
Eighth-Graders as ROLE MODELS: A Service-Learning Art Collaboration for Social and Emotional Learning

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The final collaborative artwork reflected the eighth-graders' desires for working with the younger students. Photo by Julia Gross.

BY KAREN HUTZEL, ROBERT RUSSELL, AND JULIA GROSS

The art teacher, Mrs. Gross, led a small group of eighth-grade students down the hall toward a classroom of pre-kindergarten students. In typical adolescent style, the students were slightly rambunctious as they walked, joking playfully and giggling loudly while Mrs. Gross hushed them. When they arrived at the classroom of their service-learning partners, the eighth-graders' demeanor quickly changed. They walked through the classroom door as if passing through a time machine, quickly exhibiting much more mature behavior on the other side. This was not their first visit. They had been working with these particular children for several weeks, and knew exactly where to go, what to do, and how to behave like the role models they seemed to recognize they were.

The tables and chairs were much smaller than those in the art room, matching the size of the children, who appeared bashful, hiding their excitement about seeing their eighth-grade buddies. As the eighth-graders sat in the tiny chairs, they pulled out small painted canvases, sheets of rub-off letters, and pieces of paper with the header "Words that describe me." They worked together quietly, selecting words, rubbing off multiple letters onto the painted canvases, and preparing to present their work to the entire class while several adults snapped photographs. Two by two, the groups stood in front of the classroom to present their letters. In each case, the eighth-grader did his or her best to encourage the pre-kindergarten partner to tell the class about their chosen word. In several cases, the younger partner spoke quietly. In other cases, the smaller of the two looked up to the older friend begging with his or her eyes for the older one to do the talking. As they stood in front of the room, it became evident that the painted canvases placed together spelled "helpful," a word chosen by the eighth-graders to represent how they wished to collaborate with their younger partners.

After the short presentations, the eighth-graders said goodbye to their partners and left the room. This time, as they walked back to the art room, the eighth-graders talked about ideas for an art project. One boy suggested a recycled art piece made from plastic bottles. When they arrived back at the classroom, Mrs. Gross facilitated a discussion with them to finalize plans for the art piece. Students suggested ways to

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refine the painted letters and add to the meaning of the piece. When one student suggested they add their names to the piece, another student said that would be “conceited, by drawing attention to ourselves.” Another boy suggested they add the initials of the younger student partners to make it more meaningful to them because, he said, “it’s kinda’ like their project.” He was referring to the decision he and his peers had made early in the project for the art piece to belong primarily to the younger students.

Social and Emotional Learning through Service-Learning

In a recent article, Russell and Hutzel (2007), two of the authors of this article, propose a framework for teaching social and emotional learning (SEL) in art education through collaborative service-learning. As defined in that article, SEL is a “process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence” (Elias, et al., 1997, p. 2, quoted in Russell & Hutzel, 2007, p. 7). The core competencies of SEL include self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning [CASEL], 2004), and within each competency is a set of skills (see Figure 1). Transcending the often implicit and indirect instruction of social and emotional learning in traditional art education practice, the goal of SEL for art teachers “is to teach explicitly those understandings, skills, and dispositions that positively affect student discipline as a regular part of the art curriculum” (Russell & Hutzel, 2007, p. 7) through artmaking and critical discussion of images. There are a myriad of ways this can be accomplished in the art room, from individual artmaking activities based on a big idea (Walker, 2001), to art criticism and critical dialogue about visual culture that dissects social and cultural issues, to social experiences that engage children in collaborative learning activities. In the various possibilities for directly addressing SEL in art education, this particular approach involves service-learning and collaborative artmaking through an asset-based exploration. The social and emotional skills identified by CASEL (2004) can be directly practiced, taught, discussed, and reflected on through active participation in socializing and personal and emotional reflection through writing.

This conceptual framework integrates SEL in art instruction through service-learning and a collaborate-and-create model to artmaking (Russell & Hutzel, 2007). In implementing these concepts with

eighth-graders and pre-kindergartners, the older students’ positions as *role models* became significant in addressing SEL competencies through service-learning collaborative artmaking activities. Positive role modeling involves leadership, caring, and an ability to be self-aware in order to manage one’s behavior in a positive and assertive way with others. The eighth-graders’ positions as role models will be highlighted in the teacher’s perspective on the experience and the children’s written and verbal comments relative to SEL competencies.



