Is art education too big?

I don't think so.
Visual Arts Education: Teaching a Peaceful Response to Bullying

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Since the 1970s, studies of school violence and the culture that creates antisocial behaviors increased (Larsen, 2003). The highly publicized school shootings in Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado, 1999, and others brought the issue of school violence into public focus (Lazarus, Brock, & Feinberg, 1999, 2000). While most violence-related behaviors such as bullying, fighting, and theft declined from 1991-2003, students increasingly reported that they were likely to miss school because they felt too unsafe to attend (Science Week, 2004).

Visualization of pro-social school behavior is not often found in studies of classroom management literature. Violence is often pictured in popular media, but how to work in cooperative, caring school groups is less visible. Examination of nationally published art curriculum guides shows that the creation of images of all facets of school life public and private is not often identified as an art topic. Precedent for this use of visualizing positive school life can be seen in the Reggio Emilia and Pistoia, Italy, preschools where part of the documentation process is to create and exhibit photographs of students working and studying together (Center for Early Education, 2005; Katz & Chard, 1996; Bickley-Green, 2000).

This article examines some issues associated with violence-related behaviors in our schools. The illustrations for the article are from The East Carolina University exhibit of the "Bullies Don't Belong" project (McGillicuddy, 2003; State of North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2004).

Factors that Lead to School Violence

A summary of U.S. public schools finds factors contributing to violence include (1) school enrollment size; (2) urbanicity; (3) amount of crime where students live; (4) number of class changes; (5) number of serious discipline problems; and (6) number of school-wide disruptions. In relation to serious crime, a slightly different set of factors is involved: (1) enrollment size; (2) number of students who score below the 15th percentile on standardized tests; (3) student-teacher ratio; and (4) number of serious school-wide disruptions (Larsen, 2003). Regardless of how much we know about the factors that contribute to school violence, the classroom teacher is only able to advocate for developing policy and administrative solutions to change or address the factors that promote school disruptions. However, there are steps that individual teachers can take that directly influence classroom experience.
School and class size contribute to the frequency of incidents of violence and serious crime. Some students in high enrollment schools feel disconnected from institutional goals. "Making a school feel personal is a challenge for schools with thousands of students ... Teachers need to take greater responsibility for creating a positive classroom culture where each student feels known and accepted" (Allen, 2002, p. 38). Although the shooting at Red Lake High School in Bemidji, Minnesota, occurred in a small school, the sense of being part of a school community was missing for the student who committed the killings (Sklaroff, 2005).

As mentioned, the individual teacher is usually in a position only to advocate for smaller classes or school units. However, school culture and climate begin within classroom activities (Small Schools Project, 2004). Students and teachers can critically review issues such as school culture, challenging behaviors, and transformative images within classroom settings through visual art projects. The art class offers a starting place for visualizing pro-social behaviors and discussing ways to transform antisocial behaviors.

Visual arts classes can play a larger role in developing positive school culture by encouraging learners to create, critically discuss, and exhibit images of both anti- and pro-social behaviors. The North Carolina "Bullies Don't Belong" project (McGillicuddy, 2003; State of NC Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2004) is a real-world example of how visual art can show aspects of school culture experienced by students. The public exhibition of the bully drawings opened community discussion within classrooms and in the broader community about school culture.

Revealing the Life-Worlds of Learners

Violence, poverty, child abuse, substance abuse, addiction, suicide, and depression infuse the daily lives of the students in schools in the United States (Larrivee, 2005). Although more crimes and aggression occur outside schools, (DeVoe, Peter, Miller, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2004) school personnel must attend to school incidents. Students in U.S. schools are increasingly described as aggressive and hostile (Curwin & Mendler, 1997).

The 21st-century U.S. student body displays diversity of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Learners represent diverse cultures, worldviews, and life goals. Today's teachers integrate new curriculum, pedagogy, and management techniques to address these challenges and opportunities. Yet within this framework, the day-to-day culture of the local school is sometimes ignored.

Specific events may generate special banners or art monuments, but the daily experiences of students do not receive much attention. Teachers can encourage students to visualize their personal experiences and imagine how school experiences can be transformed to meet the needs of every student. While there may not be art exemplars or art histories to model these images, students can begin to build their own images of their current lives.

