

# Transforming Ourselves as Teachers of Children Through Art

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تغيير أنفسنا كمدرسين للأطفال من خلال الفن

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### الملخص

إن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو محاولة فهم أنه عندما نتعامل مع الأطفال الذين يظهرون السلوك غير المرغوب فيه. فنحن نعلم ونتعامل مع طفل وليس طابع أو دمغة. فالعديد من المعلمين يرى هؤلاء الأطفال على أنهم مختلفون، ويصعب التعامل معهم، ويكون التعامل معهم مبنياً على هذه النظرة. مثل هذه المواقف تخلق حواجز ضخمة بين المعلم وطلابه، وهنا يمكن القول بأنه يجب أن نعامل كل طفل بقدر الإمكان على أنه شخص عادي وطبيعي مع التركيز على نقاط قوته بدلاً عن نقاط ضعفه.

لقد قدم هذا البحث الدليل على مدى تأثير الفن في زيادة السلوك الإيجابي المتصف بالإنتاجية والإبداع، والتقليل من السلوك السلبي، وذلك من خلال إيجاد الجو الصحي القائم على الاحترام والثقة والعطف، وإعطاء الحرية لجميع الأطفال للتعلم، والشعور بالراحة والأمان. ونتيجة لمثل هذا الجو الصحي للتعليم والتعلم، فقد حصل تقدم ملحوظ لتحقيق ما تقدم ذكره.

ولتحقيق هدف الوصول بمعلم التربية الفنية ليصبح أكثر إنسانية (الود، العطف، الرحمة والاحترام) في التعامل مع الأطفال، تم التركيز على ثلاثة نقاط لإحداث تغيير في السلوك السلبي لدى طفل الدراسة، هي: أ- العلاقة بين المعلم والطالب ب- الإدارة الصفية ج- الأداء أثناء العملية التعليمية. وكنتيجة لهذا التطور والتحسين في هذه النقاط الثلاثة، فإن الطفل أصبح سلوكه السلبي يتغير تدريجياً و بانتظام أثناء الخبرة المكتسبة من العمل الفني.

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### Abstract

The focus of this study is to understand children who may demonstrate undesirable behaviors. We are teaching a child, not a label. Many teachers see these children as different (and difficult) and treat them as such. This attitude creates huge barriers between these teachers and their students. It is argued that we should treat all children as normally as possible, and concentrate on their strength rather than their weaknesses.

This research provides evidence of the power of art - filtered through the teaching/learning process and the student-teacher relationship - to increase productive creative behavior and eliminate or decrease disruptive behavior, by providing a healthy environment of respect, trust, and love and the freedom for all children to learn and experience comfort and security. As a result, an environment of healthy teaching and learning, substantial progress toward described ends was made.

To achieve the goal of becoming more compassionately focused art teachers, three areas of focus were attended to change the child's disruptive behavior: (a) student-teacher relationship, (b) classroom management, and (c) instructional performance.

As a result of improvements in these areas, the child's disruptive behavior started to change gradually and diminish consistently during the art making experience.

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### **Introduction:**

This study focused on the experiences of pre-adolescent children whose challenging behaviors shape their experience in art classes and require special educational accommodation on the part of their teachers. I also looked beyond this to the broader implications regarding the therapeutic approach to teaching and learning process in art education. Henley (1992) proposes a “therapeutic” art education which “recognizes and uses the therapeutic benefits of the art process, but does not pretend to engage in psychotherapy or analysis, nor does it attempt to replace analytically-oriented support services such as counseling” (p. 16)

This approach to teaching will be explored and clarified from the literature on art education and art therapy and illustrated by exploring the way teachers deal with children exhibiting disruptive behaviors and the labeling of children in general. However, we must understand that by no means is this therapeutic approach to art teaching diagnostic or judgmental.

Lowenfeld (1964) described the importance of art in terms of child development and art education, with the significance of art lying in the self-expression, self-adjustment, and self-identification of the child. The art process becomes a confrontation with his or her own self and experience. The art product also provides a valuable key to adult understanding of children’s mental growth and educational needs.