Photos by Karen Hutzel.

Self-Awareness
Identifying emotions: Identifying and labeling one's feelings
Recognizing strengths: Identifying and cultivating one's strengths and positive qualities
Social-Awareness
Perspective-taking: Identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others
Appreciating diversity: understanding that individual and group differences complement each other and make the world more interesting
Self-Management
Managing emotions: Monitoring and regulating feelings so they aid rather than impede the handling of situations
Goal setting: Establishing and working toward the achievement of short- and long-term pro-social goals
Responsible Decision Making
Analyzing situations: Accurately perceiving situations in which a decision is to be made and assessing factors that might influence one's response
Assuming personal responsibility: Recognizing and understanding one's obligation to engage in ethical, safe, and legal behaviors
Respecting others: Believing that others deserve to be treated with kindness and compassion and feeling motivated to contribute to the common good
Problem solving: generating, implementing, and evaluating positive and informed solutions to problems
Relationship Skills
Communication: Using verbal and nonverbal skills to express oneself and promote positive and effective exchanges with others
Building relationships: Establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding connections with individuals and groups
Negotiation: Achieving mutually satisfactory resolutions to conflict by addressing the needs of all concerned
Refusal: Effectively conveying and following through with one's decision not to engage in unwanted, unsafe, unethical, or unlawful conduct

Figure 1. SEL Core Competencies as stated by CASEL (2004) and reprinted from Russell and Hutzel (2007).



AN EXAMPLE: Curriculum and Instruction with Eighth-Graders

This article describes a situation in which the proposed concepts of social and emotional learning coupled with service-learning and art education were included in a curriculum unit and implemented during two sequential years in a private middle school near Akron, Ohio. Julia Gross, the school's art teacher, developed and implemented the curriculum with her eighth-grade students (see Figure 2), who partnered with pre-kindergarten children in the same school building. This article will emphasize the second-year experience, as Mrs. Gross worked out some problems, resulting in greater impact for the project and the students.

This article considers potential outcomes in addition to SEL competencies in art education, namely the students' positions as role models in the experience. The following presents an analysis and interpretation of the learning experience for the eighth-graders, including (1) the teacher's description of the experience; (2) analysis of outcomes related to SEL core competencies; and (3) possibilities for further engaging social and emotional learning in the middle school art classroom.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVE: Role Models and Behavior Changes

I find middle school children at an age of vast change, facing challenging personal and social issues. In the art classroom they have an opportunity to express their emotions while socializing with one another. Through service-learning and social and emotional learning, I attempted to address these challenges head-on and was surprised myself at the outcomes.

When I asked the students to begin thinking about personal assets, I quickly realized that they had a difficult time coming up with their lists. It seemed embarrassing for them to write down words that described good character qualities, as if this was such a different classroom exercise. Additionally, middle school students consider it rather agonizing to venture away from the crowd, especially when it comes to evaluating one's self. The eighth-graders did not want to be outcasts, so being the first to take things seriously was a dangerous choice. Finally realizing they were in a safe space where little judgment from others would be tolerated, they worked their way through considering and communicating their assets.

I was pleasantly surprised when the students I thought would not participate at all ended up being some of the most involved with their pre-kindergarten partners. This is when I began to realize the potential of service-learning and social and emotional learning to address classroom behavior, particularly through collaborative artmaking focused on participants' qualities. One particular young girl had behavioral troubles in most of her classes, including the art class. She commented several times before and

Making Connections, Making Art

Big Idea: Connections **Related Topic:** Collaboration

Essential Questions: How can we learn about others and ourselves in creating a collaborative artwork? How can art create connections?

Lessons 1 and 2: Introduction to Project

Introduce *service-learning* and *assets* by discussing how students might evaluate the strengths of themselves and their younger partners. Eighth graders choose a word to represent the experience.

Discussion. What are your expectations in working with the pre-kindergarten students? What do you think will be most difficult/enjoyable about this project? What do you think you might learn from this project? Is there anything that you are nervous about in working with the younger students?

Emotion Word Logo. Students design a feeling word based on its meaning and implications.

Lesson 3: Introduction to Service-Learning Partners

Eighth grade students ask their younger partners questions such as: What do you like to do at home? Did you do anything fun this summer? What is your favorite thing about school?

Painting the Background. Each student pair receives a square canvas, paints the background in a color chosen by the pre-kindergarten students, and paints a letter of the chosen word.

