Using Picture Books to Develop Students' Emotional Vocabulary in Pre-K

Revisiting a book repeatedly helps children develop a sophisticated understanding of what emotions look and feel like.

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The children gather quietly and eagerly in a circle around the teacher, who opens *The Dot*, by Peter H. Reynolds. The children come closer. The teacher begins to read.

At first, the story seems simple. The main character, Vashti, believes she can't draw. Her paper stays blank except for a single dot. At this moment, some children giggle. Others watch closely, eyes wide open. As the story develops, the children empathize with the characters. The story evolves into a mirror for children's own experiences of effort, doubt, pride, and persistence.

In preschool, where the stories are meant to be returned to, lived with, and revisited, each reading allows children to access a different layer of meaning. This is where emotional learning moves beyond naming feelings.

From Naming Emotions to Recognizing Them

In many early-childhood classrooms, children learn about emotions through posters, masks, charts, and activities that help to identify feelings like happy, sad, angry, or tired. This work is valuable: Emotional vocabulary matters.

However, knowing the name of an emotion is not the same as recognizing it when it arises during real experiences. A child may confidently point to an "angry" face on a chart but still feel overwhelmed when a task keeps going wrong or when their efforts don't lead to the result they want. In those moments, the challenge is not cognitive—the child knows they feel angry—it's emotional. How do you handle these feelings? The emotion shows up first as tension in the body, withdrawal, tears, or sudden restlessness. Without support, children may experience these sensations as confusion or failure rather than as a normal emotional response to challenge.

Why Stories and Shared Reading of picture books?

Stories place emotions inside meaningful contexts. Characters want something, try something, struggle, make mistakes, persist, or eventually give up. Along the way, characters feel many things: worry when something feels hard, joy when something works, amusement at surprises, pride in effort, and confidence as they grow. Emotions are presented not as isolated labels, but as lived experiences tied to situations: the pursuit of ideas or dreams, relationships, discoveries, effort, and learning.

Shared reading, in particular, creates a powerful emotional learning space because it is relational. The teacher reads with children, not just to them. Children are supported by tone, pacing, pauses, facial

expressions, and shared attention. This makes it possible to slow down, revisit moments, observe and wonder together.

In the case of *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury, we find the characters going through different emotions, including fear, even though the text says, "We're not scared!" As we read, we can mention that they go through different challenges and that the faces and attitudes of the characters show those emotions.

The pictures are really important here. When the characters walk through the long, wavy grass, their faces show that they feel cautious, unsure, hesitant, wondering. When they have to cross the mud, it might be disgusting, uncomfortable. By looking at the faces of the characters when they cross the river, readers can see that they look worried, careful, but brave as well. Many of these emotions come up again in the snowstorm and the cave, where we might find the peak moment, when they start running back home. We can tell they feel really scared, terrified maybe. And it is relevant to mention that through all their way to the cave, they kept going even when they were challenged.

In addition, when stories are read more than once, as I personally recommend in preschool, a second or third reading frees the children from the need to follow the plot. They know what will happen in the story and can begin to notice how characters feel, why those feelings emerge, and how they change over time as the story evolves.

exploring emotional learning across multiple reads

Along with teaching how emotions are called, teachers can intentionally use repeated shared reading throughout the year to support emotional recognition. The following step-by-step approach can be applied to many familiar picture books.

First reading: Enter the story. On the first reading, simply read the story from beginning to end.

Let the children enjoy it. Let them react naturally. Focus on comprehension and connection, not analysis. At this stage, children are building familiarity with the characters and events. For example, while reading *The Dot*, children may comment on Vashti's frustration, be surprised at her refusal to draw, or focus on the final gallery scene. There is no need to name emotions yet.

Second reading: Notice reactions and feelings. On the second reading, slow down. This time, invite children to notice what the characters do and how their bodies respond in different moments.

You might pause and say:

- "Look at Vashti's shoulders here. What do you notice?"
- "What is she doing with her voice right now?"
- "Does this part feel easy or hard for her?"

Children may say things like "She looks mad," "She doesn't want to try." Some may connect personally: "That happens to me when I can't do it."

At this stage, children are beginning to recognize emotional experiences without needing precise labels. The children may spontaneously connect with their own lives. The teacher may feel that it is the

appropriate time to connect the story to the children's lives or it may be better to leave it for a third reading.

Third reading: Connect to children's own experiences. On a later reading, gently bridge the story to children's lives. You might ask:

- "Have you ever felt like Vashti, when something felt too hard?"
- "What did your body feel like?"
- "What helped you keep going—or what made you want to stop?"

Only now does naming emotions become useful. The teacher can say at a certain moment of the story: "That feeling has a name: fear. Fear can show up when we feel unsure or think we can't do it yet. Has it ever happened to you?"

The emotion is no longer abstract. It is grounded in lived experience.

Beyond the book: Recognizing emotions across contexts. The final step is helping children recognize the same emotion in new situations, Later that day, during block play, the teacher might say, "I notice you're holding the blocks and not starting yet. Your body looks very still. Is this one of those fear moments, like Vashti had, when something feels hard to try?"

On the playground, the teacher might observe, "You want to climb, but you're stopping and looking up. That can feel scary when you're not sure yet. I guess that fear feeling is showing up."

Over time, children begin to recognize their own emotional patterns, as well as those of others, across different contexts, beyond the story.