Lowenfeld described the period between nine and eleven years of age as the “Gang Age” and a time of dawning realism. During

this period, children discover that they are members of a society of peers. The relationship with peers lays the groundwork for their ability to work within groups and cooperate with others. Children also develop a greater awareness of themselves and their surroundings; this is reflected in their artwork in a form of expression that relates more closely to what they “see” in nature as opposed to what they know. Details become more important in drawing as well as the representation of space through overlapping objects and multiple baselines.

Art offers a natural process for children to explore feelings about themselves and to explore their relationship with others. Feelings and relationships have a dramatic effect on how children view their world (Kramer, 1971). Without clarification of their feelings and behaviors, children are often handicapped and experience difficulties that may reinforce later problems in learning or their relationships with others. Fifth- and sixth- grade students are beginning to understand relationships between different natural elements in their environment. Also, children at this age can begin to reflect on the motivation behind their behaviors and are aware that people think and experience emotions differently (Cowen, 1978).

In my teaching, I use my knowledge of children’s artistic development, art education methods and theories, and my teaching experience in combination with ideas based on the work of Carl Rogers (1961), Martin Buber (1947), and Viktor Lowenfeld (1964). The informing conviction implied here is that the child can change his or her negative behaviors in the interest of his or her own progress and improvement, and the art teacher can support the child in this process of change by encouraging him or her and completely accepting such positive change.

In his book, *On Becoming A Person*, Rogers (1961) suggests that a safe and free relationship between the therapist and his clients should be established, and it is the therapist’s responsibility to sense and know the client’s inner world. The art teacher can analyze the development of relationships and seek facts that cause the problematic event. The teacher’s understanding of the experience is of great importance. The teacher tries to comprehend rea-

sons while expanding the growth and well being of the students. That is why such an idea is presented in this paper as an important base for the teacher to treat the students with respect and dignity in an overall act of unconditional positive regard.

Adapting such ideas to the classroom, the relationship between the child and his or her teacher should be open and safe and also based on respect and understanding from both sides, in order for the teaching and learning process to take place in a healthy environment. In addition, the child should be given opportunities to make choices through the art process, i.e., what materials to use, how to use them, and what to make with them. Ultimately, this will influence the finished product, but the product is not as important as the process itself. Because the process is a way of enhancing how children feel about themselves, and of teaching them problem-solving and critical thinking, this can lead ultimately to self-actualization.

I presented the idea of trust and respect in my work with students as important bases for treating them with dignity. The teachers' good feelings in turn reflected onto the participant. That created a relaxing and comfortable environment, controlled by the teacher. Art materials were the motivation that helped encourage the change in the child's behavior.

### **The Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to clarify a therapeutic approach to the teaching and learning process in art education. This approach to teaching will be 1) explored and clarified from the literature on art education and art therapy, and 2) illustrated by exploring the way teachers deal with children exhibiting disruptive behaviors and the labeling of children in general. Also, to articulate and demonstrate the philosophical approach that grounds my activity as a teacher and teacher educator, and to analyze the possibilities of this approach for increasing constructive learning and decreasing disruptive behavior in children in a classroom situation - in this case, in a university-based Saturday School Art Program for chil-

dren - through the use of visual art. It is intended to identify viable concepts and principles in the literature which can be applied to art education, and to apply these concepts and principles to a real classroom setting with one particular child in mind. This child in his situation will serve as an illustration of a soft approach to teaching, one based on love and compassion, and which allow us to consider whether, through the use of such an approach, it is possible to increase one child's productive behavior and decrease the child's disruptive behavior. This is a therapeutic approach to visual arts education enacted in a particular classroom situation.

The common complaint from teachers is that pre-adolescents are a difficult group to teach, lead and understand. What causes children of this age to act, react, and feel as they do? This study will serve as a guide for all art teachers to help them understand the potential of a therapeutic, humanistic and compassionate approach to art-teaching. Art can be used to help children feel good about themselves, their environment, and life in general. A therapeutic orientation would enhance the teacher's understanding of those children and help establish healthy teacher-student relationship to bring up a healthy generation.