Lesson 4: Personal Asset Inventory (Recognizing personal strengths)

Asset Collage. Without the youth partners, eighth graders look for images and words that describe their strengths in printed materials and create a collage representing their positive traits.

Lesson 5: Partner's Asset Inventory (Recognizing strengths of others)

Adding Younger Students' Assets. One eighth grader reads aloud *City Green* by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan. The eighth graders work with their younger partners to identify a word to describe the pre-kindergartner. The pairs use rub-off letters to imprint the identified word onto their canvas and share with the class.

Lesson 6: In-Progress Reflection

Journal Prompts. What was your reaction to your pre-kindergarten student as you started working with them? Choose a word that describes how you felt as you worked with your partner. What was easy/difficult while you worked with your partner?

Lesson 7: Finishing Collaborative Art Piece

The pairs use glitter and other supplies to decorate the canvas. One eighth grader reads aloud *Alligator Arrived With Apples: A Potluck Alphabet Feast* by Crescent Dragonwagon.

Journal Prompts. What will we do when problems arise? How do we negotiate strategies together?

Lesson 8: Reflection, Make-up Day

Journal Prompts. How was this past week's interaction different or the same as other interactions you have had with your partner? How did you solve problems that arose? How did you feel when problems occurred? How are you feeling now that the project is almost done?

Lesson 9: Recognition

Students recognized for their work in school-wide assembly. Local newspaper and televised news programs should be invited to participate.

Lesson 10: Final Reflection

Journal Prompts. How did you feel about working with the pre-kindergarten students? How did you feel when you saw your work being recognized? How do you think the pre-kindergarten students felt?

Figure 2. Service-Learning Unit Plan to Promote Social and Emotional Learning.

during the project that she could not work with young children and had no desire to do so. She ended up being the most willingly silly and creative student with the pre-kindergarten children.

Watching my students interact with their younger partners, I noticed the pre-kindergarten students brought honesty, vulnerability, and individuality that eighth-grade students often struggle with as teenagers. These assets were present when the pre-kindergartners asked the eighth-graders to join in their free-style dancing ritual at the end of class. The eighth-graders hesitantly joined in the fun, but they quickly felt the freedom to be enthusiastic as the pre-kindergartners modeled this for them. The freedom and wonder the pre-kindergarten students demonstrated assisted in the behavioral changes I saw in the eighth-grade students. Students were able to focus on becoming a role model partially through the pre-kindergarten students being vulnerable and enthusiastic.

I was surprised and pleased with the students' ability to problem solve, their willingness to make choices, and their interest in fully participating in and exploring multiple ideas and possibilities. The second year I implemented this curriculum, I stepped into the role of facilitator more fully, and gave up more of the decision-making to the students.

We began the project by critiquing the quilt, the art piece created the previous year. We decided that project was too complex for the pre-kindergarten students to fully participate in the process. We brainstormed as a group to think of an art project the pre-kindergarten students could fully partner in making with us. In this conversation, we discussed the idea of collaboration. The students came up with a variety of words that described what working in a group might look like in searching for a word that could become the foundation of our collaborative art piece. Even though the pre-kindergartners were more involved the second year, I realize now that this was still not a fully collaborative exercise, as the eighth-graders made most of the decisions.

The eighth-graders came up with the word "helpful" as a symbol of working as a collaborative group. They also decided to paint each letter of the word separately in teams, one pre-kindergarten student and one eighth-grade student. Each pair painted a letter and background on their canvas and then created a colorful design to add to the letters with glitter paint. The eighth-graders also decided to add their chosen asset words in letterpress,



Word Wall in Mrs. Gross' classroom.



through a rubbing technique, to provide an easy medium for the younger students to use.

As the project neared completion, the eighth-grade students decided to create a poem to include with the paintings. Each painting had a letter of the word "HELPFUL" and also included a line of their poem. The poem stated: **H**onored to share; **E**ager to help; **L**oving others; **P**layful with friends; **F**un to be with; **U**plifts one another; **L**oved as yourself. The eighth-graders learned to be helpful as they collaborated with the younger students, and the students all learned to brainstorm and make changes to the original plan as they went along.

Strategies offered to reinforce the goals of self-esteem, hope, responsibility, empathy, and resiliency are varied and connect easily to strategies already employed in the art classroom.

