Making Art Together: A Class's Collaborative Art Experience

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Boston University
MAKING ART TOGETHER:

A CLASS’S COLLABORATIVE ART EXPERIENCE

by

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This action research project explores the impact of a collaborative lesson on the behavior and relationships of students in a combined 3rd/4th grade class at St. Mary of the Lake School in Chicago. Students in this class exhibit immature behavior and unhealthy habits of relating to one another. The research aimed to discover the effects that working collaboratively might have on students’ behavior and relationships. Using principles of cooperative learning and community art, the researcher designed a collaborative lesson for a unit on symbolism. Students used bottle caps to create a large hanging mural of a class symbol. The results of this study support the results from other studies that indicate that cooperative learning can have positive effects on students’ relationships and motivation, but negative effects are also likely. The results also indicate that thorough planning and preparation is necessary for collaborative art lessons to be a success.

*Keywords*: cooperative learning, collaborative art, elementary art, community art
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1. Introduction to the Study

Background to the Study

In the art classroom, the practice of art making often reflects the habits of professional artists. This is a process of discovery in which students “[find] out about the world and [them]selves through art” (Feldman, 1996, p. 2). Art making in the classroom is traditionally a process of self-discovery carried out in a social context. Students have opportunities to interact with each other, share their artwork, and give and receive feedback. In the end however, the artwork is created by and belongs to the individual.

This was not always the case. In the Middle Ages, young apprentice artists worked cooperatively in guilds under the direction of a master artisan (Efland, 1990). A cathedral might take centuries to build, employing generations of artisans in the process; it was a work of art made for the community that served a social purpose (Stokstad, 2002). The sense of pride and ownership that the community felt for this massive undertaking must have been tremendous.

Modern art does not center on the construction of cathedrals, but that does not mean that there is no longer room for collaboration and cooperation. Among professional artists, there are some who choose to make art that serves a social purpose and has a positive impact on a community or group of people. Collaborative artwork is designed to empower the community while creating a work of art for the entire community to enjoy (Poethig, 2008). Large-scale collaborative pieces bring an entire community together in pursuit of a common goal, just as building a cathedral did centuries ago.

Collaborative art has not been a common practice in the history of traditional art education, despite the positive effects that it seems to have on a community (Hagaman,
A traditional art education model that excludes collaborative art making might be missing a valuable relationship-building tool.

For almost six years, this researcher has been teaching art in a small Catholic elementary school on the north side of Chicago. Historically, the size of the school building limited the number of classes to one per grade level. Five years ago the administration initiated a combined grade gifted/accelerated program in select grades. High-performing students from grades 3 and 4 were put into one classroom, while students from those grades who receive Title I services (targeted assistance for students who perform below grade level) were put together in another room. The same system was used for other grade levels. This decision has had an ongoing negative impact on the students. This year, it is particularly noticeable in the 3rd/4th grade Title I class. It has a significantly higher percentage of students with emotional, behavioral, and/or learning disorders. This research aimed to discover if collaborative art might be a means of increasing the sense of community and a way to build healthier, positive relationships between students in that class.

**Research Goals**

The primary goals of this project were curricular development and classroom management. Through the research and implementation of a collaborative art unit, this researcher aimed to expand and diversify the existing curriculum. Ideally, this project was designed to provide the art teacher with the means to improve student relations. Even if this did not occur, at least the process of collecting data on student behaviors and perceptions gave the researcher insight into the group dynamic. This insight can be used to make more purposeful and effective classroom management decisions.
Research Questions

This action research project aimed to uncover the ways, if any, that the behaviors and perceptions of students in a 3rd/4th grade Title I class at St. Mary of the Lake School might change through participation in a collaborative art project. The process was divided into two parts: exploring best practice and evaluating impact.

For the purposes of exploring best practice, research was conducted to discover what approaches could be used to create collaborative works of art with elementary students. The research identified which classroom management strategies might be specific to the collaborative art process. Critical for consideration were whether the structure of a collaborative art unit might influence students’ behavior and relationships and what approach to collaborative art would be most effective in the classroom context.

Conceptual Framework

Research and coding of community art and collaborative artwork implemented by artists and fellow art teachers were used to design a unit with the greatest potential for positive impact. An attempt was made to connect the unit to students’ daily experiences. The unit was then introduced into the curriculum for the 3rd/4th grade Title I class. Data was collected through observation, student self-reports, interviews, and behavior tracking charts to determine the unit’s impact (if any) on student behaviors and perceptions of each other.

In a society plagued by the intolerance of others because of race, sexual orientation, immigration status, and religion, we need future citizens who will treat each other with dignity and work together for the common good. The job of an art teacher does not consist solely of teaching art. This researcher believes it is also her responsibility to
instill in students the values of kindness and respect so that they work towards a better society instead of creating further conflict. Recognizing this, this researcher made the commitment to work for social justice in any teaching context.

Experiences working with disadvantaged and at-risk student populations convinced this researcher of education’s potential, in the words of Horace Mann, to be “the great equalizer.” At its best, education can help anyone, regardless of wealth or social status, better his or her life. Often, however, public education falls short of such a lofty goal. Rather than break negative cycles of systemic problems like poverty, inequality in education serves only to maintain the status quo. In this researcher’s current teaching position, overcoming inequality means finding innovative ways to build better relationships and a more positive community among students in the 3rd/4th grade Title I class.

**Theoretical Framework**

The foundation of the philosophy of collaborative art is that the work produced is better when a group of people works together. Less noticeable but no less important are the social growth and developmental benefits that occur and the relationships that form as a result of interactions during the collaborative process (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006). In this way, collaborative art resembles the practice of cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning has its roots in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky suggests that children are able to accomplish far more in collaboration with each other than they might be able to achieve independently. In a collaborative environment, students with more advanced skills can help their less advanced peers complete a task that they would find impossible on their own. The more
advanced students gain greater mastery of a concept as they demonstrate and explain it to another student.

Cooperative learning is widely accepted in the educational world as a highly effective teaching and learning strategy for students of all ages. Its benefits are not restricted to academic or intellectual gains. Early studies, such as those by Moskowitz, Malvin, Schaeffer, & Schaps (1983) and Stevens & Slavin (1995) demonstrate that children who work in cooperative learning environments develop more positive attitudes towards peers and school. These children also demonstrate a higher overall level of social maturity than students who learned in more traditional teacher-centered environments.

Informal cooperative learning takes place in the art room as students talk with and help each other during the individual art making process. The teacher can also formalize cooperative learning through a large piece of collaborative artwork built through the contributions of all students. These more structured collaborative lessons are unique in that they provide students with tangible evidence of the fact that they can accomplish more when they work together. Large-scale collaborative art pieces are not solely the domain of art education. A similar tradition exists in the world of community activism and social justice; it is known as “community art.”

Rebecca Yenawine is a community artist and adjunct professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art. She defines community art as “art that is made through a collaborative process, by a community, about a social justice issue that impacts their lives and has social significance beyond their lives” (Yenawine, 2009). As Yenawine (2009) explains, community members are drawn into discussions about social justice and their relationships with each other as they participate in the creation of community art. This is
different from the traditional model of art education that emphasizes “techniques and art processes” (Yenawine, 2009). It is, according to Jan Cohen-Cruz (2002), “as much about the process of involving people in the making of the work as the finished object itself.”

Part of the collaborative art making process is teaching the participants how to work together. The finished work of art is a tangible representation of the community healing or empowerment that occurred during its creation.

Few studies have examined collaborative art in the classroom in light of its impact on the student community. Some notable exceptions are the action research of Cooper & Sjostrom (2006) and studies by Perr (1987), Murphy-Pak (2012), and Bobick (2008). Each emphasizes the social impact of cooperation/collaboration in the art room and provides a variety of frameworks for the design of collaborative artwork. Bobick’s study is of particular interest because she supplemented teacher observations with student feedback to evaluate the success of collaborative art lessons.

