



# Bullying in the Early Grades: Giving Visual Form to Voice

## SUMMARY

A first-grade classroom's concern about bullying is the focus for students to engage in image making in conjunction with the writing process.

Through the process, students discover they can give form to painful experiences and feelings and receive feedback from their peers.

## *A National Center for Education Statistics study*

found almost one out of every four students (22%) reported being bullied during the school year (NCES, 2015). According to a report by the Centers for Disease Control (2015), students who experience bullying are at increased risk for poor school adjustment, sleep difficulties, anxiety, and depression. The report goes on to note students who engage in bullying behavior are at increased risk for academic problems, substance use, and violent behavior later in adolescence and adulthood while students who are both targets of bullying and engage in bullying behavior are at greater risk for both mental health and behavior problems than students who only bully or are only bullied.

In March 2011, President Obama with First Lady Michelle Obama, held the first White House bullying conference to provide information from various government agencies on how kids, teens, young adults, parents, educators, and others in the community can prevent and stop bullying. The conference was a call to action — policies, statistics, and effects of bullying were made clear. In the words of President Obama, “if there’s one goal of this conference, it’s to dispel the myth that bullying is just a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing. It’s not.”

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten (2012) calls all educators into action when she says: “We must empower those who have been bullied by listening to them and hearing their anguish, so they know they are not alone. We must find ways to educate the people who bully

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## Joan Davidson, United Federation of Teachers

others, so that they can know the harm their behaviors cause and understand it is wrong.”

It was in this context that we developed a lesson that provides a safe environment for students to express their feelings and concerns about bullying. Healthy social-emotional development is promoted by building a safe, secure, and respectful environment in an early childhood setting with positive and consistent relationships among adults, children, and their peers (Wright, Diener, & Kemp, 2013). Building a strong classroom community aligns with current early childhood education quality standards and child development theory. A study by Findlay, Girardi, and Coplan (2006) has shown that 6- to 7-year-olds who have low empathic skills are more prone to bullying. When instructed about empathy, their aggression decreases, while their self-respect and social competency is strengthened. This insight echoes Weingarten’s comments about student anguish. By showing students that they are not alone in dealing with their difficult experiences we can help them to understand the visual ways they could communicate their ideas.

### Research on the Art Room

Hurwitz and Day (2001) explain that 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. The process of creating an expressive image based on the theme of bullying and reflecting on the product and the products of peers encourages students to empathize with their own feelings and the feelings of others.

Goleman (1998) explains how an individual’s emotional intelligence (EQ) that includes the competence of empathy rooted in this lesson contributes more than their IQ results to their potential for success in a work situation. It is through the arts that this EQ is nurtured.

Image making has the ability to bring out experiences, thoughts, and emotions that may not be expressed verbally (Kohl, 2010). Creating art, she explains, allows children to work through feelings and emotions and by referring to a finished piece of artwork, helps a child talk about feelings in a unique and meaningful way. “The art products of children tell us a great

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— Randi Weingarten

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## Bullying in the Early Grades: Giving Visual Form to Voice

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deal. Children create directly and without fear. Art is more than a pastime; it is meaningful communication with the self, as children select and organize parts of the environment into a new whole (Lowenfeld, 1987, p.34)."

Awareness about bullying in schools is growing. It is imperative that we create opportunities for students to share their thoughts, fears, and stories in an expressive way.

### Relating Image Making and Bullying

"Curriculum must include instruction that supports the development of a school environment free of discrimination and harassment. (The Dignity for All Students Act, 2012)."

The visual arts constitute important "ways of knowing" for all children, for they are among the primary languages through which personal and cultural meaning find echoes within each other. Burton (2015) explains, "... children bring their own interests and ideas with them to the study of art, and it is the teacher's task to be sensitive to the life-worlds of their pupils in their interpretation of the curriculum. (p.1)."

The process of art making provides an opportunity for students to take a journey inside themselves and identify the feelings they have about the given topic. These feelings once expressed can then be viewed in a new light and become the basis for rethinking one's actions.

Engagement in the process of image making gives students an opportunity to access their feelings and to discover new ideas and feelings. When making their images, students re-experience the feelings they had during the bullying event. Adams and Baynes (2006) put it this way, "Irrespective of age, thoughts impact and interact on/with the drawer and their drawings by the eye receiving feedback from the marks appearing on the page, which prompt further thought and mark-making." The authors go on to say, "Thoughts are not static; they constantly shift and change. Furthermore, thinking is not a regulated procedure, but an unpredictable exchange between experiences, ideas, reactions and actions. (p.3)."