SEL Outcomes for the Eighth-Graders

The students were gathered around tables in groups of four or more. In one group, there were several pre-kindergarten children working closely with their eighth-grade buddies. In another group, there were four eighth-graders without younger partners sitting around the table. In this group, a boy with the word "funny" drawn in front of him to represent his personality was poking the boy across from him in the forehead with a pencil. Across the room at the same time, another boy was helping his younger partner carry a large piece of paper across the room, gently encouraging her as to where to walk. This observational contrast highlighted the ability of this age group to exhibit varying behaviors based on circumstance: in the one case a boy who was responsible for a younger child was able to act as a role model and leader; in the other case, a group of eighth-graders who had no younger partners to watch over participated in unacceptable school behavior.

The impact of this experience on the eighth-graders' developmental characteristics is relevant to the five core competencies of social and emotional learning (SEL), including self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2004). Others besides the eighth-graders were likely impacted by the service-learning project, including the pre-kindergartners, teachers, school personnel, parents, and other students in the school—to differing degrees. However, development of understandings, skills, and potential dispositions were likely greatest in the eighth-graders, who led the project as role models of the pre-kindergarten students and directly addressed the social and emotional competencies through their collaboration.

Analysis of students' written and verbal comments, observations, and Mrs. Gross' reflections reveal the eighth-graders developed understandings, skills, and dispositions related to the five SEL competencies. These outcomes seemed especially strong when observing the eighth-graders interacting with the younger students, but were also evident in students' written journals. Analysis of the experience does not, however, conclude certain SEL skill development, as the eighth-graders would have to be observed in another situation to determine transference of their learning.

Nevertheless, students' behavior as positive role models and quotes in their journals do suggest development in each of the five SEL categories. Self-awareness, social-awareness, and relationship skills—especially in relation to acting as a role model for younger children—were most strongly indicated by students' written quotes, choosing particular words to express their emotions and understandings, while the remaining two competencies were not as strong in this experience. The first competency, self-awareness, was indicated through students describing themselves as “annoyed, frustrated, disappointed, and nervous,” and “proud, connected, and nervous” while working with the pre-kindergartners. Social-awareness was the second strongest outcome for the eighth-graders, as one stated, “I am starting to understand



him and his personality. He talks a lot.” Another student wrote, “They may of [sic.] felt uncomfortable in front of the kids,” showing this student's ability to recognize the younger student's possible perspective. Finally, the eighth-graders' behavior indicated an understanding of their own relationship skills during the service-learning project, one stating, “I felt more like a friend to him than before and I talked to him more.” Another student wrote, “I felt our relationship is getting better with better communication.” Having expressed their challenges, disappointments, and frustrations with their first encounter with the quiet pre-kindergartners, the eighth-graders realized toward the end of the project their development of relationships through ongoing communication with the younger students.

Possibilities for Addressing Social and Emotional Learning in Art Education

While this experience revealed positive results for the eighth-graders through this particular strategy, the opportunity for art education and for social and emotional learning to support learning across the middle school curriculum is profound. Cohen (1999) alluded to this possibility:

In recent years, teachers and researchers have rediscovered what good teachers and parents have known for many years: that knowledge of ourselves and others as well as the capacity to use this knowledge to solve problems creatively provides an essential foundation for both academic learning and the capacity to become an active, constructive citizen. (p. 3)

The connection of social and emotional learning with collaborative artmaking has great potential to support school reform movements that target middle school age groups, particularly the combination of an asset-based, collaborative approach to artmaking that directly addresses social and emotional competencies to promote success in middle school children. Art plays a unique role in this equation, as the process of collaboratively creating visual images requires groups of students to negotiate meaning through social interactions focused on

emotional symbols and words. The process can be especially rewarding for middle school children to step into the position of role models.

Within social and emotional learning literature is a body of work addressing the development of middle school children. This work concludes that social and emotional learning at this age of vast change positively impacts the development of responsibility (Charney, Crawford, & Wood, 1999), encouragement of empathy, and fostering of self-esteem and hope toward personal resilience (Brooks, 1999). Acting as role models allowed the eighth-graders to practice several of these developments. However, the classroom culture is most significant to students feeling comfortable taking the risks associated with such leadership.