Significance of the Study

In a society that values individual effort and achievement, it should come as no surprise that pedagogical practices in art education tend to gravitate towards individual art production (Hagaman, 1990). It is important to recognize however, that this is not the only method of art making. This study demonstrates that there can be a place and a purpose for collaborative art making in the art curriculum. For art teachers who do see the value of collaborative art, this study is valuable for providing them with the resources they need to design collaborative art lessons for their own teaching contexts.

This study also points to the need for art educators to address larger issues than merely visual aesthetics and art making techniques. As educators, we should be just as
concerned with children’s well being as we are with what they are learning. Children come into the art classroom at varying stages of readiness to learn and create. They may have behavioral or emotional disabilities. They may have learning disabilities, physical disabilities, or an unstable home life. All of these factors affect how children learn, but they also influence how children interact with each other (Stevens & Slavin, 1995). Working with peers in a positive and productive way not only makes for a more pleasant art making environment, it also prepares children to be better citizens.

Whether or not collaborative art impacts students’ behavior and perceptions of each other, it can be a powerful way for students to realize how much more they can accomplish when they work together. The finished artwork is something individual students and the class as a whole can be proud of.

**Limitations of the Study**

Time was a primary constraint on this study. The 3rd/4th Title I class comes to art only twice a week for 45 minutes per class. Combined with the deadlines of the research itself, this left a limited amount of time to implement the collaborative art lesson and collect the necessary data. Student interviews and any student feedback were brief by necessity.

This study was also constrained by spatial and monetary concerns. The art program does not have a budget, so the available materials dictated the design of collaborative art lessons. Additionally, art classes are held on the school stage. There is no substantial storage space available. This limited the size and scope of the collaborative unit and accompanying artwork.
Conclusion

This action research project intended to use collaborative art as a means of positively influencing student relationships. The research also provided the researcher with an opportunity to reflect on current teaching practices and learn from other education professionals. This experiment in collaborative art will hopefully inspire other art teachers to consider the impact their own lessons might have on the classroom community.

Definition of Terms

**Collaborative art.** For the purposes of this paper, the term “collaborative art” is used to refer art that is made in a classroom context with the participation of all students with varying levels of teacher guidance.

**Community art.** This paper uses Yenawine’s (2009) definition of community art. It is “art that is made through a collaborative process, by a community, about a social justice issue that impacts their lives and has social significance beyond their lives” (Yenawine, 2009). In this study, “community art” will be used to specifically refer to an artist-directed collaborative art process that takes place outside a classroom.

**Social justice.** There are many variant definitions and approaches to social justice. For the sake of simplicity, the term “social justice” in this paper describes justice within an institution, where all members are treated equally and have equal opportunities. It is based on the argument that since “[no] one chooses to be born into a disadvantaged social group, or with natural disabilities…no one should have to pay for the costs imposed by those disadvantageous circumstances” (Kymlicka, 1989, in North, 2006, p. 512). This researcher’s guiding principle of teaching for social justice, then, is to teach in
such a way as to help students overcome the negative influences of circumstances that are out of their control.
2. Literature Review

The 3rd/4th grade Title I class at St. Mary of the Lake school has a high percentage of students with emotional, behavioral, and/or learning disorders. The atmosphere of the class over the course of the school year has become highly contentious, and students have a difficult time working near each other, much less together. This research aimed to discover if a collaborative art unit might be a means of increasing the sense of community and a way to build healthier, positive relationships between students in that class.

Research Question

This study attempted to determine in what ways, if any, St. Mary of the Lake School 3rd/4th grade Title 1 students’ behaviors and perceptions of each other might change through participation in collaborative art. To answer this primary question, the researcher also needed to determine what approaches could be used to create collaborative art in the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

This researcher has made her goal as an educator to work for social justice and the betterment of society through teaching art. One way that this researcher can help improve society is to train students to be good citizens who respect and value all people, even those with whom they disagree. Considering the negative, aggressive behaviors of the 3rd/4th grade Title I students that this researcher has observed over the last few years, one way these students might begin this process was to learn how to interact with each other in more positive ways.
Table 2.1. Conceptual Framework of the Researcher. This figure illustrates the experiences the researcher brings to the study and the study’s goals and methods.

During her experiences as a student and practicing artist, this researcher participated in a handful of collaborative art making opportunities. She found these to be an effective means of generating creative energy, learning new techniques, and building relationships with other participants. In the past, the art curriculum for St. Mary of the Lake has been centered on individual art making. This study was an opportunity to research and integrate group-centered methods of art production into the curriculum.
Literature Review

A classroom approach to cooperative art making can be influenced by two different practices. The first, the practice of community art, emerges from a postmodern, social approach to art making. In this tradition, the artist is not a solitary genius but a facilitator of art that is made by others. The second, the practice of cooperative learning, is part of the tradition of progressive education. Community art taught this researcher a great deal about how to use art to build relationships and bring about reconciliation within a group. Cooperative learning theory emphasizes the social and intellectual benefits of working with peers instead of individually. Cooperative learning research and collaborative art units implemented by other art educators guided the researcher in selecting strategies for effective group work and training students how to work together. The design and execution of a collaborative art-making unit for the 3rd/4th grade Title I class benefitted greatly from the practice of community art-making as well as cooperative learning theory.

Community art. Generally speaking, the term community art is used to refer to art making that occurs within a community context, generally bringing together people who might not otherwise interact, for the purposes of developing relationships, promoting social justice, and inspiring community renewal or empowerment (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006; Hutzel, 2007; Irwin, 1999; Poethig, 2008; Yenawine, 2009).

Community art provides a connecting point for people of all ages, races, and socioeconomic statuses (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006; Hutzel, 2007; Irwin, 1999; Poethig, 2008; Yenawine, 2009). While the finished art takes many forms, community art’s intentional focus on developing relationships, promoting social justice, and empowering
the community during the art making process distinguishes it from other forms of art making where the goal is only to make art (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006). Community art’s success in addressing its primary focal points, particularly that of developing relationships, made further examination of the discipline highly valuable for this study.

Relationships play a key role in community art. Irwin (1999) describes community art as a means of making meaning, listening, and understanding others. Participants must build relationships with one another and with the facilitating artist if the project is to be a success. In the process of making art together, participants learn to listen to and understand each other (Irwin, 1999). Gradually, social barriers crumble and ideologies are transformed (Yenawine, 2009). In an ideal situation, community art fosters a nurturing and caring environment in which participants feel that they are heard and understood.

**Rise of community art.** The traditional, modernist view of the artist is rooted in the Western exaltation of individualism (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996; Hagaman, 1990). The artist is perceived as a solitary genius “untouched by social, political, and economic interests” who can therefore “represent that which is true, universal, and eternal, while showing what is personal” (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996, p. 19). There are artists, however, who do not embrace this individualistic role of artist-as-genius. Recognizing that it is impossible for a person to remain detached from the world around them, these postmodern artists choose instead to engage mass culture, address environmental issues, and challenge social or political norms (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). Artists, rather than isolating themselves in a studio, work and collaborate
with members of a community. They came to be known as community artists, and the work they did was termed “community art” (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996).

**Social relevance.** The conversations that take place between participants during the creation of community art is just part of the way that community art can help people find a voice. Community artists such as Cooper and Sjostrom (2006), Hutzel (2007), Irwin (1999), and Yenawine (2009) emphasize the critical importance of a social message in community art. Focusing attention on a theme also helps reduce the pressure on artistic execution, which makes community art more accessible for non-artists (Yenawine, 2009). Participants also feel more engaged and empowered when the art that they make concerns a social issue that is important to them.