Constructivist educators understand how the individual actively builds understanding and personal knowledge from the structure of content areas (Jeffers, 2002). Constructivist educators also appreciate how knowledge and understandings are culturally formed within groups. In art classes, drawing upon the students' imaginations, internal goals, and life-worlds and connecting these to creative artmaking is the first step in lesson development (Hurwitz & Day, 2001). In this pedagogic framework, art teachers can attend to and encourage students to visualize their personal experiences in confrontational situations such as bullying incidents. All students, even those who are more likely to bully others, may benefit from these visualizations.

The issue of what negative behavior looks like or the effects of the antisocial behavior on the victim is not often critically examined in classrooms or public forums. In the classroom, these behaviors and the results of the behaviors are minimized. In the public forum, these behaviors are often presented as statistics. Art exhibitions are tools to bring the ideas visualized in art classes to the public forum such as the whole class, the school, community, or an invited audience that has a specialized interest (Small Schools Project, 2004; Burton, 2006). The public format links the classroom artistic production to the life of the community and affirms the experiences of the students. Discussion of student behavior encourages students to cooperate and develop reasoning skills in relation to classmates and the learning environment (Pena & Amrein, 1999). School culture is re-formed through sharing transformative images.

This image gives insight into a student's perception of in-school bullying. The artist shows a bully encounter in a school hallway and a teacher or administrator and another student who are unaware of the event.
Some Caution

Launching an art project that produces images that are significant in the actual lives of students may reveal more conflict and discomfort than the teacher anticipates. Additionally, autobiographical images may incriminate students among peers or in the broader community. Teachers should consider these possibilities as they frame and present lessons related to school culture. One useful beginning approach is to generalize and emphasize the idea of transformation by asking, "What does a bad situation look like? How can the situation be changed to be good?" Additionally, art teachers can work with guidance counselors or social studies teachers or others who have a professional interest in the topic of the drawings.

Teachers can also review the behavioral characteristics of their students before beginning this examination of local culture. Of all students in schools, 12 to 22% suffer from mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders (R. J. Marzano & J. S. Marzano, 2003). While the art teacher is not in a position to directly address severe problems without the assistance of other school personnel, an awareness of various behavioral characteristics and methods for responding to the characteristics is critical. R. J. Marzano (2003) summarized five categories of high-needs students and some recommended teaching strategies for classroom response. (See Table 1.)

Visualizing Pro-Social Behaviors

"I find that my attitude sets the tone for most of the student attitudes, and that behaviors are most readily followed if modeled by the teacher. These include respect, listening, engaging, sharing, and so forth." (A. Gardner, personal communication, June 1, 2004).

Students learn behavior patterns that the teacher models (Quick, 1993). The teacher's leadership in developing class protocol based on the teaching/learning transaction creates the classroom environment. Additionally, recent school culture literature encourages student involvement in developing inclusive change to involve the teacher and all students in contributing to the teaching/learning transaction (Villa & Thousands, 1995).
Manipulation of student behavior is the least desirable method to employ to develop pro-social behavior. A teacher who uses behavior management plans based on extrinsic rewards and punishments does not lead students to develop internal concepts of pro-social behavior. When the student leaves the constraints of the classroom environment, he or she may return to anti-social behaviors. Instead, leading students to a sense of cooperation and mutual respect provides a catalyst for pro-social behavior and leads students toward moral thinking. The goal is to guide students to recognize what is and think about what ought to be—to an idea of a new relation between the individual and the group (Colorosa, 1994; Piaget, 1997). This transformative behavior occurs if it is student-initiated, shared, decision making with adults (Small Schools Project, 2004). Students participate cognitively in the development of the school culture.

A good opportunity for the introduction of visualizing pro-social behaviors is in the development of the class rules of conduct. Group contingency policies hold the entire class responsible for behavioral expectations or pro-social conduct (R. J. Marzano, & J. S. Marzano, 2003). For example, at the beginning of the class, the students and teacher agree that if a student or group of students continuously misbehaves and interrupts the teaching/learning environment of the art class, the misbehaving student(s) will participate in activities to learn cooperative behavior and conduct. The focus of the activity is instructional, reflective, and corrective rather than penalizing. Students can draw a picture of the antisocial behavior and then draw pictures of the pro-social behavior. This sequence first publicly illuminates an antisocial action and then makes visible a pro-social image. The student is required to transform his or her thinking to create a positive image of the class.