Why do we need this therapeutic approach? Most parents and teachers care deeply about, support, nurture, and appropriately control their children, especially considering their many other obligations. These obligations and new family situations may cause chaotic home life. Stressful lives and rapidly changing cultures will cause many children to suffer behavior problems.

We need to attend these challenges in children's lives and help them cope with and overcome all difficulties. The bottom line, in school and in art class, is that we need to change the product-oriented mentality and focus on the children and their lives. To achieve this goal art teachers need to know themselves first. By that I mean that teachers need to understand their own attitudes, expectations, and behavior toward students. Then teachers need to know their school, classroom, and the community. Above all, they need to know their students.

## Illustration of The Problem

“I wish he would stop acting-out and start to work. He is very annoying. He is disturbing peace in the class.” These statements were repeated in many different ways, so many times by teachers, and students in Saturday classes at the School of Art and Design, a unit within the College of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This group of people come to do what they love, art, with the exception of one child, who was disrupting the flow of the lesson. He is by no means a dangerous child, but he is a sweet, creative, and smart 5<sup>th</sup> grade young man.

Art is the love of his life and he is good at it. “I cannot help it, if I am the best in the class,” he said. That is why he continues to attend the Saturday Art Program voluntarily because he finds it rewarding, beneficial, necessary and satisfying.

On the other hand, he is still disruptive, as described by his teachers. He is usually critical (in a negative way) of classmates’ opinions, and rude and disrespectful to the teacher in the classroom. He talks excessively and makes distracting noises. He is a child whose behavior is challenging.

## Background of The Study

This study looks at how visual arts can change the behavior of a child who constantly exhibits disruptive behavior. The researcher proposed to illustrate the ways in which involvement with art, art teaching, and the teaching-learning experience, in addition to the student-teacher interaction, positively affected a student exhibiting disruptive behavior, over a twelve-month period of time. This research is philosophical and descriptive, and in some sense, prescriptive.

I used one student’s action to tell my story as his teacher and to demonstrate a philosophy of teaching in action, which helped this child to increase his productive behaviors and decrease his disruptive behavior. I created a safe environment for him to work within, and additionally, established a respectful and trusting relationship



with him. I assisted the child to move forward in the direction of the main goal. My unconditional acceptance of the child furthered his development, through both failure and success.

As the child's teacher, I analyzed the classroom situation, and looked for situations that caused his negative behavior, and attempted to understand why he might behave as he did. Meanwhile, supporting the child's natural development, growth, and well-being was one of my main goals.

I videotaped the child in the classroom without any restriction on him or others in the class. I started by videotaping the first two weeks of class for one hour and a half each week. Then I videotaped again in the middle. At the end I videotaped the conclusion of the semester. By doing that, I was able to look for the ways the child interacted with the whole class and his teachers, his movement, impression, and concentration, and to describe changes in those behaviors over time. In addition, I looked for causes of his behavior to attempt to discern why he was behaving in a particular way, and what circumstances caused changes in his behavior, if changes occurred. A total of 20 tapes were collected.

The tapes were coded with numbers to help me find recorded activity blocks that are important to the study. These blocks were transcribed by hand to allow comparison between one lesson and another.

I played multiple roles throughout the study. First was my role as the child's teacher that took the form of engagement in the actual teaching and learning process. For example, I remained responsible for the curriculum and overseeing the development of the lessons by the teachers I supervised, and for full involvement in the teaching process. Second, in my role as a researcher I engaged in the systematic collection of observational data to illustrate the effect of my philosophical and practical approach on the teaching and learning experience.

## Results

In the beginning lessons, the child displayed more disruptive behavior in the classroom. Then his disruptive behavior became consistent and gradually decreased during the art making experience. The percentage of disruptive behaviors during the art lessons diminished consistently. Even though his disruptive behaviors decreased over time, some lessons did not follow that pattern. During lessons six and nine, no disruption was reported. The two art projects that were presented in those lessons were three-dimensional, and involved independent work. Such lessons seemed to keep the child's attention and interest and increased his level of comfort.

