It is 8:00 A.M. at Komatsudani Hoikuen (day-care center). A pair of five-year-old girls who have arrived at school early go to the

nursery where each picks up a one-year-old baby to take out to the sandbox. Later, when I show the principal and vice-principal a videotape segment that shows the older girls playing with the infants, I ask them if they encourage this behavior in order to give the day-care-reared babies the attention and stimulation they need. They both look a bit puzzled by my interpretation. Vice-Principal Higashino then explains: "We believe this is good for the infants, of course, but we also believe it is just as important for the older children because it gives them a chance to experience what it feels like to take care of another person. These days most of our children do not have younger siblings, and we feel this contact with infants and toddlers gives them a chance they might not otherwise have to develop empathy (*omoiyari*) and to learn to know and anticipate the needs of another (*ki ga tsuku*)" (Tobin et al. 1989, p. 350).[4]

When considered as a set, these three vignettes suggest that in Japanese childhood socialization more emphasis is placed on intuiting feelings than expressing them. What babies have in common with carrots and other vegetables is an inability to verbalize their feelings. Vegetables, babies who cannot talk, and older girls who are too shy or polite to make demands provide young Japanese children with educational moments, specifically with the chance to learn empathy, which in Japan means to be aware of the unverbalized feelings of others.

Fighting.—I do not want to give readers of this article the impression that Japanese children never express their feelings, or that the expression of feelings is always discouraged in Japanese early childhood settings. There are contexts where Japanese children are encouraged to express "natural" feelings in "natural" ways, which often means to express strong feelings directly, but not necessarily verbally.

What has turned out to be the most controversial event in our book *Preschool in Three Cultures* (Tobin et al. 1989) is when one four-year-old boy (Hiroki) purposely steps (in stockinged foot) on his classmate Satoshi's hand, making him cry. Midori, a four-year-old girl, comes over, ushers Satoshi away, comforts him, and then leads a group of girls in a discussion of the altercation. ("Hiroki stepped on his hand." "That always happens when you play with Hiroki. Play with someone else next time.") What makes this event so controversial to American readers is that the classroom teacher, Fukui-sensei, does not intervene. When we asked Fukui why she had not stopped Hiroki from fighting on the day we videotaped in her classroom, she responded, "Of course there are times I do intervene, depending on whom Hiroki is fighting and under what circumstances, but in general I let them fight because it is natural for boys of that age to fight and it's good for them to have the experience while they are young of what it feels like to be in a fight" (p. 32).

Many Japanese teachers view fighting in preschool-aged children as a developmentally appropriate, prosocial activity, a fledgling attempt at interpersonal connection. As a Japanese teacher explained to Catherine Lewis, "When I see kids fighting, I tell them to go where there isn't concrete under them or where there are mats. Of course, if they're both completely out of control, I stop it. Fighting means recognizing others exist. Fighting is being equal in a sense. . . . I tell children to cry if they're being hurt, because the opponent will bite or pull until they cry" (Lewis 1984, p. 78).

Speech routines.—There are times throughout the day at Komatsudani when the teachers encourage children to use words. But these are words that refer not to individual, internal feeling states, but instead to that which is socially shared. During preschool and the first few years of elementary education, Japanese teachers concentrate less on the content of what children say than on their mastery of interactional routines (Peak 1991). Each morning a teacher at Komatsudani stands in the entrance hall helping toddlers use the appropriate posture and verbal forms to greet arriving children, parents, teachers, and guests. Lower elementary school teachers put considerable effort into teaching and reinforcing the *happyoo* (presentation)/*hanno* (reaction) large group discussion format that is used widely in Japanese science, social studies, and language arts instruction. To American ears, the formality and repetition of morning greetings and of *happyoo/hanno* makes them sound flat and overly conventional, and thus contrary to what Americans hold to be the spirit of self-expression. As Fred Anderson (1992) describes, "Japanese students stand during their presentations, and present their responses in polite, standard language. . . . From the first grade, students are explicitly taught how to react to one another's presentations by choosing from a repertoire of formulaic phrases." Early in the school year, teachers encourage children to respond to classmates' statements by saying "*ii desu*" ("That's good"). Only after this response has been mastered are children taught to add a second possible response, "*onaji desu*" ("I think the same thing" or "I was going to say the same thing"). Later in the year children are taught to preface their comments with the phrase "*tsukekuwaemasu*" ("I have something to add"). The final response form introduced is "*chigaimasu*" ("I disagree").

In contrast to this explicit instruction in routines for greetings and classroom discussions, informal speech, including words used to mediate disputes and to talk about emotions, is taught by not being taught. Japanese preschools provide situations where children can interact in complex ways free from adult supervision and interruption. We have suggested (Tobin et al. 1986) that one of the reasons Japanese pre-

schools have such high student/teacher ratios (around 30 children per teacher) is in order to assure that teachers cannot easily overhear or intervene in children's conversations.

In sum, in these vignettes we see Japanese teachers (1) teaching self-expression by not teaching it, as when they encourage children to settle their own disputes; (2) deemphasizing the importance of clearly expressing one's feelings and needs, by stressing instead the importance of children's learning to be sensitive to the unenunciated feelings and needs of others; and (3) teaching speech routines to be used for expressing one's opinions appropriately in specific settings. What appears to Americans to be an inconsistent approach in which teachers intervene in children's expression either far too little (e.g., when children fight on the playground) or way too much (e.g., when they insist that children make their points in class discussion using formulaic phrases) is entirely consistent to the Japanese. The Japanese preschool's "two-sided" approach to teaching children to express their feelings mirrors what the psychoanalyst Takeo Doi refers to as the "two-sided consciousness" of the Japanese character (Doi 1986). To be Japanese, Doi argues, is to be able to move back and forth fluently between behaviors appropriate to formal and informal social contexts. In contemporary Japan, preschools are a key site for developing this fluency (Tobin 1992). Japanese early childhood educators make it abundantly clear to children that appropriate self-expression on the playground, among peers, is very different from appropriate self-expression in formal class discussions, led by the teacher. What is consistent across both contexts is the importance of being responsive to the voiced and unvoiced feelings of others.