This social issue might be something as large as gang violence or discrimination, or it could be something as small as the need for a safe place for children to play. The finished artwork is relevant to the social issue in some way. For instance, when Hutzel (2007) spearheaded a mural project for the West End neighborhood of Cincinnati, violence was an issue. Rather than focus children’s discussion on violence, however, she asked the children to imagine what they would like their community to be. The resulting images and symbols were used to paint a mural in the neighborhood. In this way, community art can address a social issue indirectly by drawing attention to strengths of the community (Hutzel, 2007).

Yenawine (2009) and Hutzel (2007) emphasize the importance of recognizing and celebrating a community’s assets rather than focusing on its problems. Hutzel (2007) gives an excellent justification for using an “asset-based” as opposed to “need-based” approach when dealing with social issues (p. 306). Need-based approaches can lead to a
The community’s dependence on outside assistance, while asset-based approaches recognize the value of participants and the community in a larger context (Hutzel, 2007). Community art can address the issue of racism, for example, by illustrating the valuable contributions of various ethnic groups to the community as a whole. Asset-based practices help empower the community, increasing the sense of pride and unity that a community feels.

Addressing a social issue in a way that empowers the community requires a genuine understanding of that community (Hutzel, 2007). This researcher has worked with these 3rd/4th grade students for many years. The relationship she has with the students and her knowledge of the class dynamics enabled her to identify class weaknesses as well as strengths. Because attention is drawn so frequently to the deficiencies of the 3rd/4th Title I students at St. Mary of the Lake, the class has not had the opportunity to develop a positive self-image. This researcher believed that it was important for students to acknowledge the unhealthy levels of conflict and poor communication habits within their class. From there they would be able to move on to imagining and focusing their artwork on what they want their class to become.

**Community empowerment.** Community artwork continues to speak long after the work is done. Displaying the finished piece in a prominent public place can promote discussion among the general public and raise awareness of the social issue that the community art addresses.

Community art, when made with attention to addressing a social issue, is an authentic way to amplify often-oppressed voices, to make diverse perspectives on
social issues accessible to a wider audience and ultimately to become a catalyst for change (Yenawine, 2009).

While raising awareness will not change the problem, over the course of time it may help change the way the public thinks (and eventually acts).

The 3rd/4th grade Title I class has developed a negative reputation in the school at large. Even if the class’s behavior were to change overnight, the opinions of teachers and administrators would not. The display of the collaborative art piece may, over time, give the community a reason to reconsider their opinions.

**Role of the community artist/teacher.** For community art to be a success, the artist must be an active participant in the community, not an outsider (Hutzel, 2007). In practice, the artist serves more as a facilitator than a visionary (Alexenberg & Benjamin, 2004). The artist provides materials and serves as a technical resource. The community members, however, take responsibility for the execution of the project. This structure ensures that the message that is communicated comes from the community itself.

For the art teacher, this translates into making sure that students have input in primary decisions. These decisions include the form that the final project might take, subject matter, color, and final placement of the piece. The art teacher may have the final say, but students should know that their opinions have been heard and considered.

**Cooperative learning.** The mechanics of group work and student interactions can be optimized through the study of cooperative learning strategies. Over the last few decades, studies have shown that cooperative learning does indeed have the potential to increase student achievement and social relations; as a result, they develop more positive attitudes towards peers and school (Stevens & Slavin, 1995; Cohen, 1994).
abundance of resources available to help teachers facilitate cooperative learning, and some classroom teachers incorporate cooperative learning opportunities on a regular basis (Stevens & Slavin, 1995). This is not the case for all teachers. Bobick’s (2008) study of cooperative learning in elementary schools in Georgia revealed that, on average, students participated in only one or two cooperative learning projects a year (across all subject areas). It seems that despite the benefits of cooperative learning and the increasing prominence of community art, art teachers have been slow to make a place for cooperative learning in the art curriculum (Hagaman, 1990).

**Benefits of small group work.** Most strategies for cooperative learning involve dividing students into small groups so that students have increased opportunities to interact. Learning, explains Cohen (1994), “emerges from the chance to talk, interact, and contribute to the group discussion” (p. 36). This group work model, when executed properly, facilitates conceptual thinking and increases the time that students spend on task (Cohen, 1994). Stevens and Slavin (1995) suggest that in order for group work to be truly successful, teachers must establish group goals and also hold individual students accountable for their learning. The interdependence of these two elements resulted in higher achievement gains because students were forced to discuss and engage in “elaborate explanations” rather than merely work towards completing a task (Stevens & Slavin, 1995, p. 323). This emphasis on process is similar to community art’s focus on relationships built, social relevance, and community empowerment.

**Potential problems.** Teachers who decide to incorporate cooperative learning strategies into their curriculum have unique challenges to overcome. Groups may have difficulty staying on task. Some students do not participate equally because they are of
“low status”, either socially or intellectually (Cohen, 1994). As a result, they learn less than peers who participate more. Additionally, teachers may discover that cooperative learning magnifies antisocial behaviors in certain students or groups (Cohen, 1994). These problems were certainly a concern for this researcher given the current class dynamics of the 3rd/4th Title 1 group. Training students in groupwork strategies was critical in helping reduce student conflict and teacher frustration (Cohen, 1994).

**Integrating collaborative art making in the classroom.** Bobick (2011) encourages elementary art educators to integrate cooperative learning. She reminds teachers that “cooperation can provide opportunities for sharing ideas, learning how other students think and react to problems, and allowing students the opportunity to practice their thinking skills in small groups.” Art educators with experience in collaborative art recommend a few strategies for increasing the likelihood that students will experience these benefits of collaborative work: plan and prepare, delegate responsibility to students, and facilitate positive student interactions.

**Plan and prepare.** Before tackling large scale cooperative artwork, Bobick (2011) and Perr (1987) recommend that the teacher prime students with one or two small cooperative art making activities. Low-pressure activities allow students to learn how making art together impacts social relations and the finished artwork without feeling as though they are sacrificing the quality of their work. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to observe interactions among students so that she can form groups that will work well together (Bobick, 2011). Receiving permission from the school administration and keeping parents and school staff well-informed on the lesson goals and progress are crucial steps in maintaining positive community relations (Bobick, 2011). Lessons go
more smoothly if materials are organized and readily available and students are aware of physical boundaries, such as where they can and cannot work, before beginning the project (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006).

**Delegate responsibility to students.** Perr (1987) and Cooper and Sjostrom (2006) encourage teachers to give students the responsibility of planning and executing artwork. In this context, the art teacher, like the community artist, “moves away from the positions of absolute initiator, organizer, and judge, and becomes an art resource person, an authority, not an authoritarian” (Perr, 1987, p. 13). This strategy encourages students to take ownership of the artwork. The finished work can then be a source of true pride for the students involved, particularly if it is permanently displayed in the school or community (Bobick, 2011).

It is important that all students feel they have a voice during a cooperative art project (Bobick, 2011; Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006; Perr, 1987). Conducting whole-class discussions about the focus or form that the artwork will take is a way to address this (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006). Ensuring that students are participating in a meaningful way is another means of ensuring that each child has a voice (Cohen, 1994).

**Facilitate positive student interactions.** Cooper and Sjostrom (2006) advise teachers to establish a positive “attitudinal framework” by approaching the project with a positive, can-do attitude (p. 37). The teacher’s own excitement for cooperative art making generated excitement among students. It also helped students overcome initial intimidation because of the size and scale of the project (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006).

Cohen (1994) cautions that teachers should not assume children know how to work together. The teacher must train them in appropriate behavior through skill-building
activities that can teach children the importance of responding to the needs of others and working as a team. During the work period, the teacher can circulate and ask questions of students that prompt them to recall positive group work strategies. Cohen (1994) also recommends that teachers train students how to respond to anti-social behavior. In this strategy, the teacher instructs students to respond to antisocial behaviors with, “When you said/did ___, I felt ___,” and to request behavior modification.

