

## **FOCUSING AND TEENAGERS:** A Research Project Based on Sequenced Graphic Expression

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There aren't many quantitative studies on the use of Focusing in adolescents or of studies on Focusing and drawing with adolescents. Specifically we are not aware of any quantitative studies on the effectiveness of sequenced drawing and adolescents' ability to Focus.

Boukidis (1985) was one of the first to address the topic of Focusing in childhood and adolescence. His interventions were based on a psychotherapeutic approach in the parent-child relationship. Broertjes (1996) did the same from a therapeutic approach based on games.

Later, other studies were done on Focusing and childhood development (Karno, 2012; Bruinix, 1993; Iberg, 1997; Klein, 1998; Marder, 1997; Nelson, 1997). Some studies took place specifically at school (Conway, 1997; Stapert, 1997) and others in non-academic settings (Mepkyp, 1997; Neagu, 1988). Likewise, one study concentrated on the use of Focusing and its effect on the teacher-pupil relationship (Cornelius-White, 2007). Another relevant research project was that of Ellison-Cole (2003) who explored the ways that Focusing could help adolescents establish their self-identity and self-assertion. Also worth mentioning is the study of Focusing in the TREVA Program (Experiential Relaxation Techniques in the classroom) for adolescents (López-González, 2010) which was carried out in more than 50 schools in Spain.

As far as applying Focusing in the realm of artistic expression, Mepkyp (1997) used hand painting as an artistic resource to enable ways of expressing the felt sense. The author concluded that artistic expression helped in working with conscious psychological material, as well as with the person's unconscious mind. In addition, she also observed how expressing the felt sense with hand painting was both agreeable and entertaining for adolescents. Because of the high safety level in Focusing, the process also ensured adolescents' sense of privacy, generating a feeling of both security and relaxation, which allowed the students to participate more confidently in the experience.

The research done by Neagu (1988) was certainly pertinent to our research. Drawing was used as a mirror to verify and adjust the handle-step, that is, verifying that the drawing genuinely expressed what the child was feeling/experiencing at the time. The author emphasized the importance of the relationship that took place between the adult and child, or adolescent. For this author the most important aspect of the study was that the minors

managed to connect with their inner felt sense through the process of drawing rather than the traditional modes of words or movement. The process of expressing the felt sense through drawing seemed to help children and adolescents create a distance from 'that' on which they were Focusing and might, in the long term, lead to a higher level of self control in handling their inner experience.

Similarly, in her article, Rappaport (1988) analysed the possibilities drawing offers to enhance the Focusing *process*. In addition to drawing as a means of adjusting the handle, Rappaport suggested specific questions to expand the description of the felt sense.

Finally, Leijssen (1992) featured drawing as a means of nonverbal communication that can facilitate the internal dialogue for the participants. In our study, we wanted to find out if sequenced drawing is useful as a way for adolescents to express the felt sense as well as to delve more deeply into their Focusing process. Using an internal dialogue, the participants are invited to draw the sensations they experience as well as simultaneously self-observing the changes that take place inside them.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this research is to encourage the use of Focusing with adolescents and to suggest the use of drawing to facilitate its expression. The first objective is to know whether adolescents have the ability to comfortably work in a Focusing way while drawing; and the second objective is to know if, for those selected students, sequenced drawing is a good expressive resource for Focusing.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Thirty-nine students took part in this research. They were students of two baccalaureate programs from a Secondary Institute in the province of Barcelona (Spain). It was convenient to select this population because one of the investigators had previously carried out relaxation training sessions there. All the participants had had at least seven 50-minute sessions of Experiential Relaxation Techniques (López, 2010) during their physical education class. Their involvement was voluntary and with informed consent.

### **Tools**

We used three instruments of our own creation: a body somatogram, a template for the drawing, and a Focusing based script-questionnaire.

### Body somatogram

Created by López-González (2011), a body somatogram is a tool to help adolescents develop a clearer awareness of their internal body phenomenon. An empty human silhouette is presented on a white sheet of paper. On the paper, the adolescent is asked to use lines and colours to represent different sorts of psycho-corporal signs (sensations, emotions, feelings...), locating and reflecting them as reliably as possible.