Self-Expression in American Preschools

If you are an American early childhood educator, or if you have been the parent of a child enrolled in an American preschool, then I am sure that you can provide examples of your own for this section. For those of you for whom the beliefs and practices of mainstream American early childhood education are unfamiliar, I offer the following vignettes:[5]

Sharing time.—It is 9:30 on a Monday morning at a Chicago day-care center, time for "show and tell."

> *Billy:* The other day, we was going, we was gonna go, to *Aladdin,* but we didn't, cuz . . .
>
> *Teacher:* To the movie *Aladdin?* Yesterday your family had plans to go to see the movie *Aladdin?*

Billy: The movie *Aladdin*. With the genie. And the flying carpet. And . . .

Teacher: Something happened so your family's plan to go to the movie had to be changed? Is that what you're sharing with us today?

Billy: Yeah.

Teacher: Then why don't you tell us what happened, why you couldn't go to the movies.

Billy: My mom and my dad. (Switching to deep, serious voice.) They had soooo much work. (Back to normal "sharing" voice.) So we couldn't go to the movie, so we watched some video movies. My brother wanted *Die Hard* and I wanted (suddenly singing) "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. (Joined now by several other children.) Heroes in a half-shell. Turtle power! (No longer singing). Turtles movie number two." When Shredder, and . . .

Teacher: What a shame! You must have felt very disappointed when you couldn't go to *Aladdin.*

Billy: My Dad and Mom said we could go but then they said we couldn't go this day but we could go a different day. So we watched *Die Hard,* and *All Dogs Go to Heaven,* and *Ninja Turtles Two*. (Switching to "dude" accent.) "Pepperoni pizza. Excellent!" And, and Michelangelo . . .

Teacher: So you were disappointed when you weren't able to go to the movies, but then you felt better when you watched one of your favorite videos at home? Right? Is that what you're saying? Good. Thank you for sharing.

Free write.—It is a special day at Lake School. All of the children gather in the "multipurpose" room for an assembly. An ornithologist has brought an owl to school, and he is demonstrating how hunting birds catch and kill their prey. He walks across the room, away from the owl, which he leaves sitting on its perch. He then holds out a toy mouse hanging from a string. On his whistled command, the owl comes swooping across the room, just over the children's heads, and snags the mouse in its talons. Twenty minutes later, the kindergarten teacher discusses the assembly:

Teacher: What happened? What did the owl do?

Scott: It flied and grabbed the mouse with its feet.

Teacher: Right, the owl flew across the room and grabbed the mouse with its talons. A bird's feet are called talons. Were you scared when the owl flew over your head? Raise your hand so I can call on you. Jarrod?

Jarrod: It was wicked awesome!

Teacher: It was exciting! Gina?

Gina: Scared and sad.
Teacher: You felt scared and sad? Why did you feel sad? You aren't sure? Did you feel sad for the mouse? It wasn't a real mouse was it? It looked like a real mouse, didn't it? Let's do a free write. Get your crayons and pencils and papers and draw a picture of the assembly and write about how you felt? Ok? Let's get busy!

Hitting.—It's playground time at St. Timothy's. Stu and Lisa, playing in the sandbox, begin to fight over a plastic shovel. Gwen, a teaching assistant, quickly appears on the scene. She reaches out and grips the shovel in the middle, her hand between the grasping hands of Stu and Lisa.

Gwen: Lisa! Stu! Stop pulling on the shovel. I'm talking to both of you. Are you listening to me?
Stu: (not letting go of the shovel but looking at Gwen) Yes.
Lisa: (holding onto her end of shovel) I had it first, and then Stu, he grabbed it . . .
Gwen: One at a time, or I can't understand what you are saying.
Stu: I was using it before, and I was using my hand to dig just for one little minute, and then she took it, and . . .
Lisa: It was just sitting there. He wasn't using it. And then he pulled on my arm real hard like this (pulling hard on her own arm).
Stu: And she hit me, right there (pointing to his chest).
Gwen: Stu, when Lisa picked up the shovel you had been using, what could you have done instead of trying to yank it out of her hand? Could you have told her that you had it first? Do you think that would have worked?
Stu: No! She hit me.
Gwen: She hit you because you grabbed the shovel, right? Lisa, is that why you hit Stu? Were you feeling angry?
Lisa: I had it and he took it.
Gwen: Lisa, when you feel mad, can you think of a way you can let someone know how you are feeling?

A Book about Me.—Every kindergartner at King Elementary School draws and writes a book called *A Book about Me.* This assignment integrates a natural language approach to teaching reading and writing with the traditional kindergarten social studies emphasis on the individual child and his or her family. The contents of Kevin's book are typical: "This is me. This is my house. This is my family. I have a baby brother. My Grandma lives with me. I collect erasers. My favorite food is McDonalds. I play Nintendo. I hate cheese."