We must recognize that students will learn most effectively in an atmosphere in which they feel safe and do not fear being ridiculed or humiliated, in which they are challenged and assisted to meet realistic goals, in which they feel teachers genuinely care about them and respect their individuality, and in which learning is seen as an exciting adventure rather than as drudgery. (Brooks, 1999, p. 65)

In our experience with Mrs. Gross' eighth-grade students, the atmosphere she created was significant to the success of the learning process and the eighth-graders' ability to step into the position of role models and leaders. In the opening vignette, the evidence of this sense of safety was revealed in the students' ability to assert their own ideas for future collaborative art projects.

Strategies offered to reinforce the goals of self-esteem, hope, responsibility, empathy, and resiliency are varied and connect easily to strategies already employed in the art classroom. Charney, Crawford and Wood (1999) offer six particular strategies, including: (1) classroom organization, (2) the Circle of Power and Respect (which is a structured routine of interaction), (3) rules and logical consequences, (4) academic choice, (5) guided discovery, and (6) assessment and reporting to parents. While these strategies are very specific and direct, the art classroom offers a space where rules and risk-taking through exploration are constantly balanced. As such, the art

classroom provides an obvious space in which students can experience these strategies (presented here in direct response to the six strategies just stated) through (1) the art room's organization of work spaces and media; (2) routines of art criticism and interactions around art production and critique; (3) the art teacher's specific rules and consequences; (4) choice in what students will make, what materials students will use, and how students might respond to others' art; (5) the art teacher's role facilitating artmaking through informal guiding activities and discussions; and (6) assessment of artwork and exhibition of finished pieces. These strategies are common in art classrooms, but could be enhanced through more direct instruction that includes components of social and emotional learning.

Discussion

The potential for social and emotional learning in art education is vast, including our proposal for service-learning and collaborative artmaking as a specific approach to address the core competencies. In a previous article in which we projected a marriage of art education and social and emotional learning, Russell and Hutzel (2007) stated: "Art educators already teach social-emotional skills. After all, we know that much of art throughout history engaged social issues in one way or another. Moreover, the creation of and responses to art involves emotional dimensions in some respect" (p. 7). However, our research provided no literature sources that directly connected art education with social and emotional learning. In addition to this connection, however, we found in implementing the curriculum additional outcomes that are worthy of discussing.

Two related themes touched on earlier deserve further discussion in closing: *role modeling* and *asset-based collaboration*. The leadership that the eighth-graders provided to the pre-kindergartners included performing, and therefore modeling, the roles of a teacher and caregiver to the children. In addition, their role modeling influenced the learning of both the models and the imitators. For example, how teachers and caregivers should behave, even when teenagers, was likely reinforced for the (pre-kindergarten) imitators. And how teachers and caregivers should behave was reinforced for the (eighth-grade) models, as well. Another dimension was added for the teenagers when they were asked to perform the role with real children in real time and space. For many adolescents this would mean a primary role reversal—from imitator to model, from receiver to giver—particularly in the context of the school day and curriculum. Of course, many adolescents are mentors and caregivers to younger siblings at home, at least some of the time. As a result, the learning for these adolescents would seem to have been more profound or significant than for the younger children. For example, the eighth-graders found themselves in a situation where they felt obligated to *act out* many of the SEL competencies outlined earlier, rather than "act out"—try out whatever immediate impulses moved them at the time, as youngsters often do, even when serious emotional issues are not at work. By adopting the "adult" role, the eighth-graders (1) practiced socially and emotionally responsible behaviors to themselves and to others, (2) received recognition and encouragement for doing so, and (3) perhaps gained a new-found appreciation

for the trials and obligations of their own teachers and guardians.

The idea of asset-based collaboration implies that all partners have different resources (understandings, knowledge, skills, and dispositions) to contribute to the group effort. But the age and comparable abilities of the pre-kindergartners raises the question of what assets they brought to the adolescent-led art project. The answer might be "relatively little" in light of a young child's understandings, knowledge, and skills. But if considering their *dispositions* and, paradoxically, their *need* for care and mentoring, the number of assets grows. First, consider *dispositions*: pre-kindergartners have a natural tendency to wonder at new but simple things. They are unpretentious and tend to engage in new activities without undue fear. All of these qualities are typically suppressed to some degree by the adolescent angst to fit in. Second, consider *need*: logically, a "need" is the opposite of an "asset." But in a wider sense a need can serve as an "asset" in relation to our psycho-social need to give to others, the need to be needed. The children's need for care and tutoring was an "asset" brought to the partnership as a genuine *opportunity* for the eighth-graders to give, to be needed.

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