*In this drawing, a student explains that one student pushed her, but another helped pick her up.*

Engagement in the process of image making gives students an opportunity to gain access to their personal feelings and to discover new ideas and feelings.

The image making process and the image itself, clarified by the student statement, allowed the bullying problem to be seen and heard by peers, family, and community members. When sharing their work midway and at the end of the project, students saw how bullying affected not only them but their peers as well. The process gets to the core of a student's feelings and results in images that have a strong impact on the viewer.

Image making and reflection on the work, can be used as a strategy to develop solutions to a given problem, by those who view the work. Freedman and Lynch (2012) explain that in making and sharing their artwork with others, students learn that they can actually have an impact on the world through the images they create.

### The Stand Up to Bullying Project

The primary purpose of the project was to engage students in an opportunity to express their personal concerns, their fears, their feelings of helplessness, sadness, isolation, and/or their need to be a bully.

Students were encouraged to share personal accounts about their experiences in a visual form accompanied by a written/verbal statement about what the work was about. Time was also provided for students to talk about their work and the work of peers. This process supports the development of a

school environment free of discrimination and harassment, sensitive to the concerns of others and appreciative of the unique points of view of their peers.

Using the framework of the New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Visual Arts (2015), this lesson covered five strands: Art Making, Literacy in the Visual Arts, Making Connections, Community and Cultural Resources, and Careers and Lifelong Learning. The components of the strands go through pre-K–12 and the benchmarks for the grades are scaffolded and recursive.

Young children are active and exuberant explorers (Burton, 2015). Artistic images capture the physical and sensory aspects of their discoveries. They

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**A student shares a bullying incident:**  
*A little boy is punching me. I have a bloody nose.*

## Bullying in the Early Grades: Giving Visual Form to Voice

Inherent in the process of image making is critical thinking, decision-making and flexibility, and persistence — all skills that are essential to life-long learning.

love to express the movement, feeling of places and people. They tell stories by combining their observations with their inner worlds of fantasy and include details that capture the important parts of their ideas. Art making becomes an important spur to the use of imagination.

The bullying theme, introduced with teacher and student stories and role-playing, was appropriate for the way early childhood students learn. Inherent in the process of image making is critical thinking, decision-making and flexibility, and persistence — all skills that are essential to life-long learning.

I presented the lesson to 26 first-grade students in a Brooklyn public school. The students were culturally and academically mixed. Most were beginner readers and were just beginning to write sentences using “inventive” spelling.

It was helpful to present the theme in cooperation with the classroom teachers, who had knowledge of the students and who had discussed bullying during other class sessions.

### The class was structured into segments:

- Whole group presentation and discussion;
- Whole group review of resources;
- Small group studio work;
- Individual instruction;
- Peer dialogue and;
- Whole group reflection on the work.

The classroom teacher grouped all the students on a rug and began telling a dramatic story of when he was a bully. Next, students role-played a time they were a bully or a time when they were bullied. For this they had to stand and do an action that would show what they were doing or what was happening to them. Some stood in front of the group and repeated their action and asked other students to guess what was happening and how they thought the student felt.

When the students were ready to “draw their story,” we discussed a reproduction of “Carolina Shout,” a picture created by Romare Bearden (see right). This work of art was chosen because the parts of the figures are exaggerated and each figure is doing something different;



*This artwork shows one student reacting to seeing another student hit.*

the color is expressive and the figures are shouting/singing — something children like to do.

Art materials, such as crayons, construction paper, glue, and scissors were set up at each table of four. The students were each given a 12 inch x18 inch white drawing paper to work on.

I asked, “What topic are we working on?” I did this to review and clarify what the students were to do. I suggested students begin their work by tearing or cutting out the figures or drawing their figures that were involved in the bullying activity first. Then I suggested that they add their background.

Hwang (2012) cautions adults to avoid asking young children, “What is it?” Instead invite children to tell you about their picture in their own words. As students worked I walked around the room, responding to their questions and guiding them individually by commenting on what they were doing well and by asking some of the following questions:

- How can you make certain parts stand out?
- What parts could be exaggerated to add to your story?
- What colors could you choose to get across your feelings?
- What could you add to tell where the event happened?