Book talk.—My niece Emma lives in Lee, New Hampshire. Lee is a village just down the road from Durham and the University of New

Hampshire, the home of Don Graves, Don Murray, Jane Hansen, Tom Newkirk, and other giants of the writing-process movement. In this community, public school teachers who develop and practice whole-language teaching get to be almost as well known as the whole-language experts at the university. Emma, who is now 10, spent first grade at Mast Way School in Lee, in Mrs. McLure's class. Pat McLure is a teacher celebrated for her whole-language curriculum. Pat McLure's approach features daily peer writing conferences, book-sharing groups, and "publishing" books written or drawn by her students. Pat McClure's classroom was a key research site for both Donald Graves's *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983) and Ruth Hubbard's *Authors of Pictures, Draughtsmen of Words* (1989).

Having heard and read so much about Pat McLure, I was curious about Emma's views of her classroom. I was visiting my brother and sister-in-law one afternoon when Emma came home from school and complained about the events of the day: "Today during author time Michael showed our group some pictures in a book he is writing and when it was my turn I said, 'it looks like a baby drew it.' Mrs. McLure gave me the mean face and she told me to say nicer things. I can't help it. I have to say what I think. Do you want me to lie? It really did look a baby could have drawn it. It did! I could have said worse things, like 'Your picture looks like doo-doo, but I didn't.'"

When I asked Emma whether other kids ever make similar comments during author time Emma answered, "Sometimes. Like sometimes some kids will say something like 'Your picture is junky.'" "And what does Mrs. McClure do them?" "She gives the mean face, and tells them to say something different next time."

Deconstructuring Self-Expression

By placing these familiar American early childhood educational practices alongside exotic approaches used in Japan, I have attempted to defamiliarize our assumptions about how we should teach young children to talk about feelings. In the rest of this article I will move to critique by arguing that the pedagogy of self-expression is (1) conceptually confused and internally inconsistent, (2) insensitive to class and cultural differences within American society, and (3) a symptom of postmodern emptiness. To make these critiques, I will use three modes of discourse. My first argument is traditionally academic in form, a call for conceptual clarity. My second argument is liberal and modernist in its appeal for equal rights and access. My third argument

is postmodern, and thus less linear than the first and less earnest and optimistic than the second.

Argument 1: Toward Conceptual Clarity?

Self-expression is defined in the early childhood educational literature as children's talk and writing that is free, natural, authentic, and meaningful. But is it? Can it be?

Self-Expression versus Free Expression

The sharing-time vignette is an example of the high value early childhood educators place on self-expression. A time is set aside each day for each child to have a chance to hold the floor. As Courtney Cazden writes, "Sharing time . . . may be the only opportunity during official classroom air time for children to create their own oral texts: to give more than a short answer to the teacher's questions, and to speak on a self-chosen topic that does not have to meet criteria of relevance to previous discourse" (1988, p. 9). As Cazden observes, stories told in sharing time need not be relevant, but they must meet other criteria. In sharing time the teacher does not set the topic, but she provides a scaffolding on which children are to build their narratives. This scaffolding is made up of grammatical and vocabulary suggestions and corrections, and the teacher's insistence that sharing should convey a sense of sequentiality, interest, coherence, and completeness. The rules of sharing, though rarely stated, are clear: You must begin by making sure that your audience understands your topic—an aborted trip to the movie theater. Once you choose this topic, you shouldn't switch suddenly to telling the plot of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle video you watched, for to do so would be a narrative digression.

In the vignette the teacher doggedly attempts to co-construct an appropriate, coherent, interesting, grammatical narrative with an inexperienced four-year-old storyteller. Similar processes of co-construction occur between children and adults in the bird of prey and sandbox fight incidents. In each case we see teachers providing children with words and discursive forms to be used to express feelings appropriately. While not as formulaic as the "I agree"/"I disagree"/"I have something to add" presentation routines characteristic of Japanese classrooms, sharing time in American early childhood settings is similarly conventional and performative.[6]

I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with teachers' playing such a direct and authoritative role in the development of children's conversational competence. To say that a speech act is conventional or culturally constructed or to show how it is systematically elicited by teachers is not to critique or undermine the value of the act. The fundamental paradox of social interaction alluded to in the title of this article is that all (intelligible) self-expression is conventional.[7] Conventions of self-expression are learned at home and taught in American early childhood settings. The chief problem with the American pedagogy of self-expression is that teachers are rarely aware of, comfortable with, or honest about playing this role. The thesis of this article is that we misunderstand children and ourselves when we label the discourses we ask them to produce in school self-expression, when we equate self-expression with free expression, and when we describe the role of the teacher in process-oriented instruction as merely facilitating children's natural desire and ability to express their inner thoughts and feelings.

Self-Expression versus Intersubjectivity

To rephrase the old philosophical question: If you talk about your feelings or experiences and no one (neither the teacher nor your classmates) is listening or caring, are you expressing yourself? Activities such as sharing time and assignments such as writing *A Book about Me* are self-expressive in topic, but they lack the intersubjectivity ("connectedness") that distinguishes self-expression from solipsism and egotism. Many teachers try, gamely, to introduce a sense of communication to these essentially monological classroom structures. Students are told to keep quiet and listen during their classmates' turns, to consider the listeners' point of view, and not to filibuster when it is their turn. But the reality of sharing time is that the child who holds the floor generally is addressing not a willing audience, but instead a collection of fellow presenters not-so-patiently waiting their turns. The author circles and peer-conferencing activities that are typical of writing-process classrooms build some child-child interaction into assignments such as *A Book about Me*. But the central problem with *A Book about Me* is that the author may be the only one who is really interested in reading it.

