

Katrina Healing Arts Program: A Schoolteacher's Perspective

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Katrina blew into our lives and irrevocably changed everything. For the first five weeks we picked up the shattered pieces, worrying about the children waiting for the call to return to school. In the interim, I researched and contacted the International Child Art Foundation and decided to participate in ICAF's Katrina Healing Arts Program. The idea of art seemed such a logical way to make sense of the trauma that was Katrina.

Our school's neighborhood was particularly hard hit by Katrina and the majority of my students lost most, if not all, of their possessions and in some instances pets and family members as well. Children are particularly vulnerable in times such as these as they tend to internalize and personalize traumatic events. ICAF believes that art can provide a window into the experience of the trauma, revealing its neuropsychological nature and because trauma affects mind and body, creative expression is an important piece in trauma intervention, including the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder. ICAF's Katrina Healing Arts Program fosters the emotional and social needs of the children, especially the students with verbal weaknesses as it allows them to capitalize on their visual strengths and provides them with the means to relate their experiences.

That first day back, I fully expected 'war stories' and was rather apprehensive about dealing with the emotions these may evoke. I was stunned when the students discussed the usual topics such as TV shows and sleepovers. I got them to doodle their "Worry" – where it lived (on the shoulders, under the bed, behind the ears), when it was most active (in the middle of the night, when the sun comes up) and what the Worry worries about. This activity allowed them to share their worries in a totally non-judgmental, non-threatening environment but from this I was able to learn a lot about their fears and anxieties.

It is always a treat for my students to be allowed to paint so the next time I saw them they were given a variety of art materials and asked to create 'hurricane art'. While drawing and painting they spoke amongst themselves and to me - sharing by explaining or drawing attention to things on their paper. One boy drew a house surrounded by a force field to shield it from wind and rain. The house he drew was his neighbor's home that had been destroyed. It was a sixth grader's way of telling his friend that he cared. One girl drew her family huddled on the roof with the washer and dryer floating by and on the back she wrote, "I worry that my home will flood again." Some found it really hard to complete their artwork because they were focused on minute details like a crack on the sidewalk.

The second week brought with it a change of emotion – some of the students were upset and angry. Upset because their mothers were crying and their dads were yelling. Angry because their homes had been destroyed, angry because they had to share a home with others, and angry because McDonald's had a limited menu. This was a perfect time to write a letter to Katrina. They were really excited about this activity because for once they were instructed to forget all the social niceties and say whatever they wanted to her. They had to illustrate their letters and Katrina emerged in all shapes and sizes - and very ugly. My younger students portrayed Katrina as a hideous apparition spewing filth and debris. The colors were dark and depressing, the images terrifying. It was a catharsis as the self expression allowed the children to bring their inner world to an outer world of concrete reality, providing opportunities for reflection as well as self- and peer-evaluation. While the content of the letters was very sad it prompted a great deal of humor as each child tried to outdo the other in the comments and the outrageousness of Katrina's look!

In our classroom we are very aware of the mind/body connection and have long practiced breathing techniques and guided imagery. One of our favorite activities is to visualize our most favorite place in the whole world. This allowed us to discuss the idea of a safe place and how relaxing it is to visit such a place. One student was moved to tears by this activity and could not draw what he had visualized because his sanctuary was his home that was no longer there. The girls who had had such a problem completing their art the week before were so excited with the colors in the new work. Katie compared her hurricane art to her sanctuary art and commented, "Look, how depressed I was last week!"

If there is one thing we have learned, it is that it is easier to give than to receive. People have been so overwhelmingly, unbelievably generous that one begins to yearn to give back. When an earthquake devastated northern Pakistan my students' first thought was "How can we help?" Ever the educator, this was a perfect moment to take time to reflect - even though we have a long way to go, we have come so far. As art transcends language, we felt we were in a unique position to give encouragement to those children via our art.

Katrina changed everything, our lives will never be the same but I believe that through our art the healing process has started, giving us visual markers of just how far we have come.

I teach the same students from grades 2 through 6, and was able to do a follow-up activity in the fall of 2008, three years after Katrina. This activity was to become a part of ICAF's "Children of Katrina" exhibition at the 2009 Education Without Borders conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Our neighborhood was once again threatened by a major hurricane and the children were understandably concerned so we once again wrote letters to Katrina, this time we wrote her thank-you notes. By focusing on the good things that have happened since Katrina we came up with an amazing list. Apart from the kindness and generosity of strangers, the new roof and playground equipment at school, one student shared that he used to live in a trailer but now he has a brick home, another that she now has a dad as her mother married one of the volunteers! They once again personified Katrina - what a transformation and extreme makeover - she was rather attractive, dressed in bright colors with matching jewelry and instead of being surrounded by dirt and debris she had flowers swirling around her!

By comparing and discussing their previous artwork depicting the same disaster, I observed that the students who had participated in the original healing art process had minimized and sanitized the event, students who had not - still painted disturbing images - lending credence to the theory that the initial art had been of great benefit to them.

I asked these same children to combine the images of the storm with their current emotions and was rewarded with some poignant pieces of art that were both gloomy and optimistic. As important to the healing process, were the discussions and explanations that occurred during the execution of this project. Students were able to objectively consider the damage to their environment and to positively predict the future. It provided an opportunity for introspection and reflection and afforded insights into the affective and expressive quality of their thoughts.

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