Through proper planning and preparation, delegation of responsibility to students, and facilitation of positive interactions, this teacher can help reduce distractions or stumbling blocks. Both students and the teacher will be able to focus more fully on the strengths of the class and making art together.

Conclusion

Tacit understandings. The negative interactions of students in the 3rd/4th grade Title I class led this researcher to seek alternative means of improving student relationships besides teacher-centered positive and negative reinforcement. Collaborative art seemed to hold promise because it creates opportunities for students to directly engage each other in a positive way. The researcher’s experience with social justice and community art instilled in her the value of strong relationships and community empowerment. These were experiences that she desired for her 3rd/4th grade Title I class. Through the researcher’s educational experience, she learned the value of cooperative learning in developing critical thinking habits and increasing social maturity. The researcher hypothesized that through a collaborative art unit designed with these values and experiences in mind, students might come to view their peers in a more positive light.
Theoretical understandings. Literature on community art indicated that the process of collaborative art making can build and strengthen relationships, although it appears that this happens over a far longer time period than was possible in this study. The literature also revealed some pitfalls and problems that can arise from working in groups. To ensure that the study had the greatest possible chance for success, community art literature suggested that this researcher must take the time to think about the strengths of the 3rd/4th grade Title I class and how to empower it to succeed. Cooperative learning literature suggested that she take extra time to plan for the unit, decide how she will delegate responsibility to students, and prepare activities and methods for facilitating positive student interactions. These measures would not automatically guarantee that collaborative art making would result in more positive student relationships, however. For this reason, the researcher needed to collect data on student behaviors and perceptions of each other before the project began and throughout the art making experience to determine if any change took place.
3. Methodology

Design of the Study

The review of relevant literature on cooperative learning and community art practices in Chapter 2 indicated that cooperative learning can result in more positive attitudes towards peers and school. It also revealed that community art practices can provide opportunities for reconciliation. These benefits suggest that incorporating collaborative art into the classroom curriculum might improve student behavior and relationships. Therefore, the philosophies of cooperative learning and community art were combined to inform the design of a collaborative art lesson (Appendix A1). The lesson was implemented in a combined 3rd/4th grade class of twenty-eight students at St. Mary of the Lake School. Students worked collaboratively during eight art classes over the course of three and a half weeks to complete a hanging class mural.

During a typical art lesson, students worked independently at a table with five to six of their peers. For this collaborative lesson, each student was placed in a group with two or three other students from their assigned tables. This arrangement ensured that students would interact with the same peers during the collaborative lesson.

At the beginning of the lesson, students were shown examples of recycled art made with bottle caps and discussed how symbols are used to communicate ideas in life and art. Students then worked in their groups to design a symbol that they thought should represent their class. Two groups chose a sun and one group chose a star (“because we want to shine brightly”). Two groups chose a flower (“because we are growing”). One group drew a smiley face (“we want to be happy”). One group drew the American flag (“we are united”). The last group drew an angel (“we want to be good Christians”). The
MAKING ART TOGETHER

class discussion guided the teacher/researcher’s decision on which symbols to use for the final design: a sun, a flower, and a smiley face. Two groups had designed a flower and two other groups had designed a sun, so the inclusion of these symbols meant that five of the nine groups had some variation of their symbol represented in the final artwork. This meant, however, that some students’ artwork would not be chosen. Leaving room for the real-life possibility of disappointment was one way to test the extent of the impact of collaborative art on student behaviors and relationships with their peers. It was also a means for students to learn how to cope with disappointment in a healthy way.

Cooper & Sjostrom (2006) warned that a situation such as this one would lead to disappointment and might result in hurt feelings if the problem was not addressed. The best way to deal with the inevitable disappointment, the authors suggested, was to talk about it openly. After the symbols were chosen, the teacher acknowledged that feelings of disappointment or sadness were natural but explained that it would be necessary for students to rise above the disappointment and work together for the common good. She encouraged students to remember the final goal. By keeping her own attitude positive, she helped maintain an atmosphere of excited anticipation.

To reduce the time frame of the project, the researcher/teacher incorporated the symbols as closely as possible to the original with some small color modifications if not enough caps of the chosen color were available. A projector was used to enlarge and trace the design on a 3 ft. x 6 ft. piece of butcher paper the size of the finished mural. Students from the groups whose designs were chosen helped color code and paint the butcher paper during recess (see Figure 3-1). They then cut the paper into 1” strips that were numbered for easy reassembly. These strips were distributed to student groups, who
strung bottle caps together to match their assigned strips. As strings were completed, they were tied in the final position on the wood strip that would support the piece.

![Figure 3-1. Symbols generated by student groups are combined and painted as a full-scale template.](image)

During the creation of the final artwork, each student in a group assumed a different role (supply manager, group leader, artist/recorder). The tasks involved in assembling each bottle cap string were divided among the group members. Students were instructed to take turns at each job from one class to the next. One student was responsible for retrieving bottle caps in the correct colors and sizes. Another student arranged the bottle caps in the correct color order according to the strip of paper that students were given. The remaining student(s) used a needle to string the bottle caps
together on the group’s designated string, holding it up to the strip of paper to make sure that the colors matched (see Appendix B). These roles were chosen democratically within each group at the beginning of each class.

Completed strips were taped securely on the end to keep the bottle caps from falling off and given to the teacher in exchange for a new string and strip. Students were able to see the art come to life as they worked. The completed strings were then tied to a wooden rod to form a hanging mural. Although no single student could take the finished artwork home, it was displayed in the stairway in time for spring parent-teacher conferences (see Figure 3-2).

Figure 3-2. The completed 6 ft x 3 ft hanging bottle cap mural hangs in the main school stairwell.
The intention of the lesson design was to ensure that all students participated and that they listen to and help each other. When disagreements or problems arose, students were encouraged to work together to resolve them. The researcher hoped that working cooperatively would reduce negative behaviors like tattling, verbal and physical aggression, and being off-task that seemed to cause increase between students. At the same time, the hope was that the lesson would encourage interpersonal behaviors that build positive relationships, such as conflict resolution, encouragement/positive tattling, and cooperation.

**Research Methods**

This study was conducted using a classroom-based action research methodology. Action research, according to McNiff & Whitehead (2009) is “an attitude of enquiry that enables people to question and improve taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting” (p. 7). In this study, classroom-based action research consisted of putting teaching theories based in relevant literature into practice in a specific classroom setting, then observing and measuring outcomes.

Since the study aimed to identify the lesson’s impact on students’ behavior and relationships with each other, every effort was made to preserve as many classroom procedures as possible. The researcher herself, who was the students’ regular art teacher, taught the collaborative art lesson. By playing the roles of both researcher and teacher, this researcher needed to take care that data collection did not interfere with teaching duties. Care was taken to also ensure that the researcher’s close attention to student interactions did not influence students’ behavior. No changes were made to classroom standards and consequences.
Data Collection

During lesson implementation, a variety of data collection methods were used to determine the lesson’s impact (if any) on students’ behavior and relationships with each other. Most of the data collection was completed or coordinated by the researcher, but the school counselor contributed her own observations of student behavior.

The data was gleaned from two primary sources for these observations and reports: the researcher and the students themselves. Assignment rubrics and finished artwork provided corroborating data. A combination of participant observation and interviews were used to help “triangulate” data to determine if the conclusions from one set of data match the conclusions from another (Maxwell, 2012).

The researcher gathered as much observation data as possible during a typical class period before the implementation of the collaborative lesson to establish a baseline of student behavior. During the implementation of a collaborative lesson (see Appendix A1), this researcher closely observed students’ behavior and relationships with each other. Data collection continued during each class period for the duration of the lesson and culminated in a set of interviews with select students after the lesson ended.