His disruptive behavior may have decreased during this time frame for great many reasons. The art teachers learned redirecting skills as well as how to control the surrounding atmosphere through the progression of the study. Also by creating a healthy student-teacher interaction, the child was able to adjust to the new classroom experience with less disruption. On the social level, he needed more guidance to help him understand the meaning of working with a group or how to act in a social atmosphere. The child's interaction with peers remained a problem for him, but at the same time there were some successful attempts on his part to improve in this regard. Further, on many occasions his willingness to interact with peers was rejected by most of the children. This pattern of peer interaction could become the focus of a further study.

It was my intention to illustrate that art, art making, and student-teacher interaction assisted in the behavioral improvements of the child in the classroom. My documentation showed that by having encouraged him to work in the patterns of familiarity and understanding, there was a decrease of the disruptive behavior that was a part of his world. Teacher encouragement, rather than resentment and frustration, was central to his success.

Based upon my observation, the child seemed to like most of the three-dimensional projects, which gave him the chance to use all

his energies in a constructive way. The scrap wood and clay were not only familiar but also tactile and nondirective. He was able to feel a sense of accomplishment with various end results. Creativity played a part in the task as he established well thought-out designs and structure in building his projects. The final result was satisfying with a pleasing, productive quality to it.

His least successful artwork was produced in response to two-dimensional projects. He paid little or no attention to his drawing. He made few decisions and exerted little effort to respond creatively to the assignment; rather he was redirected several times to stay on task until the end.

## **The Theory of Transforming Ourselves as Teachers of Children Through Art**

This theory is formulated because it is appropriate to the topic of a therapeutic approach to art education. This theory stresses the importance of creating and maintaining a safe and orderly learning environment to improve the result of the teaching and learning process and identifies the teacher's primary responsibility for doing so. All of the information provided greatly influences the enhancement of meaningful learning and artistic expression and the subsequent diminishment of disruptive behavior, and thus, this theory provides a much-needed resource for art teachers working with children exhibiting challenging behavior.

This theory considers five elements: art, education, disruptive behavior and constructive behavior, art therapy, and the therapeutic approach in art education. I will describe the relevant features of each element and discuss how each aspect of practice might help us transform ourselves through art.

### **Art**

1. Art, in its most basic and universal sense, is a means of expressing ourselves in a way that carries forth and communicates the authenticity and uniqueness of the self. Artistic expression is the

result of art making, a process of material transformation which is our way of bringing spirit into our lives. Spirit is the place where feelings and ideas are animated and narrated and where character exists.

2. People made objects and forms to mark matters of birth or death, to commemorate important adventures and occurrences, and to decorate their indulgence in living.

3. Through art people have solved problems, soothed pain, faced losses and disappointments, and have come to know themselves.

## Education

1. The nature and function of education: As the artist forms his thoughts and ideas by using different materials such as clay, paint, wood, words, music, and dance, education also forms and creates, but its materials are human beings. Education can form the individual and his or her actions, beliefs, the ways he or she perceives knowledge, and create an individual in a society who knows his or her rights and responsibilities. The child is born without power, knowledge, language, and belief. He or she does not know the good from the bad, nor does the child know how to behave in a civilized society. But education with all its means and ends in the school, home, and society is the tool to shape that child and to make him or her a productive member of society.

2. Humanistic psychology: Humanistic Psychology maintaining that discussion is the way of doing things, and the dialogue between humans or the opening of the line of communication is the way of resolving our differences and expressing our own feelings and ideas.

3. The nature of a person's character depends largely on his or her environment, the conditions under which he or she lives, the school he or she goes to, and the friends with whom he or she mixes. It is for this reason that educational reforms should improve existing conditions, for they realize that a person, especially when young, is powerfully affected by his or her surroundings.

4. It is important for young children that they should accustom themselves from their earliest years to depend on themselves. In this way at a very early age they may begin to learn habits of independence and self-reliance.

5. The same principle should be followed at school. Some people have an idea that a teacher's job is to fill the child's head with all kinds of knowledge, while the child sits passively listening to what is said to him. The best teacher directs the child into the path of self-learning. The teacher's aim is to encourage the child to work and learn for him- or herself. Such a teacher prepares the child for the world, which he or she will enter after leaving the school.