### Drawing and sequenced expression template

Participants are given a white sheet of paper divided into six equal parts, three on the upper portion and three underneath. They are instructed to draw their first felt sense in the first square, and then at three minute intervals, draw five more felt senses in each of the successive squares.

### Guideline-Questionnaire for sequenced drawing of Focusing

The Guideline-Questionnaire consists of nine instructions and one last item referring to the whole change (to be completed by trainer) (Table 1).

**TABLE 1:** *Guideline-Questionnaire for sequenced drawing Focusing*

QUESTIONNAIRE-GUIDELINE	Stage of drawing sequence
1. Draw the two most disagreeable sensations (here-now).	1st
2. Draw the two most agreeable sensations (here-now).	1st
3. Make an inventory of issues and choose one.	1st
4. Draw the <i>felt-sense</i> .	2nd
5. Draw the <i>felt-sense</i> every three minutes.	3rd
6. What is the worst about feeling all of this?	4th
7. And what is the best about feeling all of this? Is there something good about Focusing on this in the here and now?	4th
8. What does this sensation encourage you to do?	4th
9. Do you consider that you have recognized the felt sense?	5th
10. Has there been any change during the process? (To be completed by trainer)	—

**Procedure**

The research took place in a classroom in a center after school hours. The students were given a somatogram, a drawing template, and a list of participation rules. Listed below are the five phases of the sequenced drawing, based on the steps in Focusing.

**First stage:** The first five minutes were spent getting prepared. For the second five minutes we asked the students to draw in the somatogram (corporal silhouette), the two most disagreeable and two most agreeable sensations, sensed at that moment. Then they wrote a list of issues that were interfering with their happiness and were asked to select one of them.

**Second stage:** We suggested that they form a felt sense related to the selected issue, and after a brief felt-moment, to draw in the somatogram what they were experiencing, as accurately as possible. Then, as the starting point of the sequence, we asked them to copy the drawing into the first space in the expression template (picture 1, minute 1).

**Third stage:** We encouraged the students to observe the felt sense and draw a picture of it every three minutes, a total of five times, so as to fill in the chart with six drawings.

**Example of one student’s six drawings**

Image 1 (0')	Image 2 (3')	Image 3 (6')
 <p data-bbox="176 1074 487 1116">"I'm so stressed out. Its like something sharp, made out of hard ice..."</p>	 <p data-bbox="514 1074 696 1097">"It's not so sharp now"</p>	 <p data-bbox="857 1074 962 1097">"It's smaller"</p>
Image 4 (9')	Image 5 (12')	Image 6 (15')
 <p data-bbox="176 1319 487 1358">"Every moment it is smaller and not so sharp"</p>	 <p data-bbox="514 1319 744 1338">"It has a less definite shape"</p>	

**Fourth stage:** Once the sequence was concluded, we asked the students three questions: *What is the worst of this? What is the best of this? What does this felt sense encourage you to do?* This last question ended the process. Finally, for the wrap up, we asked them: *Were you able to easily recognize the felt sense? Can you sense if there has been any change in how you're feeling?*

We also took into consideration whether or not they felt that they had been capable of Focusing: We asked:

- *if they sensed a felt-shift?*
- *if they felt that this process was useful?*
- *if they could see a possibility of carrying whatever new inner-knowings they got forward into their lives. (Feasibility)*

**Fifth stage:** We closed the process by encouraging them to protect the experience from the internal critic, and to savour and stay (for a few minutes) with the possible body shift that they might have experienced. Also, we asked them to put one hand on their chest, taking the time to thank themselves for the work they had done during the process.

### Data analysis

Four trainer-members of *The Focusing Institute* (in New York) made a qualitative analysis of the students' responses. In the first two points of the guideline there were three different evaluation levels (from 0 to 2) depending on the number of sensations found/felt and then drawn. For the rest of indications (from the third to the tenth) the evaluation was a yes/no question.