Research context. St. Mary of the Lake School is an elementary school in Uptown, a neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. According to a study done by DePaul University’s Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development, Uptown is the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in the city. St. Mary of the Lake School’s student body reflects this ethnic diversity. Enrollment data collected by the school office reveals a high number of first- and second-generation immigrants from East and West Africa,
Central and South America, and Southeast Asia. At the time of this study, nearly 90% of the students qualified for free/reduced lunch and many receive tuition scholarships.

Recently, the administration of the school decided to split and combine select grades to create three “gifted” classes. As a result, there were two classes of combined 3rd and 4th grade students, one of which was also designated as the “gifted” class. Most of the students in the other 3rd/4th grade class qualify for the school’s Title I program (specialized assistance for low-income children who are not performing at grade level). Many students have learning disabilities. Compared to the other class, this 3rd/4th grade class also had higher numbers of students with behavioral and emotional disorders. These unique behavioral challenges piqued this researcher’s interest to find ways to improve student relations. For that reason, this class was chosen as the subject of this study.

The study took place during the class’s 45-minute art periods on Monday and Friday afternoons. All lessons took place on the school stage, which had been converted to a dedicated art space. The stage is very small and leaves very little space between students. The lack of privacy presented a challenge for collecting student feedback data, a challenge that will be addressed later in this chapter.

**Observation and field notes.** According to Maxwell (2012), “Observation provides a direct and powerful way of learning about people’s behavior and the context in which this occurs” (p. 103). To measure student behavior, the researcher relied on personal observations and those of a colleague.

Student behavior is to some extent quantifiable, since the frequency of certain behaviors can be measured. To guide teacher observations, a Behavior Tracking Chart (see Appendix A2) of positive and negative behaviors was created for daily use. Negative
behaviors that the researcher recorded include off-task behaviors, tattling, verbal aggression/name-calling, and physical aggression. Positive behaviors that the researcher hoped to cultivate and that were recorded during data collection include peacemaking/conflict resolution, encouragement/compliments/positive tattling, and cooperation/teamwork. This chart (Appendix A2) was designed to allow the researcher to quickly note observed behaviors as they occur during class without taking time away from the lesson. The data could then be analyzed for each student and for the class as a whole.

The researcher’s observation notes on specific class activities and interactions supplemented the data collected through the Behavior Tracking Chart (Appendix A2). These observation notes were taken during and immediately following each class. The school counselor contributed observation notes (see Appendix A3) taken during select classes. Assignment rubrics (see Appendix A4) provided a summary of data on each student’s performance during the project.

**Questionnaires and interviews.** Observational methods alone could not provide the information necessary to infer the quality of students’ relationships with their peers. Therefore, to obtain the most detailed picture of student behavior it was necessary to gather data through other means, such as questionnaires and interviews. To collect regular data on students’ relationships with their group members and tablemates, the researcher relied on a Daily Student Reflection Questionnaire (see Appendix A5). The self-report section of the questionnaire helped hold individual students accountable for their own learning and participation. Students completed the questionnaires during the last five minutes of each art class.
The art space was very crowded, with little room for students to spread out. There was a concern that some students might feel pressured to answer a certain way because their group members could see their responses. To reduce this possibility, students were given their questionnaires and spread out in the school hall. Students handed their questionnaires to the researcher, who kept them face-down to preserve student privacy.

To “check the accuracy of…observations” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 103) and student questionnaires, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with select students after school and during lunch/recess after the end of the project. The interview questions (see Appendix A6) were designed to solicit more detailed information about peer relations and the project itself than would be available through the questionnaires alone. The primary interview questions were designed to start conversation, and follow-up questions would be asked to solicit clarification of student responses. If the researcher believed that her presence might influence a student’s answers and compromise the validity of the study, arrangements were made for the school counselor to conduct a secondary follow-up interview.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher began examining and analyzing the data as it was collected. As Maxwell (2012) explained, this made the process of data analysis much less overwhelming. It also allowed the researcher to read over her observation notes, students’ Daily Reflection Questionnaires, and the day’s Behavioral Tracking Chart results while the class was still fresh in her mind.

For analyzing behavioral data through students’ Daily Reflection Questionnaires and the Behavioral Tracking Chart, the researcher employed Maxwell’s (2012) concept
of “contiguity relations” (p. 106). The questionnaire data was sorted into subsets based on
student groups. Each group’s data was put into a table and coded based on the type of
response (positive, negative, or neutral). The tables were sorted in two ways: by group
members’ reviews of a student and by each student’s reviews of his/her group members.
This enabled the researcher to see how a student’s behaviors were perceived by the group
as well as how a student perceived the behavior of others. Throughout this time, the
researcher wrote memos to “facilitate…thinking [and stimulate] analytic insights”
(Maxwell, 2012, p. 105) about student behaviors and interactions. Memos allowed the
researcher to see connections between student reports and personal observations that
might have otherwise been forgotten.

Students’ written perceptions of the project and their observations of their peers’
behavior, collected through the Daily Reflection Questionnaires and interviews, also
benefitted from “substantive analysis” (Maxwell, 2012). The data was sorted into
categories that developed naturally while reviewing student responses. By allowing these
categories to develop organically, the researcher avoided imposing predetermined
organizational categories that might have skewed the data or caused her to miss important
connections.

The researcher took Maxwell’s (2012) advice and used connecting strategies for
the data. Notes on student interviews were reviewed along with each of the student’s
Daily Reflection Questionnaires and records of the student’s behavior during the project.
This approach allowed the researcher to analyze the data without “fragmenting it”
(Maxwell, 2012), preserving each individual student’s perspective. Connecting the data
in this way also enabled the researcher to identify changes in an individual students’
behavior or perspective of group members that might not have been visible by analyzing the class as a whole. This connective approach also gave the researcher a better chance of identifying external circumstances that may have contributed to a perceived change.

**Conclusion**

**Tacit understandings.** This study took place in one specific classroom, rather than a controlled laboratory environment. While every attempt was made to keep the classroom atmosphere as consistent as possible, it was impossible to predict which students would be absent on a given day or what set or circumstances transpired before art class to make a student angry or upset. In some cases, teaching circumstances dictated small changes in the lesson (such as reviewing the concept of symbolism at the beginning of each lesson or joining a lone student with the other group at the table when both her partners were absent). No changes were considered, however, that diminished the collaborative nature of the lesson. This planned flexibility ensured that the researcher fulfilled her obligations as a teacher during the action research process without compromising the study’s validity. With these small changes taken into consideration, the researcher’s goal was to discover any changes in this classroom dynamic that might be attributed to the structure of the collaborative art lesson itself.

**Theoretical understandings.** The collaborative lesson was designed to utilize elements of cooperative learning and community art in ways that have the potential to positively impact students’ behavior and relationships with each other. This was not a guarantee that the researcher and the 3rd/4th grade class would experience these results. Whether or not the integration of collaborative art into the curriculum had an impact on students’ behavior or relationships with each other, the study was still valuable.
Observing students’ behavior and their relationships with their peers for an extended period of time equipped the researcher with tools for reflecting upon and improving her current teaching habits to increase desirable social behaviors.
4. Results of the Study

This study attempted to identify any changes in students’ behavior or perceptions of each other that might occur as a result of the implementation of a collaborative lesson. Twenty-eight students at St. Mary of the Lake School participated in the three and a half week collaborative lesson spanning eight art classes.

Students worked in groups of three or four to choose a symbol that they thought should represent the class. A class discussion guided the teacher/researcher’s decision on which symbols to use for the final design: a sun, a flower, and a smiley face. The artwork of five of the nine groups was represented in some form in the design of the final hanging mural. Groups used a full-size template created by the teacher to assemble strings of bottle caps. Individual jobs that each group member might have were described by the researcher and groups decided at the beginning of each class who would assume which role. Independent conflict resolution was encouraged, though care was taken to ensure that all students were actively contributing to the creation of the final artwork.