Self-Presentation versus Self-Disclosure

Alongside all of the *Books about Me* that are written each year in first grade classrooms across the country, picture a companion set of books

that are not written. The contents of these unwritten books is quite different from the "I like pizza; I have a dog; we go to the beach" texts to which we are accustomed: "I wet my bed." "I like doo-doo jokes." "My Mom and Dad said I can't watch Beavis and Butthead, but I do." "At recess, my friends and I go on the jungle gym and say 'fuck' and 'shit.'" "My mother's boyfriend touches me." "Sometimes when the teacher is talking I pretend to be listening, but really I smell my fingers and think about different things." "My teacher doesn't like me." "I have bad dreams almost every night." "I wrestle with my Dad and it's kind of fun because I win except if he doesn't have his shirt on, sometimes I touch his body and it's all hairy so it feels weird." Statements like these do, occasionally, turn up in children's school writing—but only occasionally. More important than learning what to put into *A Book about Me* is learning what to leave out. Alternative autobiographies remain unwritten because to write them would be to break our culture's rules of self-revelation and self-disclosure. What is interesting here is not that such rules exist, but that they are learned so quickly and thoroughly by five- and six-year-old children.

Convention and Resistance

Courtney Cazden's and Thomas Newkirk's books on young children's school talk help to move us away from the Rousseauian notion that the narratives children learn to produce at school are natural and that effective process-oriented teachers function by standing aside and allowing children to express themselves freely. Cazden's *Classroom Discourse* (1988) demythologizes sharing time by describing and naming the rules and expectations teachers hold for young narrators. Newkirk's *More than Stories* (1989) and *Listening In* (Newkirk and McClure 1992) dispel the myths that children are natural storytellers and that the key to successful teaching is stepping aside and, as Ruth Hubbard (1988) and others have argued, "letting children's voices through."

Listening In is a study of conversations in Pat McClure's K–1 classroom. Reading *Listening In* has helped me to rethink Donald Graves's, Ruth Hubbard's, and Emma's versions of what Pat McLure is up to and what whole-language instruction should be about. Emma accused Pat McLure of censoring her inalienable right to express her true feelings about her classmates' books. But this interference in children's self-expression is only unfair or hypocritical if we begin with the assumption that the point of classroom conversation is for children to talk freely and spontaneously about their feelings. Newkirk's account of Pat McClure's classroom (written with Pat McClure) suggests that

her central goal is for children to learn to participate comfortably and appropriately in classroom conversations. These conversations are built on routines that prescribe topic selection, turn taking, and the form and content range of questions and answers. It is only when children have mastered these routines that they can begin to express their individuality in classroom conversation. McLure and Newkirk locate self-expression in the ways children gradually begin to play with and against the conventional forms of classroom conversation. They describe how the clearly defined author circles and book talk routines of Pat McClure's classroom allow children room to resist, transgress, and parody without leaving the embrace of the classroom as a community. For example, they give the example of how some children in the class play with the conventions of book talk by stringing five or more routine questions together ("What's your favorite page and what other books did the author write and why do you like this book and which is your favorite picture and what kind of book is it?").

Expressing one's individuality through transgressing, parodying, and resisting classroom conventions is a carefully nuanced game. Like the court jester's parodies of the king and the antics of merrymakers at carnival, transgressions of classroom conversational rules straddle the line between supporting and threatening the social order (Bakhtin 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986). And like these forms of medieval transgression, prosocial resistance in classrooms can occur only when there are clear social structures and a strong sense of community. I would speculate that Pat McLure gave my niece Emma "the mean face" because she heard Emma's "It looks like a baby drew it" comment as a threat to the classroom community's conversational rules. Book talk in Pat McLure's classroom is an occasion not for the expression of one's true feelings but for participation in a social routine. Thus expressions of feelings must adhere to classroom conventions; that is, you can talk much more freely about a trade book than you can about a book written by a classmate; you can comment critically on a classmate's work if you do so in a humorous or self-deprecating register that suggests that a shortcoming is common to the class rather than characteristic of an individual. I believe that it is the learning of these sorts of distinctions, and not free expression, that we should think of as the core of the early childhood curriculum.

Self-Expression versus Doing (and Saying) the Right Thing

I have found the Japanese concept of *kejime* helpful to sorting out these issues. *Kejime* means something like "making distinctions" or

"correctly reading the context for what it is and acting accordingly." Perhaps the closest phrase we have in today's English is "do the right thing." For young children to learn to do (or say) the right thing, they must learn more than simply to express what they are feeling. Appropriate self-expression is hard to master because it requires children to identify the context, know which speech conventions are appropriate to that context, and then use the appropriate conversational convention. A sensitive teacher must be able to distinguish between situations where (1) a child is unable to read the context, (2) a child lacks a conversational convention to use for a given context, and (3) a child knows what the context calls for, and has the conversational competence to speak appropriately, but chooses not to. I think that when Emma told a classmate that his picture looked as if it were drawn by a baby, Pat McLure decided that the problem was type 3, which is why she responded with "the mean face."

In Japan a good person is one who knows how to modify his or her self-expression and behavior according to varying contexts. Because so much emphasis is placed on context, Japanese are often labeled insincere or two-faced by Americans who claim to prefer for people "to always be themselves" and "to always let you know exactly what they are thinking and feeling." We tend to see the need to do or say what is socially expected as an imposition on our individuality and our inalienable right of self-expression. But isn't the ability to vary one's speech and action according to changing social contexts as crucial for children to learn in America as in Japan?

Argument 2: Self-Expression as Cultural and Class Hegemony

Mulicultural Critique

The version of self-expression that is taught in middle-class American early childhood educational settings is a discourse that is more familiar and attractive to some Americans than to others. Like the beige crayon marked "flesh" in the old crayola box, the pedagogy of self-expression works to privilege an already privileged group of Americans.