"Don't fight back, just walk away" is one of the behaviors that children learn to respond to bullying. This image visualizes the transforming behavior.
Teachers Assisting Students to Respond

As teachers learn how to respond effectively to students, they can teach students to respond appropriately to their classmates. The effect of antisocial behavior in schools concerns education personnel worldwide (Student Accountability Standards, 2004). Many national and international programs demonstrate how to teach pro-social behaviors to reduce violence and bullying in schools. J. Garbarino (1999) listed 25 programs to develop social responsibility and violence prevention in schools. The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado; the Safe Havens Training Project and Resolving Conflict Creatively sponsored by Educators for Social Responsibility, Cambridge, MA; and the Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents in Newton, MA, are of particular interest to art educators. Eighteen states in the U.S. have laws that ask schools to attend to bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment (Cohen, 2005).

The internationally recognized Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, developed by Dan Olweus in Bergen, Norway, proposes ways to prevent bullying, improve the social climate of classrooms, and reduce related antisocial behaviors. The classroom components include (1) reinforcement of school-wide rules; (2) regular classroom meetings with children to increase knowledge and empathy; and (3)
informational meetings with parents. On the classroom level, the program encourages (1) interventions with children who bully; (2) interventions with children who are bullied; and (3) discussions with parents of involved children (Olweus, 2001). Variation of art projects such as the “Bullies Don’t Belong” activity provide the art teacher with an intervention tool that can lead to mediation and conversation with bullies, victims, and parents.

Students who demonstrate bullying or antisocial behavior are major contributors to class management problems. Students who are the victims of bullies develop lower self-esteem and may adopt bully behaviors as protection against being bullied. One solution to the problem created by bullies is to teach all children how to peacefully, effectively, and constructively communicate with others. Visual images provide constructive communication.

An Art Contribution: North Carolina’s “Bullies Don’t Belong” Project

It is certain that men and women can change the world for the better, can make it less unjust, but they can do so only from a starting point of the concrete reality they “come upon” in their generation. They cannot do it on the basis of false dreams, or pure illusion. What is not possible, however, is to even think about transforming the world without a dream, without utopia or without a vision (Freire, 2004, p. 31).

The North Carolina “Bullies Don’t Belong” project, developed in 2003, piloted an interdisciplinary model of behavior transformation in NC schools. Students visualized a peaceful school life. The NC Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the NC State Attorney General’s Office asked K-12 students to draw pictures of peaceful, cooperative school behaviors (McGillicuddy, 2003; State of North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2004). The 2003 exhibition of more than 1,300 drawings at East Carolina University brought regional attention to problems in school culture, bully events that children experience, and the solutions that children have for countering this antisocial behavior. The images reveal aggressive behaviors of bullies, the tears of victims, the positive images of caring students, and give viewers a concrete image of school life. The drawings opened dialogue about school culture.

The interdisciplinary model is based upon the premise that individuals cannot change others’ behaviors, but that individuals can change their responses to others’ behaviors and, in doing so, can have an effect on the aggressor. The art teacher can assist K-12 students to recognize symptoms of anger and aggression in communication and constructively respond to inappropriate or aggressive behaviors by visualizing appropriate modes of behavior through drawings. The idea is similar to empathy training with the addition of a visual art component.

Summary

This article reviews some basic issues related to school violence. As observed by the practicing teachers and other educators who have been quoted, adults who serve as role models to children and adults who respect, listen, and share will increase the students’ awareness of the need to use assertive, non-aggressive behaviors in and out of school. Art educators particularly, can encourage students to visualize pro-social behavior. The teachers who contributed to this article used the management methods suggested here. The teachers who contributed images to the “Bullies Don’t Belong” project asked students to visualize pro-social and transformative behaviors. While the behavioral effectiveness of pro-social visualizations has not been assessed, the activity opens dialogue about school behavior and culture in classrooms and the broader community.

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For the North Carolina “Bullies Don’t Belong” Project, students illustrated both positive and negative school behaviors. This poster shows happy faces of students who agree on a pro-social behavior.
REFERENCES

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