

“CARDS BY KIDS”©: A PROJECT OF ART AS THERAPY

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I have worked with emotionally disturbed children as a teacher for the past eight years. Some of the most difficult obstacles I've tried to help these children overcome are low self esteem, insecurity, frustration, and the inability to cooperate with peers and adults. Few educational experiences prepare the teacher to deal with this. Much emphasis is made on how to observe, record and/or diagnose the problems, but little is taught about how to remedy these problems. Over the years, however, I've observed that all of these children relate to the visual arts. I would like to share with you my experiences and the special projects and techniques that have worked for me in helping kids feel good about themselves.

I was educated as a special education teacher and certified to teach learning disabled, educable mentally handicapped, and behavior disordered children. I received no training in art nor were the visual arts taught as a way to work with these children. Art Therapy, in general, is an observation after the fact. Little is offered on the use of art and its processes as a means of therapy.

After graduation I entered the Peace Corps where I spent two years living and working in an isolated rural area of South America developing special education programs and designing learning materials. I returned to the States and worked in a special school for severe and profound mentally handicapped children. It was there that I first began to observe the effects of art on children. I had the opportunity to work with a very gifted teacher whose approach to communicating with these children was through the use of the visual arts. These children often had to be dealt with in a physical way, but when art projects were involved, everyone could communicate and relate.

My next experience, teaching on a Navajo Reservation, placed me in a position where I could use what I had previously observed. I worked with an Art Therapist who shared a thought about a project he used individually with emotionally disturbed children. As the school year began I realized I needed to develop a specific means of communicating with my children. Most were unable to read or write, a few had no command of the English language, and I had no command of Navajo. But all of these children were gifted artistically. After much frustration,

I walked into class one morning remembering what the art therapist had shared, tore off a long sheet of butcher paper, positioned the kids in their own space, supplied them with colors, and asked them to draw what they were feeling. The response was instantaneous. Each child understood what was asked of him/her. There were no guidelines or preconceived notions, only a group of children responding to a request and expressing their feelings. (One restriction should be noted: there was a time limit.) The success of this response prompted me to continue the activity on a daily basis. Each day a new topic was presented. At the end of each drawing session we discussed their drawings as a group. Initially group sharing was very difficult. For many of these children, it was their first experience in speaking before their peers. As time passed, they became more confident and comfortable with this process.

As a result of this experience, a project was developed later in the year that would enable the children to express their feelings to their parents and community. In this project, very restrictive discipline measures were placed on the children, like restrictions an artist would face working in a commercial studio. Deadlines were imposed for phases of the project and a specific format was chosen. A series of topics were presented to the children based on a central theme. This theme was the common causes of behavior problems. The children chose and developed their own concepts. The methods used in executing these concepts were the same techniques that a commercial artist might use in developing a TV commercial. The children did their initial sketches, looked at them, analyzed them, dropped certain things, added more content and detail, and reillustrated over and over again until they had developed complete thoughts that totally expressed the subject matter. Throughout the process, no attempt was made by me to edit their drawings or change their ideas. All decisions were based on group discussion and changes were by group consensus. The result of this process was an extremely professional presentation that retained all the qualities and innocence of a child's work and expression. This resulted in people looking at their work on a different level. Their drawings were a powerful expression and they communicated to the community what they were trying to communicate without a language barrier.

This further strengthened my opinion that using art as a means of therapy was a valid and necessary teaching tool. And that what I had been taught about art as a child had little to do with what creativity, expression, and communication is truly about.

In 1986, I was asked to join the staff of a Residential Treatment Center with an on-site school. It was unique in the sense that it is one of the few CRTS programs in our state that has its own school. Here

I was confronted with a different situation. The majority of the children were behaviorally disordered as a result of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Few of my children had “mental disabilities,” some were even “gifted.” The common denominator among all of them was their inability to communicate, low self-esteem, unwillingness to cooperate, and lack of respect. As in my previous teaching situation, I began each day with an art journal. We now refer to this as the “Living News.”* The “Living News” project is slightly different than the approach I used previously. They have to express a certain topic by drawing and by writing. Being so dramatic, these children are able to express themselves well, but due to sexual and cooperation problems, they need their own sheet of paper and their own space, rather than working on the same sheet. The process begins with the child using a ruler to border his/her page. This bordering acts as the only restrictive measure and establishes a routine and discipline. Bordering helps to isolate the subject matter and establish a level of importance. To enhance the child’s self-esteem, each sheet is dated and signed. The topics are thought of ahead of time and done weekly, so that they are related in some way. Topics range from “My favorite thing to do” and “The first sign of Spring” to more complicated and abstract issues such as “Control,” “Color,” “Pain,” and “Fear.” These stronger emotional topics are presented to help the children become aware of the abuse they have been subjected to. At the end of the school week, the children put these together as a book and share their weekly book with the group. Sometimes this group sharing will last a long time and become a therapeutic task group. If a child feels uncomfortable with sharing these feelings, he is not required to do so. These books are hung in the class weekly and previous ones set aside. The children enjoy going through the books after months have passed. They see how much they have changed and grown. At the end of the school year or when a child is discharged, he/she takes them along. The journal is also available to other staff and therapists for use in individual therapy sessions.