Building a curriculum on the white middle-class version of self-expression in the early childhood curriculum leads to a series of inequities. It naturalizes the culture and personality styles of one group of Americans. It creates a scenario where children who come to school unfamiliar with the favored version of self-expression will be perceived to have a deficit that invites remediation in the form of special educa-

tion or a year of kindergarten "readiness" (Graue 1993). As Lisa Delpit (1986, 1988) suggests, forms of personal narrative assumed to be natural and desirable in process-writing classrooms are unfamiliar to many African-American children. Delpit argues that by conceptualizing self-expression as a natural behavior rather than as an acquired set of skills, proponents of the pedagogy of self-expression mystify the steps nonwhite middle-class children must follow if they are ever to master this unfamiliar discourse and thereby to gain entrée to middle-class jobs and power.

The choices confronting parents are complex. The middle-class preschool's pedagogy of self-expression presents many minority parents with their first experience of choosing whether they want their children to become successful in the mainstream culture or to retain the cultural and personality characteristics they value (Ogbu 1978, 1992). In Hawai'i, for example, eliminating pidgin (Hawaiian creole English) and learning to talk like a Ha'ole (Caucasian) are often explicitly or implicitly presented as prerequisites to educational success.

Creating curricula that are sensitive to cultural differences in expression is a complex challenge because we live in a society with a wide range of cultural attitudes toward individualism, self-disclosure, and emotionality. Delpit suggests that many African-American parents and educators feel that children in their community come to school already possessing a strong voice. What these children need to learn is how to express their thoughts in forms of expression valued by the larger society. Many Japanese-Americans do not share the cultural value of putting forward personal opinions and feelings in large group settings. The Kamehameha Elementary Education Program developed a "talk story" approach to classroom conversation that they found to be culturally familiar and attractive to Hawaiian students, parents, and teachers (Au 1979). But this talk story model was experienced as embarrassing and overly individualistic by Navajo students who were invited to try it (Tharp and Gallimore 1988). Sharing time, author circles, peer conferencing, and other popular pedagogies based on self-expression need to be critically examined and modified for use with African-American, Hispanic-American, Native-American, and Asian-American students. We need to make explicit the unexamined cultural assumptions of the whole-language, child-centered, and natural learning movements.

Class Critique

Although less often and openly discussed, social class differences in self-expression within American society are as profound and signifi-

cant as ethnic and cultural differences. Peggy Miller's work on the socialization of emotions is rare and valuable in its foregrounding of class (Miller 1982, 1987, 1988). For middle- and upper-middle-class readers, Miller's descriptions of mother-child talk in a working-class Baltimore neighborhood read like passages from an ethnography of an exotic people. For example, consider this narrative told to Miller by a young mother, a narrative that although not directed principally to the three-year-old daughter, included her in its audience: "I was walkin' on Charles St.—and the girl happens to be my girlfriend now. She big and fat, boy. She could sit on me and flatten me out, but I stuck up to her. Her name was Janie. And she hung with the bad people too, boy. And she says, 'Look at that big-nosed B-I-T-C-H.' And I turned around and I says, 'Uh, you talkin' to me?' I said, 'ARE YOU TALKIN' TO ME?' I says, 'Well, you fat slob you, I put you in a skillet and strip you down to normal size, if you mess with me'" (Miller 1987, p. 13). Clearly, this is not the kind of discourse that members of the National Association for the Education of Young Children have in mind when they call for the importance of providing children with opportunities to learn self-expression. But why not?

Miller's research in working-class Baltimore teaches us that people do not need to use "emotion words" to express emotion and that children learn to understand, manage, and express their feelings largely by listening in on emotion-laden conversations of adults. The working-class adult and child protagonists of Miller's studies "share" and "show and tell" and "use their words" to mediate disputes. But their sharing, telling, and mediating lack the psychologized metanarrativity characteristic of upper-middle-class family conversation and of process-oriented language arts curricula.

The south Baltimore mothers teach their children to deal with conflicts with friends, lovers, and family by using such strategies as threat, bluff, topic switching, insult, sarcasm, and irony. The children Miller studies generally talk about their emotions not by using emotion words ("I felt sad") but by using words that refer directly to actions ("I cried"). I suspect that such action-oriented language is typical not just of working-class children, but of children in general. What varies by social class is parents' and teachers' reactions to children's expressions of emotion. When preschool teachers insist that children replace their actions and their action-oriented language with a metadiscourse about feeling, when they outlaw the use of sarcasm, insults, and other aggressive speech acts, and when they respond to children with "I messages" instead of with direct expressions of feeling, they are privileging the values and manners of contemporary American bourgeois society. In

bourgeois pedagogy, the action of crying is replaced by the statement "I feel sad." Yelling and hitting become "I feel angry." Working class children who come from homes where such psychobabble is not the native tongue will find themselves at a disadvantage in early childhood educational settings where self-conscious, psychologized self-expression is equated with intelligence and morality.

Moral fiber and intelligence in south Baltimore, as in many other American communities, are measured in part by one's ability to stand up to unjustified attacks on yourself and your friends. A child with a good character is one who is neither a sissy (someone who expresses hurt feelings when she should not) nor spoiled (someone who asserts her desire when she should not). In south Baltimore, self-expression has less to do with providing a running metanarration on your thoughts and feeling than with being a fearless, formidable street-corner (or sandbox) debater and a witty and engaging back-stoop storyteller.