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## “Carolina Shout” art discussion

**Where did you notice that the artist used exaggeration to communicate his ideas?**

(Show “exaggeration” by speaking in a very loud voice then a very soft voice.)

**Can you point out, in the picture, parts you think are exaggerated?”**

(Using a pointer, students showed the hands, the heads, and the mouths of the figures.)



**Can you describe what you see in the picture?**

(One student responded, “I see people.” After the students counted the people, one student was selected to use the pointer to touch the people and count them out loud.)

**What do you think the people are doing?**

(Students said the people are talking; when asked to point to areas in the picture that gave them that idea, one student pointed out the mouths.)

**Can you make sounds that you hear in the picture and use your hands at the same?**

(Students began to make loud shouting noises and raised their hands high and moved them in a variety of ways.)

**Can you guess what materials the artist used to make the picture? And why do you think that?**

(I finally explained that the artist, Romare Bearden, made the picture by combining bits of cut or torn paper, from magazines or papers with a design on them. I tore some paper and demonstrated how it could become a figure in action.)



*This drawing shows a student helping:  
I'm patting my brother's head to make him feel better.*

## Bullying in the Early Grades: Giving Visual Form to Voice

- What can you do to consider the whole page?
- What details, such as patterns, parts of things, can you add to clarify your story?



Above: A drawing shows one student slapping another.

Below: A student shares how it feels to be told, "You can't play!" by another student.



Midway through the lesson, while students worked, I held up a few pieces that showed different ways of presenting ideas to encourage students to be inventive and to think in new ways. When sharing their work midway and at the end of the project, students saw how bullying affected not only them but their peers as well. When the pictures were completed they were set up on the floor and students were invited to walk around our floor gallery and see what their peers had done.

### Assessment/Reflection:

Students who wanted to share why they liked a particular picture were encouraged to do so. I asked students to tell how the artist whose work they viewed got across their feeling about bullying. Some students mentioned the colors the artist used, others mentioned how certain parts were exaggerated, others mentioned what they saw happening in the picture. I asked where they thought the action took place and to give evidence in the work, why they decided what they did.

I asked the young artists what they had learned in working on their images. One artist said, "I didn't know I could remember so much about what happened." Another said, "I learned that exaggeration really adds to your picture." I asked, "Can anyone point out a work that shows a similar experience as yours?" Several hands went up. This last question was to encourage children

to look at each other's work. Then I asked students to share what they had learned in making their work or seeing the work of other students.

## Conclusion

Arts processes by their very nature incorporate multimodal opportunities for students to discover and solve problems independently and/or collaboratively. When artists, including young artists, are intensely engaged in the creative process the visual language is used most expressively.

In this project, the children were passionately involved with communicating their feelings and stories. They were in a "creative zone" in which they intuitively exaggerated parts of the picture, used color, lines, shapes, and patterns in a rhythmic and unified way.

Like the work of Romare Bearden, which the students examined before they made their artwork, they used the whole page to tell their story.

In my research I found only a few organizations concerned with stopping bullying and/or teaching tolerance that capitalized on the language of the arts, whether it be theater, music, dance, or visual arts. Students were asked to draw a picture, sing and/or write a song, role play, etc. and the work was looked at for content only, not how the students manipulated the language of the art form expressively.

While the examination of these issues is important and can be empowering, Bickley-Green (2007) cautions art teachers to work with other school staff when introducing a theme that may reveal more conflict and discomfort than was anticipated. Also autobiographical images may incriminate students among peers or in the broader community. One way to reduce this problem is to ask that names of the children who did the negative action(s) not be mentioned. It is not productive for children to carry a descriptive label of "bully" or "victim."

I believe that when students really want to share their feelings, story, or idea about something in a visual form, it is their intent, passion and full engagement in the art-making process that becomes a springboard for them to learn about the power of the visual arts language to communicate what is inside them. In this project the need to share their experiences related to bullying was the springboard. This lesson provided students a safe environment to express their feelings and concerns around bullying.