Multiple data collection methods were used during the lesson to assess student behavior and perceptions. Students completed brief reports on their behavior and the behavior of their classmates after every art class. The researcher conducted daily observations. The school counselor made three observation visits over the course of the lesson. The researcher also interviewed select students after the lesson was complete.

Significance of the Study

Data analysis and triangulation of the data provided firm support for the findings of this study. Data gleaned from daily student reports was consistent with observations by the researcher and school counselor. The conclusions reached by analysis of these data
sources were further reinforced by triangulation with data collected from student interviews after the completion of the lesson.

As expected, the data both affirmed strengths and exposed weaknesses in the lesson design. While there was not a measurable change in the behavior of the class or students’ perceptions of each other as a whole, the collaborative lesson was highly effective in improving certain students’ motivation and relationships with each other. Additionally, the data shed light on the impact of a few students’ antisocial behaviors on their classmates.

These findings are consistent with studies by Stevens & Slavin (1995) and Cohen, (1994), which suggest that cooperative learning techniques can improve student relations and help students cultivate a more positive attitude towards others and school. Cohen’s study also warned that group work might increase antisocial behaviors in certain students, something this researcher observed firsthand.

The researcher can use the findings on improvements in students’ behaviors and lesson strengths and weaknesses to guide future lesson and curriculum design. The insight into the antisocial behaviors of certain students will influence the researcher’s behavior modification strategies. It will also inform the way she seats students and groups them for collaborative work in the future.

**Bias and Validity**

The researcher has been teaching art and technology to this 3rd/4th grade class since the students were in kindergarten. Since that time, the class as a whole and a few students in particular have developed a reputation among the faculty and staff for being
immature and poorly behaved. To reduce the chance that the results might be biased, the researcher asked the school counselor to participate in the data collection process.

Careful measures were taken to ensure the validity of the study. Students worked in groups with the same students with whom they previously shared a work table to ensure that changes in behavior were due to the lesson format, rather than new company. During completion of students’ self-report forms, students were separated from their groups and given a private place to work so that their responses would not be influenced by their peers’ proximity. Data from each class was analyzed as soon as possible after the class to ensure that the events of the class were fresh in the researcher’s mind.

Analysis of the Data

For each class period during the collaborative lesson, students completed a Reflection Questionnaire (Appendix E). Each student’s response to the questionnaire was converted into numerical form (see Figure 4-1).

![Sample Student Review](image)

Figure 4-1. A student’s questionnaire on another student’s behavior was converted to a numerical score by assigning each smiley face a number. The final score was used by the researcher to get an idea of how well this student felt his partner worked with the group during this particular class period.
Every student’s Reflection Questionnaire responses were recorded as numbers in a spreadsheet for the group to which the student belonged. The researcher’s and school counselor’s notes were compiled in a table. The daily student responses were then compared to the researcher’s (and school counselor’s, when available) observation notes.

The researcher’s interest lie in determining what impact (if any) the lesson had on students’ behaviors or perceptions of each other. Therefore, the researcher examined the data with this in mind, looking for trends in the way students rated, talked about, or interacted with each other. When discrepancies arose, such as when one student gave both his partners the most negative review possible, the researcher questioned the student further to better understand the problem. If significant changes in behavior were observed, the researcher conducted an interview with the students to better understand the role the lesson design may have played.

Results

**Positive changes in some students’ behavior.** The analysis of the data did not indicate any significant change in the class’s behavior as a whole. Teacher observation and student self-reporting indicated that most student groups worked well with each other, though some conflict was present. Of particular significance were changes in some individual students. In the case of four students, the collaborative process had a noticeable impact on engagement and behavior. The students were socially isolated from their peers to some degree before the lesson began. All four have struggled in school and their academic frustrations often manifested themselves in inappropriate or immature social behaviors. Their attitudes and behaviors changed noticeably during this lesson.
**Student 1.** Student 1 had only been at the school for a few months, but her physically aggressive and disruptive behavior in class had alienated her from her peers. During the collaborative lesson, however, Student 1’s behavior and relationship with her partners improved significantly. Though rated low by her partners before and in the beginning of the lesson, by the end both of her partners gave her perfect behavior scores (see Table 4-2).

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<tr>
<th>Peer Reviewer</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
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*Note.* The summary of daily evaluations of Student 1 by herself and her partners shows she was given the perfect behavior scores during the middle and end of the lesson. A dash (−) indicates that no data is available because the student was absent.

On Day 7, Student 1 attempted to mediate a conflict between her other group members. During the selection of jobs at the beginning of the class, Partner A criticized Partner B and called him names. The researcher/teacher intervened, but so did Student 1. As she recounted to the researcher later, “I hate to see [Partner B] cry. I calmed [Partner A] down. I told him [Partner B] had sensitive emotions.” Student 1 then took responsibility for comforting Partner B down and helping the group work together again. By the end of the class, the three students were working productively.
**Student 2.** Student 2 transferred to St. Mary of the Lake at the beginning of the school year. Even this late in the school year, he did not have any friends in the class; his unpredictable temper and tendency to cry or sulk led his classmates to avoid him. Student 2 also struggled with his schoolwork, often becoming frustrated and angry. This attitude often carried over into the art room.

The researcher observed that Student 2 was increasingly engaged and in better spirits in art class as the lesson went on. He continued to have conflicts with his group members but was able to move past the disagreement and work productively instead of sulking. At the beginning of the lesson, his responses to questions of what his group accomplished or what he contributed were always a variant of, “We finished,” or, “We listened.” By the end of the lesson, some of his responses were, “It was fun finishing my work,” and “We learn stuff together.” During an interview at the end of the lesson, Student 2 announced happily that he felt like he had made friends with a student who hadn’t been his friend before. When asked what he learned from the lesson, he said, “I can be a true artist!”

**Student 3.** Student 3 was not rejected by her peers to the same extent as students 2 and 3; however, she was consistently disengaged from lessons. When she did not get her way or a teacher corrected her, Student 3 threw temper tantrums and refused to do any work. This resulted in avoidance by some peers. Additionally, most of her artwork remained unfinished or was of poor quality.

Observation notes by the school counselor and this researcher indicate that Student 3 was usually on-task and working cooperatively with her group members. If she was off-task, it was never long enough to warrant a reminder to return to work. This is in
stark contrast to independent art lessons, during which Student 3 was rarely on-task. Her evaluation of her own behavior improved (see Table 4-3). She also transitioned from describing her behavior as “good” and “happy” (Days 4-6) to “perfect” (Days 7 and 9).

Table 4-3

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<tr>
<th>Peer Reviewer</th>
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*Note.* The summary of daily evaluations by Student 3 reflect her increasingly positive perception of her own behavior and that of her group members over the course of the lesson. A dash (-) indicates that no data is available because the student was absent.

For Student 3, the best part of the collaborative lesson was that, “I can do it with my friends. Doing it with a friend is [better] than doing it alone.” She explained that before the lesson there was “always fighting.” This lesson seemed to change that for her group.

*Student 4.* Student 4 was good-natured but easily distractible. His off-task behaviors led to poor work quality and conflict with his peers, who felt that he was keeping them from doing their best work. This changed during the collaborative lesson. Like Student 1, Student 4 also progressively rated his group members more highly and was more highly rated by others as the lesson went on (see Table 4-4.)
Table 4-4

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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The summary of daily evaluations of Student 4 by himself and his partners reflects his improved work habits and reduced conflict with peers during the middle and end of the lesson. A dash (-) indicates that no data is available because the partner did not submit a form or the student was absent.