Argument 3: Self-Expression as Postmodern Malaise

I have stressed thus far that the main problem with pedagogies of self-expression is that they put children who do not come from white middle-class homes at a disadvantage. This liberal line of reasoning implies that, equity issues aside, self-expression is a good thing for those fortunate enough to belong to the privileged sectors of our society. A postmodern critique of self-expression leads to a different conclusion: the self-expression taught in schools and practiced around dinner tables, in therapists' offices, and on talk shows is the quintessential discourse of the culture of late capitalism. If I were to give a name to this empty discourse, it would be the "hallmarkization of feeling." Why "hallmarkization"? In the old days greeting cards offered conventional messages for conventional occasions, messages such as "Congratulations on your 25th anniversary!" or "Our feelings are with you during your time of bereavement." Now greeting cards are sold that contain such personal messages as "I hope last night was as special for you as it was for me." A store-bought card that purports to communicate a personal feeling is a perfect objective correlative for "the irony of self-expression."

A postmodern perspective would see the hallmarkization of feeling and the pedagogy of self-expression as harbingers of an era of postindividualism. Various theorists have suggested that the shift from collectivism to individualism is an essential precondition of modernization. Michael McKeon (1987), for example, suggests that the focus on the

individual that characterizes the development in the eighteenth century of the British novel can be connected to the birth of entrepeneurial capitalism. David McClelland (1961) argues that the development of individual motives including achievement motivation is a prerequisite for succeeding in a modern educational system, which in turn is a prerequisite for building a modern, industrial society. Masao Maruyama (1965) suggests that Japan's modernization in the Meiji era produced a new kind of Japanese citizenry characterized by an "atomization and privatization" not only of capital, but of emotions.

The individualism of the industrial age did not require self-expressivity. In the prototypical hero of the American modern age (picture John Wayne) we find a rugged, laconic, stolid individualism. Self-discipline, yes. Self-knowledge, maybe. Self-expression, no (at least not for men). At some moment in the postwar period (post-Vietnam, that is) America began its shift from modern to postmodern, from industrial to postindustrial, from capitalism to late capitalism, from a production- to a service-oriented economy, and from individualism to postindividualism. White-collar success would hereafter require not the rectitude of John Wayne, but the verbal expressivity of Alan Alda. "People-oriented" careers in personnel management, counseling, the law, medicine, teaching, tourism, and sales would require a new style of expressivity. A new generation of child-rearing experts including Berry Brazelton and Penelope Leach responded, encouraging parents to view their infants' cries as self-expressive acts rather than as willfulness. And, not accidentally, it was around this time that the pedagogy of self-expression began to make headway in the early childhood curriculum.

Frederic Jameson (1984) has defined the key features of postindustrialism/late capitalism as superficiality, the dominance of the signifier over the signified, simulation, commodity reification, and the waning of affect. Each of these characteristics can be found in the self-expressive discourses and practices of contemporary early childhood education.

The valorization of signifiers can be seen in early childhood education's logocentrism. The belief that signifiers (words) can adequately represent the signified (feelings) is essentially a modernist belief. In the contemporary version of self-expression we have moved beyond the modernist faith in meaningful communication through the spoken and written word to the postmodern condition in which the word becomes more real and more important than that which is signified (Derrida 1976). In the postmodern early childhood educational world, statements about feeling ("I feel angry") replace expressions of feeling ("Give me the truck, you doo-doo head!") which replace feelings (anger? competition? desire?).

In "Emotional Socialization in the Post-modern Era," Robin Leavitt and Martha Power (1991) offer a troubling exposition of what they see as the inauthenticity and superficiality of emotional expression in day-care settings. Leavitt and Power paint a bleak portrait of day-care settings in which child minders aggressively substitute their own interpretations of what children are feeling for children's authentic experiences of their bodies and emotions ("You aren't hungry. You just need a nap."). Leavitt and Power observe caregivers putting great emphasis on simulations—on children displaying desirable surface emotions at odds with their actual feelings: "Dwain and Gwen (both two years) were playing in a large gym with the rest of their day care class. . . . Dwain hit Gwen for no readily apparent reason. Gwen started to cry. A caregiver approached the two of them and said, 'Dwain, that's not nice. You shouldn't hit your friends. Now give Gwen a hug and tell her you're sorry'" (Leavitt and Power 1991, p. 38). Other examples of the simulation and inauthenticity of emotion can be seen in early childhood educational settings that have rules such as "You can come out of the time-out corner when you are ready to apologize," "We don't use mean words here," and "You are not allowed to tell someone 'I won't be your friend.'"

Postmodern deconstructions of the inauthenticity of day-care centers run the risk of repeating modernism's romantic fallacy. To label the contemporary discourse of the emotions inauthentic is to imply that in some earlier era or under some other conditions feelings could be expressed authentically. When they are not careful, postmodern critics ensnare themselves in the same Rousseauian trap as those natural learning and process-writing advocates who suggest that if adults would only get out of the way and not impose rules on discourse, children's authentic voices will come through.

Another defining characteristic of late capitalism is commodity reification. Everything is commodified, including feelings. There is a core irony at the heart of the writing-process movement: process is valued over product, but the process valued is a process for producing products. The writing-process approach to self-expression valorizes the role of the individual, entrepreneurial author as the producer and distributor of commodities. Postmodern theorists are hailing ours as the age of the death (decentering) of the author. But authors are alive and well in middle-class American early childhood educational settings. In some classrooms, these young authors even get published. Children write books about themselves and other subjects. They get feedback from potential readers on their drafts. They then add dedications, title pages, copyrights, and cloth covers, and publish books that are placed alongside trade books on the classroom shelves. A counter-

argument to my cynicism would be that publishing children's works and giving them the status of trade books undermines capitalism's distinction between sold (and thus valuable) and unsold (and thus valueless) commodities. This is a plausible and attractive notion. But my experience in process-oriented early childhood educational settings suggests to me that often what is going on has less to do with resisting commodification than with passing on cultural capital and with preparing children to be producers and consumers of commodified expressions of feeling.