6. The teacher should use love and compassion, trust and relationship as major concepts and principles when working with children.

## **Disruptive Behavior and Constructive Behavior**

Disruptive behavior is typically demonstrated in children who argue or brag considerably, demand undue attention, tease or are mean to others, disobey teacher's directions, are loud or talk too much, have temper tantrums, show sudden mood changes, and are stubborn and irritable. Other behaviors such as underachieving, anxiousness, and impulsiveness are also defined as disruptive, because they are considered by teachers to be equally disruptive to the children's overall learning process. All of these behaviors are considered off-task due to their effect on the teacher's attention and the classroom-learning atmosphere. On the other hand, all behaviors that are positive, meaningful, and productive are considered constructive behaviors. However, to open the vent of creativity and increase the constructive behavior, we must shut the vent of disruptive behavior because a child cannot do both at the same time.

## **Art Therapy and Therapeutic Art Education**

Henley (1992) tackles the domain where art education and therapy most commonly overlap, that of children with special needs in

educational settings and their right to full inclusion in the art program within the school curriculum.

Both fields should complement one another for the benefit of all children and their needs. Children may feel stress, confusion, and isolation from home and school. That's why those children become frightened, isolated, and anxious. As a result, this becomes a time of crisis for those children and is acted out in various traumatic behaviors. Children who experience the stress of personal problem such as parental conflict, divorce, drug abuse, homelessness, and peer pressure often do not realize their learning potential in the classroom. This may be manifested by disruptive behaviors and may cause diverse emotional effects in children. A therapeutic approach will help those children to make sense of the world that affects them (Yauman, 1991). Galas (1998) describes the disruptive children found in virtually every classroom as the (bad boys).

## **Therapeutic Approach to Art Education**

Based on the elements above, I came to the conclusion that using such an approach in art education might be particularly beneficial to children with disruptive behavior. I hope to clarify this approach for the teachers to use in order to increase constructive learning and decrease disruptive behavior. However, to allow others to understand this approach and use it effectively, I will redefine it using concepts and principles outlined above. Although in practice the five elements of this transformative approach exist in continual interaction, I will divide them here for the sake of precision.

### **Concepts**

1. Art is a gift, freely available, that we can use to help us soothe pain, comfort us in difficult times, and inspire us to look forward to new experiences. In her book, *Drawing from a Dying Child*, Berotia (1993) tells the story of Rachel, a nine-year old dying of leukemia, whose awareness and understanding of her dying process is

explored through her drawings. These drawings deflect her private inner self-experience, and how she became conscious of her death, and came to accept it.

2. Education promises to move a young person from the world of powerlessness to the world of power, by granting the child the right to explore his or her capacities on his or her own.

3. Disruptive behavior is any action that causes difficulty or disruption in the child's relationship with others around him or her. However, the teacher's job is to encourage constructive behavior and meaningful learning process in order to decrease disruptive behaviors.

4. Art therapy is the application of art as therapy to alleviate human problems.

5. Therapeutic art education is the use of art to help youngsters with special needs in our schools and planning a curriculum that includes such young people, focusing on what they can do, not what they cannot do.

## Dimensions

In order to successfully achieve the above we should look at the following dimensions as tools to accomplish our goals:

1. Ideal teachers cultivate personal and professional growth to nurture the development of the young children in their care.

2. Art media is one of the most important elements in the teaching and learning process, which must be safe and invite creative exploration. Art media is so powerful in this respect because it is a source of motivation to maintain students' interest and keep them focused at all times, which enhances constructive activities and reduce destructive behaviors. By just having an inviting media in the classroom for the child, this is not simply something that is fun to play with, as we may think, it is exciting and colorful and has associations with many other sorts of things in his or her experience. It is also a basis for communication with the teacher on a new level and with dignity.

3. A lesson plan should be the vehicle that carries the child into an exciting and inviting venture to the world of imagination and exploration of the self.

4. An effective environment encourages cohesion and stability in the learning setting (Johnson, Lathey, and Shore, 1992).