In 1987, as the holidays approached, another idea began to formulate that would help them deal with the stress that is often evoked during this period. We were looking for a project that would be fun and at the same time address their anxiety about the holidays. This resulted in “Cards by Kids”©, traditional and nontraditional greeting cards by children who are expressing their feelings through art as a way of dealing with their problems. When I first presented this idea to the children, it was met with enthusiasm, excitement, and endless questions. We began the project in November. Looking for ideas required a brainstorming session. Dozens of questions were posed about

* The “Living News” name is compliments of Rob Etigson

the holidays. What does Christmas mean to you?; What color is Christmas?; Where does Christmas come from?; How does it feel?; etc. All ideas were accepted and written on the blackboard. Based on the written ideas, each child drew six designs for a possible card. After the initial designs were completed, the children met as a group. They looked at all of the designs (total of 54 designs) and chose, by consensus, the six best designs representing their feelings about the holidays. Designs ranged from dinosaurs and space people to traditional Christmas trees and stockings. After the basic illustrations were chosen, a method was developed for reproducing these ideas in quantity. (This process took a couple of weeks. During that time period, the word got out and people began placing orders. We had customers but no product.)

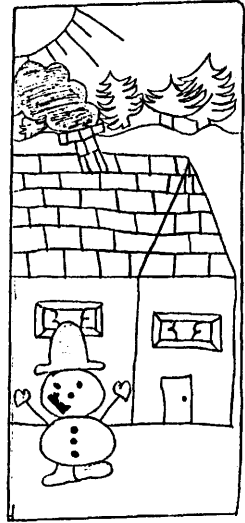
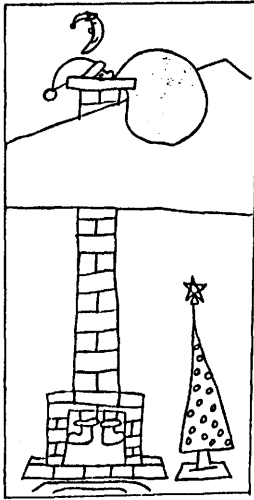
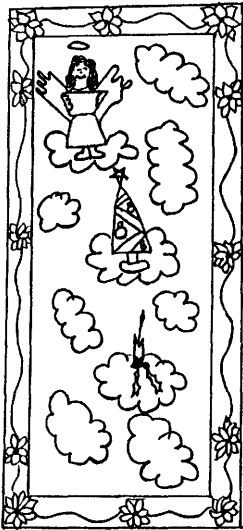
Teams were set up according to the ages, abilities, and skills of the children. Graphic artist, color, money management, and advertising and packaging teams were created. The children chose each other according to their abilities. Staff members randomly joined the teams. By being on teams, it was hoped that the children would develop a new identity, gain peer acceptance and support, increase their self-respect, and become more responsible. In the following weeks, the classroom changed to a professional business, but learning continued. Reading, writing, and arithmetic took on a new meaning.

As the children became more comfortable, the work began to flow and emotions began to surface. One child might become depressed because he had no family. The group, children and staff alike, would deal with this problem together and still keep working. The children also began to realize that there was love all around them from staff and peers.

As Christmas approached, the cards were packaged and the orders were filled. It was an immediate hit with the public. The excitement over the success was immense. For the first time in their lives, many of the children were proud. The feeling of self-accomplishment was tremendous. As a result of their efforts they felt accepted by others.

After the holidays, we had the happy task of trying to decide how to spend our money. We made our decision by consensus. They bought school jackets the first year. This year they are going to an amusement park and purchase school T-shirts.

As teachers and child care workers, it is always nice to succeed. Our work is hard, stressful and often frustrating. Having a chance to share these experiences gives us an opportunity to explore new ideas and find better ways to communicate with the children. I am proud of our success and hope others will also share their ideas and successes in journal articles.



“Cards by Kids”©

A special project by and for the Children of Escuela Cielo Azul, Taos, N.M.

Hand made by Monica & Maxine, age 13; Stanley and Suzanne, age 12; Nicky, age 11; Sherry, age 10; David and Emerson, age 9; and Jeremiah, age 7.