Here is an example that though admittedly extreme, is also paradigmatic. A few years ago I supervised early childhood education students during their student teaching in a university-run laboratory child-care center. One of these student-teachers presented to our weekly seminar meeting a report about the lesson going on that week at her preschool: "It's really exciting! I'm helping the teachers get the kids ready for the art auction next week. The children choose their best paintings and then we help them frame them. We're getting one of the fathers to come in and be the auctioneer. The night of the auction, all of the kids and their parents will be there. The kids will all bring their pennies and nickels. Then the kids will bid on each others' paintings, just like a real art auction. This is a great lesson because it integrates art with writing—they sign their paintings and give each painting a title. And it teaches them about money and math, too. We're working hard with this kids to teach them how much each coin is worth. Its' really cute because they have no idea about the value of money. They keep asking me, 'How much money do you think I'm gonna get for this painting?'" This example appears extreme because its subtext (cultural capital) is so blatant that it threatens to turn the explicit objectives (art, writing, and mathematics) into pretext. But before you dismiss this lesson as an aberration, consider the opening passage from Ruth Hubbard's essay in *Young Children* entitled "Allow Children's Individuality to Emerge in Their Writing: Let Their Voices Through."

> If someone had suggested to Cezanne that his landscapes and still lifes rendered the subjects according to a certain style, he would likely have flown into one of his magnificent rages, insisting that he was representing the world according to reality—as he saw it. And he did recreate the world on his canvas as he saw it. But anyone who views his work sees the undeniable stamp of Cezanne's particular style. In interpreting the world, his voice came through. From Paul Cezanne to Judy Chicago, Jonathan Swift to Alice Walker, artists speak to us in voices distinctly and recognizably their own. Six- and 7-year-old children have distinct personal-

> ities, and often reveal strong voices in their *writing*—when encouraged to develop them. (Hubbard 1988, p. 33)

Hubbard then goes on to blast approaches to language arts which force young writers "to conform and write in much the same way, each sounding a lot like the next" (p. 33).

I suppose this argument appeals to the kind of parents who like to think of their first graders as little Judy Chicagos and Jonathan Swifts in the making. But while only a very few children who pass through middle-class early childhood classrooms that emphasize artistic self-expression will become successful novelists or painters, all of the children are taught to conceptualize the processes of drawing and writing as the production of works of art and to value these works as commodities. Classrooms decorated with framed children's artworks and with books written and published by children are linked to upper-middle-class living rooms decorated with framed paintings and signed lithographs and with bookshelves full of hardcover copies of recently published fiction. In these classrooms as in the living rooms, we can read attempts to define and express oneself through the accumulation and display of items of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

Most chillingly suggestive of the culture of late capitalism in pedagogies of self-expression is the waning of affect. The discourse of self-expression often is used to control and diminish the intensity of children's emotions. Of course, a channeling and damping of the emotions is an inevitable feature of civilization and its discontents. To critique the waning of affect in modern society is not necessarily to call for a return of the id or imaginary (for "schizoanalysis," in DeLeuze and Guattari's [1983] terms). It can mean instead an appeal for a middle ground, between uncontrolled desire and the desirelessness ("the desire to desire") characteristic of alienation in the age of late capitalism. A reasonable postmodern critique (is there such a thing?) might suggest that the core of the problem is not that we are civilized (in Lacan's terms, that the symbolic world has replaced the imaginary), but that we have gone too far. In our contemporary educational settings, under the guise of helping children let their feelings out, we interrupt and then attempt to eliminate expressions of feeling which we find grotesque, parodic, silly, sexual, or sadistic. Bakhtin (1984) describes this development as the victory of the marketplace over the carnival, of the upper over the lower bodily strata, and of the individual ego over the communal spirit.

If we were to succeed in eliminating from children's conversation all that is silly, sadistic, grotesque, or sexual, what would be left? A pseudoaffective psychobabble in which words replace feeling, psycho-

logical interpretation is the highest form of meaning, and expressions of feeling are no more authentic then greeting cards.

Postscript

The intent of this essay on self-expression in early childhood education is to produce a sense of disorientation and defamiliarization, but not of despair. A problem with deconstruction as a mode of argument is that it often leaves us despairing over the possibility of acting in a way that is not hopeless, counterproductive, or self-deceiving. We may find ourselves agreeing with the logic of postmodern critique, but this logic gives us little idea of what to do with the children in our classrooms. Having spent this many pages deconstructing teaching practice, it is perhaps too late for me in a postscript suddenly to become prescriptive. But I will, because I believe that each of the modes of argument I have marshaled against the pedagogy of self-expression suggests some possible action.

Argument 1, a call for conceptual clarity, leads me to the quixotic suggestion that we should drop the term self-expression from our professional lexicon. I have argued, I hope persuasively, that the term is an empty concept that defies coherent definition. In early childhood education self-expression is inextricably entangled with notions of free expression, natural expression, and authentic expression, and yet we have seen that it is none of these. Although I am aware that the term is unlikely to disappear soon from popular discourse, I propose that in our teaching and scholarship we drop the term self-expression and speak instead of children's oral and written expression, or more simply, of children's talk and writing.

Argument 2, the call for equal rights and access, suggests the need to address the cultural and class biases in our theories and practices for teaching and responding to children's talk and writing. The most effective weapon in this struggle is self-consciousness, a constant questioning of the taken-for-grantedness of our most firmly held beliefs and most loftily enshrined "best practices." The question is not, Are our notions of self-expression culture- and class-bound? (for of course they are) but rather, What can we can do to open ourselves and our classrooms up to a multiplicity of perspectives on what constitutes appropriate expression?