**Positive behavior changes conclusions.** While the collaborative lesson may not have improved the class’s behavior as a whole, it provided a means for “outsider” students like the four mentioned above to make friends. Students’ attitudes and behavior improved as they felt more accepted by their peers. These findings are consistent with the impact of cooperative learning on student relations, as cited by Stevens & Slavin (1995) and Cohen (1994).

**Impact of antisocial behaviors.** As Cohen (1994) warned, group work does have a tendency to magnify antisocial behaviors in certain students. Two students routinely demonstrated antisocial behaviors such as verbal teasing or baiting, physical aggression, and refusal to share or compromise. The collaborative setting greatly increased the negative impact of these antisocial behaviors on students in the immediate vicinity.

**Student 5.** The researcher and school counselor’s observation notes both made mention of Student 5’s physical and verbal aggression towards her partners or nearby students in every class. On one occasion she grabbed a student in another group to put
him in a headlock. When questioned about problems they encountered during the lesson, two separate students mentioned Student 5’s behavior as a problem or the “worst part”. Interestingly, both of Student 5’s partners consistently rated her behavior far lower than she rated herself (see Table 4-5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer Reviewer</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The summary of daily evaluations of Student 5 by herself and her partners shows how Student 5 rated her behavior as better (in some cases, quite dramatically) than her partners. The data clearly shows which of her partners she fought more with on a given day. A dash (−) indicates that no data is available because the partner did not submit a form or the student was absent.

**Student 6.** The researcher’s and school counselor’s observations both show evidence of Student 6’s regular physical and verbal aggression and off-task behavior. He was frequently off-task. When one of his partners was absent and he was left to work alone while the other partner collected bottle caps, he did nothing. On the days when he was in charge of collecting caps, he played around on the way (in one case initiating a very short-lived game of tag). When he was away, the school counselor observed that his partners accomplished far more.

Student 6 was friends with his Partner A, who rated him highly despite his poor behavior. He did not work well with his Partner B, however, and this partner became the object of his physical and verbal aggression. In a closing interview, Partner B expressed
his frustrations. “[Student 6] always says he gets to be the ‘needler’ and he calls people
names.” The researcher observed that Student 6 made fun of his Partner B and drew
attention to him when he was upset or embarrassed. The impact of these interactions is
evident in the reviews that Partner B wrote for Student 6 (see Table 4-6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer Reviewer</th>
<th>Student 6</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
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*Note.* The summary of daily evaluations of Student 6 show how negatively he was rated by one of his partners. A dash (−) indicates that no data is available because the partner did not submit a form or the student was absent.

**Impact of antisocial behaviors conclusions.** When working independently, students may be better able to ignore the antisocial behaviors of certain students. As this study showed, in a collaborative setting those antisocial behaviors become more difficult to avoid. The discovery of how Students 5 and 6 interact in a group setting will impact how future collaborative lessons are designed and how student groupings are decided.

**Increased value of teamwork among students.** Student responses and attitudes towards the artwork indicated that students were always conscious of the fact that it was something they were doing together. When questioned at the end of the lesson, a large majority of students (15 out of 24) shared that they did not mind leaving the artwork at school. As one student wrote, “I feel happy because everyone will see our artwork that all of us worked on.” Another wrote, “I feel happy because we get [to] see what we have
done.” Personal interviews also revealed a sense of shared ownership. When overheard talking about how they explained the project to their parents or friends, students used the words “we”, “us”, and “our”.

When students were asked through interviews and short answer forms, ten students out of twenty-seven mentioned working with others as something they enjoyed or learned to do better as a result of the lesson. The researcher also observed that students began to find ways to resolve disagreements towards the middle and end of the lesson. Student 2’s group, for instance, used rock-paper-scissors at least twice that this researcher noticed. Another group developed a new, faster system for stringing caps that they shared with other groups.

**Lesson design.** The implementation of the lesson improved the researcher’s understanding of how to design a successful collaborative art lesson. Before this action research project, this researcher had only a theoretical understanding of how a collaborative art lesson would work. She had never designed or conducted a lesson in which an entire class contributed to the creation of a single work of art. The research conducted during the literature review and the collection of data primed the researcher to be more aware of students’ response to different parts of the lesson.

**Lesson successes.** The researcher recognized that the selection of certain symbols and not others for the design of the final artwork might cause conflict within the class. The review of the literature had prepared her to talk briefly to the students about the importance of overcoming personal disappointment for the good of the final artwork. As expected, some groups were initially disappointed that their designs were not chosen; however, the class quickly embraced the artwork as their own. One student, Helena,
whose group’s angel symbol was not overtly included, found a creative way to imagine that it was still present in the final design. The white space around the flower, she asserted, represented heaven, which contained the angel that she and her group had designed.

**Flaws in lesson design.** The study revealed a flaw in the lesson design that may have resulted in unnecessary group conflict. The researcher decided to let each group decide which student would perform which job. Students were reminded to take turns but there was no rotation system put in place. While Perr (1987) and Cooper & Sjostrom (2006) advised that the teacher delegate as much responsibility to students as possible, in this case it would have been better to establish a system that students could have used to ensure fairness.

From both evaluations and researcher observations, it was clear that in some groups, students did not spend equal time doing each job. This was a sore spot for many students. Out of the 27 students, the job of stringing caps together was mentioned twelve times as the best part. The other jobs were mentioned only twice. In certain groups, one student tended to take the stringing job far more often than the other group members. Two groups that worked together very well in the beginning and middle of the project had a great deal of conflict on the last day because one or more of the group members felt that they had not spent as much time stringing caps as another student.

**Conclusion**

While this collaborative art lesson did not have an immediate impact on the class’s behavior as a whole, there were small, noticeable changes in the attitudes and behaviors of certain students. With continued reinforcement, the researcher is hopeful
that these changes can be lasting ones. The study also provided valuable information for the researcher on how to design and conduct a collaborative art lesson.

The study also gave the researcher valuable feedback about how well students internalized lesson objectives. Students also expressed how much they enjoyed working as a team. A few students reported learning how to share and take turns; while this was not a stated lesson objective, it is an important life lesson that might be reinforced with further collaborative work.
5. Discussion and Conclusion

Having examined the impact of this collaborative lesson on students’ behavior and relationships, it is important to reflect on the significance of this action research project. The next few pages will explore the study’s impact on the researcher’s teaching practices and approach. Finally, the researcher will discuss changes she would make to future collaborative lessons and make recommendations for other art teachers interested in including collaborative activities in their curricula.

Personal Impact of the Study

Prior to this study, the researcher had not attempted collaborative art-making with elementary students. This lesson structure did not seem as valuable as individual art-making. Large-scale artwork felt like an overwhelming undertaking for minimal payback. After designing and executing this lesson, however, the researcher is more aware of the benefits of cooperative learning and how collaborative art-making can be structured to maximize student success. Although effective collaborative lessons require more preparation by the teacher, they can be highly energizing and exciting for the students involved.

This study confirmed the researcher’s theory that modifying behavior on a large scale takes time and patient dedication to teaching social skills. Behavior is not likely to change over the course of three weeks. The study also reinforced the idea that not all students respond the same way to learning activities and behavior intervention strategies. A technique that is effective for one student may have little or no effect, or the opposite effect, on another student. Nevertheless, cooperative learning did have a positive impact on some students’ behavior and relationships. Those positive changes make collaborative
art-making a worthwhile teaching technique that this educator will continue to incorporate in her art curriculum.

**Rationale for the Unit**

Symbolism was a foundational concept for a number of the community art works studied in the literature review, including Hutzel (2007) and Yenawine (2009). The process of choosing a symbol for their community allowed participants in those community art projects to imagine what they wanted their community to be while still acknowledging the problems within the class. Considering the contentious relationships and negative behaviors that exist within the class, this was an effective way to tie in lessons learned from the study of community art.