5. The art teacher must provide a safe and orderly environment. Classroom management is used to achieve this goal.

## Principles

The teacher must understand that the child is the center of the teaching and learning process, because the child is the seed that will bear the fruit of excellence of value, and in whom will develop aesthetic power and civilized behavior. Therefore, the most important foundation of the educational setting is the constant love and compassion of the teacher for his or her students. It is important to have an idea of what children can create and expected to create. Like Lowenfeld (1964), Szekely (1991) believes that all children are born with natural creative abilities that can blossom when nurtured. He describes the appropriate “liberated” art room as a place full of choices and filled with unusual as well as traditional art materials.

This knowledge will guide the teacher in selecting media, and planning effective instruction and motivation. The teacher also must be open to cooperation with organizations concerned with art education in the service of the community.

## How Can Teachers Do the Above?

1. Teacher-student relationship: This is one of the most important elements in the teaching and learning process. Teachers need to respect and trust their students and treat each child equally. Also, the teacher should never label a child or call him or her by undesirable names or pass negative information to others about a particular child or group of children. Ginott (1972) cautioned, “Children often live up to what parents expect them to be, and what teachers tell them they are. It is damaging to tell a child where he will end



up. Destinations may become destinies,” (p. 102). He also concluded, “labeling is disabling” (p.99). Ethical and caring practice must guide the teacher’s behavior at all times.

2. Classroom management: The teacher needs to provide directions to students to guide them as they work in the classroom and the teacher needs to express his or her rules and expectations to students. Materials should be ready to use and plentiful enough to go around to avoid arguments or disputes over a tool or materials.

3. Instructional performance: The teacher should have a strong knowledge of media and processes and their effect on students’ behavior. Susi (1996) proposes, “the combination of well-planned learning activities and interesting assignments are expected to keep students on-task and focused. When well-designed, these practices counter the problems associated with low motivation, lack of structure, and unclear expectations,” (p. 62). The teacher should provide enough visuals and appropriate materials to accomplish the objectives of the lesson and keep all students focused at all times. However, the teacher needs to understand which type of activities had negative or positive effects on the students and to use this knowledge to increase the constructive behavior and to avoid disruptive behavior.

## Conclusion

This study provides hope for students not only to exist, but also really to live. This study offers some evidence that the whole teaching and learning experience of art and art making can increase productivity and creativity and decrease disruptive behavior in classroom situations in students exhibiting such behavior. Art promotes productivity by combining with motivation and stimulation as a source of creativity. This child did not stop misbehaving completely during the art program, yet his behavior was more self-controlled and meaningful which encouraged independence and security.

The art program introduced an outlet for the child to use his energy in a positive way. With the knowledge of providing proper visual and tactile stimulation and motivation, the art teachers were able

to observe the effectiveness of media. From the experience, it was found that this child responded best to materials provided in conjunction with three-dimensional projects. Art materials that offer independence and creativity, and materials with which the child was comfortable, seemed to hold his attention and concentration most successfully. Through these common actions, the child is able to keep from misbehaving in the classroom and from expressing disruptive behavior.

The art teachers showed unconditional acceptance, and encouraged further growth for the betterment of the child. I found and understood the quality, normality, and humanity in diversity, rather than disparity, difference, and humiliation in the classroom. The nurturing of support and assertion of compliment can provide a safe place for children. I want to like, cherish, appreciate, join, invite, and help our students without holding, judging, invading, demanding, and insulting them; this kind of relationship is the key to respect, trust, and the ability to ameliorate others. By understanding the warmth and the meaning of art, art making and the student-teacher interaction, and by following them, we should be able to form a path to our students' reality and help them to be positively constructive individuals.

We need a teacher education program that prepares, nurtures, and demands teachers who do not abuse their power over children. We need teacher education that trains teachers to know more about their students' lives in the streets, homes, and their social surroundings.

We, as art educators, should look at art as something that provides meaning for going beyond mere survival. The ideas, values, and approaches that constitute the basis of the visual arts can continue to help transform our lives and our surroundings into something more meaningful and satisfying. Art encourages and puts to good use our standing awareness. We form art, and art forms us.

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