Through common consent, the analysis was expressed/shown only on a chart. The experts evaluated the experiential factor in the narrative and graphic expression of the students' responses. That is to say, they were looking for how many adolescents experienced a change on any of the three levels observed: graphic, narrative, and experiential.

## RESULTS

As can be observed in Table 2, 67% of the adolescents knew how to identify one of their disagreeable sensations and 15% knew how to identify two disagreeable sensations, and 72% identified one or two agreeable sensations (62% and 10% respectively). Only 18% of the participants could not identify any bodily sensations, and 28% could not sense any positive sensations.

As far as identifying personal problematic issues, 97% of the students were able to list them, and the same percentage found it easier to identify the worst-of-it (97%) rather than the best-of-it (77%), that is, the positive of what they were Focusing on (77%). 90% said to have felt a certain impulse forward, that is, they felt a body shift due to listening to their felt sense. 95% confirmed having been able to distinguish their *felt sense*, and 49% of the students stated having experienced changes in their sensations (*body shifts*).

**Table 2:** *Results from the Guideline-Questionnaire*

	Answers			%		
	0	1	2	0	1	2
1. Disagreeable sensations	7	26	6	18	67	15
2. Agreeable sensations	11	24	4	28	62	10
	Yes	No	Yes	No		
3. List of issues	38	1	97	3		
4. Felt-sense	39	0	100	0		
5. 6 drawings	24	15	62	38		
6. The worst	38	1	97	3		
7. The best	30	9	77	23		
8. Invitation	35	4	90	10		
9. Distinguish felt-sense	37	1	95	3		
10. Change of process	19	1	49	3		

**Overall valuation on behalf of the trainers**

The trainers then differentiated between students who had experienced a change on the three levels: graphic, narrative and experiential, and those who had not. (Table 3)

**Table 3:** *Overall valuation on behalf of the trainers*

EVALUATION OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENTIAL CHANGE	<i>n</i>	%
Graphic, narrative and experiential changes	15	38
No changes observed (on the three levels)	10	26
Non assessable	14	36
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100</b>

As indicated on the graphic, 38% of the students reported experiencing changes on narrative and experiential levels, while 26% did not report such experiencing such changes. Due to inadequate or incomprehensible responses, the trainers were not able to rate 36% of the responses, but that may not mean that there was no change because according to earlier findings in the questionnaire, 49% (19 students) indicated that they had experienced a change. Possibly some of the participants in this group experienced some degree of change but did not express it clearly on the graphic, narrative, and experiential levels.

Of the 19 students who said they felt they had made some progress in their Focusing process, we can confirm that the evaluators found 15 of them (38% of all 39 participants) showed changes on the three levels (graphic, narrative and experiential). The trainers were unable to confirm changes in only 4 of the 19.

## CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the first objective: We wanted to find out if adolescents have the ability to comfortably work in a Focusing way while drawing; this study shows that they do. The fact that 95% of the adolescents perceived and experienced the felt-sense, that approximately 50% followed the process with changes, and that 38% of them completed the Focusing process and felt a definite body shift leads us to confirm that adolescents can experience Focusing even though not all of them complete the process. This outcome suggests that *paying attention inside* requires a certain amount of training and that some participants were able to Focus on their felt sense, but didn't signify their experience, either verbally or in writing.

As for the second objective: We wanted to find out if the sequenced drawing is a good resource to better understand Focusing; the study shows that 100% of the students could express their felt sense with a drawing. This outcome shows that drawing the felt sense, along with words, allows adolescents to be in a more direct contact with their body.

However, the fact that this was not a controlled study and that all of the students were from the same school, limited the possibility of generalizing the results. In the same way, it is important to take into account the fact that some of the 36% of participants had not handed in enough material or submitted their results in a incomprehensible way. This outcome could be due to the lack of confidence or comprehension of the procedure. All of the above leads us to suggest that we need more and similar studies in a controlled manner in order to find out more specifically the number of adolescents who are able to experience Focusing more directly with sequenced drawings of their felt senses. We also suggest further comparative sequenced drawing studies with adolescents who have not had experiential relaxation, to in order to better understand whether experiential relaxation training should be recommended that adolescents learn how to Focus.

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