The balance between helping children retain their community's values and discursive styles and helping them to develop skills that will allow them to succeed in the larger society needs to be negotiated in local settings, between parents and educators. This negotiation is

unlikely to go well if the discussion begins with the assumption that the version of self-expression practiced in middle-class American preschools and promoted in the mainstream early childhood educational literature is natural, inevitable, or necessarily desirable.

Argument 3, the postmodern critique, need not leave us in despair. I think that Foucault is right that many of our educational practices, including the pedagogy of self-expression, are versions of the Panopticon, the model prison Jeremy Bentham imagined and Foucault (1979) put forward as a metaphor for modern society. The good news is that panopticism rarely works as well as Bentham hoped and Foucault feared. Folklore suggests that teachers have eyes in the back of their heads, but there is in fact much that teachers do not see and cannot control in their classrooms. Like prison inmates, children find ways to resist institutional authority and the panoptic gaze. In process-oriented as in teacher-centered classrooms children continue to express themselves in nonsanctioned ways, despite their teacher's conscious or unconscious intent to monitor and shape this expression. The playground and the lunchroom are sites for talk and action unmediated by teachers. Whispers, notes, and gestures exchanged among children during lessons express thoughts and feelings the teacher does not sanction but cannot extinguish.

I believe we as teachers should restrain our panoptic, panotic, and omnipotent urges to see, hear, and control all that goes on in our classrooms. A variety of pressures operates on American early childhood educators, compelling us to feel we must be constantly vigilant, ever ready to intervene. In Japan, where student/teacher ratios are much higher and where teachers are much slower to intervene in children's disputes, children have more emotional space and privacy than in American early childhood settings (Tobin et al. 1986). I am not suggesting that teachers should never intervene in children's interactions or listen in on children's conversations. Instead I am suggesting that there should be a flow to the day, periods when children can express themselves and interact out of the reach of their teacher's eyes and ears, mixed with periods of teacher-directed, teacher-monitored instruction. Attention to the flow of the day and a sensitivity to changing contexts is what the Japanese mean by *kejime*. Children need to learn not simply to express themselves, but to express themselves appropriately in different contexts. Our task should be to help children develop written and oral competence in conversational conventions they will need to function successfully in both formal and informal sectors of the larger society. The marker of conversational competence we should look for in our students is their experience of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity is a sense of connection, a feeling

of understanding others and of being understood. The argument of this article has been that intersubjectivity need not require introspection or self-revelation. Intersubjectivity can occur not just during author circles and sharing time, but also when children gather on the jungle gym to have a giggly exchange of naughty words, or in a lesson where students use formulaic phrases to enter into a book talk. Ours is an age of psychobabble, late capitalism, and cultural misunderstanding, and yet intersubjectivity still can be found in our classrooms.

Notes

1. The pedagogy of self-expression has a close cousin in the pedagogy of self-esteem. A critical examination of the pedagogy of self-esteem practiced in American schools is sorely needed. My hunch is that such a project would reveal a pattern of class and racial inequity in the promotion of self-esteem that would mirror the dynamics I am attempting to uncover in this article on self-expression. Shirley Brice Heath and Milbey McLaughlin's *Identity and Inner-City Youth* (1993) contains discussions of survival strategies and sources of self-esteem in poor African-American neighborhoods that provide a useful challenge to mainstream conceptualizations of this issue.
2. This rhetorical convention of appealing to the child's sense of empathy for uneaten food generally is done in a register of mock seriousness, a wink in the voice to suggest that the child is in on the joke. Heard routinely in homes, restaurants, and preschools, it is the Japanese equivalent of the American "You have to eat at least one bite of your vegetables or you can't have desert," or the older "Think of the starving children in China."
3. I am indebted to my colleague Haruko Cook for this example, which she recorded during her research on Japanese children's learning of honorifics.
4. This vignette and the one that follows, titled "Fighting," are discussed in much greater detail in our book *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States* (Tobin et al. 1989). The research method we used was to videotape typical days in a day-care center, and then show the tape to teachers and administrators to elicit their reactions and explanations.
5. The vignettes in this section come from several sources. "Hitting" is from *Preschool in Three Cultures*. "Book talk" is based on the published sources cited as well as conversations with some of the key participants. "Free write" and "A Book about Me" are lessons I observed while supervising student-teachers in kindergarten classrooms in public schools in New Hampshire and Hawai'i. "Sharing time" is a lesson I observed while conducting research for a study of children's sex play.
6. Sharing time is performative in two related but nonidentical senses of the word. Following J. L. Austin's (1962) linguistic sense of performative, we can view the meaning of a sharing-time statement as being more than or other than the content of the words spoken (1962). The act of taking the floor during sharing time has a performative power and meaning that exceeds the meaning of the words the child says. Another version of performativity comes out of the emerging scholarship in performance theory. Following Peggy Phelan (1993), we might argue that sharing time is a singular performance,

rather than a fixed text, and thus that much of the meaning of the performance is lost or transformed when the words uttered are transcribed and analyzed outside of the context of original event, a context that may have included, for instance, elements of parody and mimesis lost in the translation from act to text. For a discussion of the intersections of these notions of performativity, see Beeman (1993).

7. I am grateful to a reviewer for helping clarify the co-constructedness of self-expression. For a discussion and summary of the literature on the conventionality and performativity of conversation, see Bauman (1986) and Bauman and Briggs (1990).

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