*(Editor's note: See additional resources for a unique idea for an anti-bullying art exhibit.)*

# Bullying in the Early Grades: Giving Visual Form to Voice

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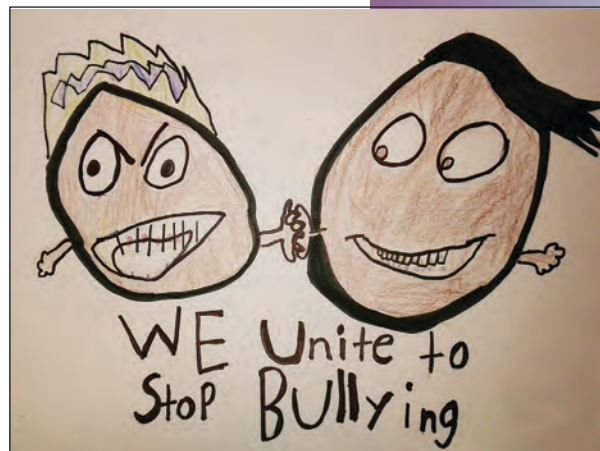
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**COPE NYC**  
Creative Opportunities Promoting Equality

THE NEW YORK CITY ART TEACHERS ASSOCIATION/  
UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS IN COLLABORATION WITH COPE NYC

*presents a Student Exhibit Opportunity*

### INSIDE/OUTSIDE: YOUNG ARTISTS UNITE AGAINST BULLYING

*The goal of the project is for students to share their concerns about bullying in a visual form. We hope this exhibit of student work will result in the artists and viewers gaining new insight. Understanding a problem is the first step in finding a solution.*

Students are encouraged to create images that share their feelings about bullying and intolerance - it could be an incident they were involved in or one they observed. It could be from the point of view of a friend or family member. All types of visual solutions to the problems are welcome. Work can be in any genre or media - realistic, figurative, symbolic or abstract. Words can be included in the image. **Key words can be but are not limited to:** fear, alone, pain, empathy, rage, anger, thrill, hope, self-esteem, tolerance, strength, identity.

#### Guidelines:

- Art work to be two or three dimensional (individual or group), film/slide show (2 minutes);
  - 3D work can be any size but must be delivered and picked up by teacher/artist at end of Reception
  - Maximum size for 2D work 18x24 for physical exhibit; Size unlimited for digital exhibit.
  - Work need not be mounted or matted.
  - Materials -your choice. For relief, materials should be securely attached. Pastels, charcoal, or cray-pas must be well fixed. We cannot be responsible for damage due to fragility.
  - Please do not submit artwork that specifically addresses a person by name or title. For example an artwork that says "I don't like when John Doe calls me names everyday" could simply say "I don't like it when he calls me names everyday".
  - Please e-mail up to 10 student images 300 dpi or film/slide links before Friday, February 17th to: [Anu.Sieunarine@nycata.org](mailto:Anu.Sieunarine@nycata.org)
- SAVING AND LABELING IMAGES: Each image should be numbered and labeled:  
#, Student Name, Grade, School, Teacher, Title.  
(Example: #1, Jane Doe, Gr 4, PS 1, Ms. Adams, No Bullies)  
Student writing-double spaced (a WORD document) Label document to match jpg.

#### Timeline:

Friday-February 17th : Digital Submission deadline  
Week of March 8th : Adjudication: work will be grouped: Grades 1-3: 4-6; 7-8; 9-12;  
Week of March 13th : Teacher notification  
Digital Exhibit : Beginning March 20th -  
Physical Exhibit : May 2017 Place, Date, Time TBA

#### Selection Criteria:

Work will be selected for digital and physical exhibits based on: interpretation of the theme; clarity of message; craftsmanship and size (no size limit for digital exhibit)

#### Recognition:

- A Reception for selected students and Teachers. Date, Time, Site TBA
- All teachers and students will receive certificates thanking them for their participation

#### See Exhibit Overview: [www.nycata.webs.com](http://www.nycata.webs.com)

Details include: Bullying defined; basic understandings; goals; resources; optional written statement content; suggested questions to motivate students; process arts activities; art-making activities.

Exhibit Coordinators: NYCATA/UFT: Joan Davidson, President; Anu Sieunarine, VP, High Schools; Mario Asaro, VP, Executive.  
COPE NYC: Vida Sabbaghi, Founder & Director

**The New York City  
Art Teachers Association/  
United Federation of Teachers  
developed a student  
anti-bullying exhibit.  
For resources and guidelines  
to use to develop  
your own exhibit, visit  
[www.nycata.webs.com](http://www.nycata.webs.com).**