The concept of symbolism is important in the study of art history. In order for students to be able to engage masterworks in a deeper way, it is necessary that they grasp the concept of symbolism. Although the cognitive abilities of third and fourth grade students are not yet fully developed, they are increasingly able to understand rudimentary forms of symbolism. The process of identifying symbolic meaning and constructing personal symbols engages higher order thinking skills and improves students’ ability to understand more complex symbolism.

**Recommendations**

Most of the changes that the researcher would make to the study concern the lesson design. As discussed in the previous chapter, the data analysis revealed that group members argued a great deal about the job each group member would have. If the study were to be repeated, it would be wise to address this issue by establishing a jobs rotation for groups and limiting the group size to three students. This change would allow each
student to spend more time putting the caps on the string, which the data indicated was by far the most popular job. Instituting a jobs rotation and reducing the group size may reduce unnecessary conflict between group members. The researcher also found it challenging to find the time during the class to make detailed observation notes. It would have been helpful to use a camcorder to record each class session or request that the school counselor or another teaching professional observe all class periods instead of one per week.

The results of the study will be shared with school staff and parents of those students whose behavior improved or deteriorated noticeably during the lesson. The study will also be shared with other elementary art teachers. It will be of particular interest to teachers who have an interest in collaborative learning or are seeking ways to help socially isolated students connect with their classmates. Working together to complete a common task can facilitate conversation and build relationships between students that may not have interacted before. Of course, it is imperative that the teacher be conscious of the class dynamic and carefully group students to encourage interactions between shy or isolated students and kind, patient peers. As this study demonstrated, the teacher must also be aware of how she groups students who exhibit antisocial behavior disorders; these students can have a powerful negative influence on their group.

To incorporate collaborative learning exercises into their curriculum, teachers can use the collaborative lesson included in Appendix A, modifying it if necessary to utilize the materials they have available. They might also incorporate the cooperative learning techniques like assigning jobs to students within a group and create their own plan for creating collaborative artwork.
Conclusion

This action research study was a valuable learning experience for this researcher as well as the 3rd/4th grade class. While some changes could be made to the study to facilitate group work and data collection, the study still provided the researcher with unique insights into her students’ behavior and the class dynamics. The results of the study can be utilized by the staff at St. Mary of the Lake school, other art teachers, and the researcher herself, as she continues to explore the possibilities of collaborative art-making with elementary students.
References


Bobick, B. Cooperative learning in elementary art classrooms and preservice teaching programs. *Art Education Association Advisory*, Spring 2011.


MAKING ART TOGETHER


A1: Unit and Lesson Plan

UNIT PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Esther Pomranky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>St. Mary of the Lake School, Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>3rd and 4th</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Symbolism in Art: What Does It MEAN?</td>
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Goals

**UNDERSTAND**
How the arts communicate an idea. (IL VAS 27B)
How sculptures are made. (IL VAS 26A)

**KNOW**
How the arts can contribute to community. (IL VAS 27B)

**BE ABLE TO**
Create a composition expressing a personal idea from observation, research, or imagination. (IL VAS 26B)
Plan and create a work of art using defined elements, principles, and tools. (IL VAS 25B)
Identify and use universal symbols. (IL VAS 25A)
React to art works in a respectful, constructive, and supportive manner (IL VAS 27A)

Instructional Concepts

Students in third and fourth grade are beginning to develop higher order thinking skills. With some coaching and discussion, they are able to understand symbolism: how an object can represent an idea. At this age, students are beginning to develop a sense of personal identity. They want to be accepted by their peers and belong to a group, but they are conscious of differences between themselves and others. They are also increasingly social while becoming more selective about their friends.

This unit allows students to embrace their uniqueness and reminds them of
their place within the class community. It gives them an opportunity to develop their social skills and learn how to work effectively with others.

| Lessons | **Lesson 1** Symbols in Everyday Life  
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|         | ▪ Class discusses symbols and symbolism  
|         | ▪ Students look at how companies use logos to identify their product  
|         | ▪ Students discuss the symbolism of a logo  
|         | ▪ Students create their own personal logo  
|         | **Lesson 2** Creating a Class Logo *(see expanded lesson below)*  
|         | ▪ Class discusses what materials can used to make art  
|         | ▪ Class views bottle cap exemplars  
|         | ▪ Students work in groups to choose a symbol to represent their class  
|         | ▪ Teacher guides discussion of group logos and chooses one or more to represent the class (creates full-size template for use in creation of mural)  
|         | ▪ Students use paper template as a guide for stringing bottle caps together to make hanging mural.  

| Unit Materials and Exemplars | **Materials:**  
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|                             | ▪ Computer  
|                             | ▪ LCD Projector  
|                             | ▪ Markers  
|                             | ▪ Grid paper  
|                             | ▪ Drawing paper  
|                             | ▪ Bottle caps  
|                             | ▪ Metal punch  
|                             | ▪ 6-9 Yardsticks  
|                             | ▪ Heavy string  
|                             | ▪ Fishing line  
|                             | ▪ Yarn needle  
|                             | ▪ Dish soap  
|                             | ▪ Bucket  

| **Symbolism Exemplars:**  
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|                          | ▪ Dove (peace)  
|                          | ▪ Heart (love)  
|                          | ▪ Light bulb (idea)  
|                          | ▪ Cell phone bars (signal strength)  

| **Logo Exemplars:**  
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|                      | ▪ Apple logo  
|                      | ▪ Nike logo  
|                      | ▪ Chicago Bulls logo  
|                      | ▪ Batman logo  

| **Bottle Cap Exemplars:**  
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|                          | ▪ Bottle Cap Van  
|                          | ▪ Michelle Stitzlein  
|                          | ▪ Morgan Corbett  
|                          | ▪ Hanging bottle cap art  

| Assessment | **Informal Evaluation**  
|------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|            | ▪ Level of student attentiveness during presentation  
|            | ▪ Level of student participation in discussion  
|            | ▪ Student Daily Reflection Questionnaire  
|            | ▪ Behavioral Tracking Chart  

| **Formal Evaluation**  
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|                      | ▪ Personal Logo Lesson Rubric  
|                      | ▪ Group Symbol Rubric  

## LESSON 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Esther Pomranky</td>
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<tr>
<td>School:</td>
<td>St. Mary of the Lake School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade:</td>
<td>3rd – 4th Grade Title I Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Lesson:</td>
<td>(6) 50-minute class periods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to the Unit:</td>
<td>The lesson gives students an opportunity to work with recycled materials collected by the school community. Students will experience the process of collaborative art making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Life:</td>
<td>This lesson is designed to help students reflect on their place in the larger community as they make art together. The finished collaborative artwork can be a source of pride for the classroom community and an exciting addition to the school environment (Poethig, 2008).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem/Activity statement:</td>
<td>Small groups of students will brainstorm and present a design that they want to represent their class. The class will select one of the designs to create a larger work of art. Each small group of students will be responsible for replicating a part of the design. The parts will be put together to make the finished piece.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Goals:                     | **Students should:**  

**UNDERSTAND**

How the arts communicate an idea. (IL VAS 27B)

How sculptures are made. (IL VAS 26A)

**KNOW**

How the arts can contribute to community. (IL VAS 27B)

**BE ABLE TO**

Create a composition expressing a personal idea from observation, research, or imagination. (IL VAS 26B)

Plan and create a work of art using defined elements, principles, and tools. (IL VAS 25B) |
### Objectives:
- Students will use a limited color palette to create a drawing that uses symbolism to communicate an idea.
- Students will engage in thoughtful analysis and respectful critique of peers’ work.
- Students will work in small groups to complete part of a larger work of art from recycled materials.

### Materials/Exemplars:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>Bottle Cap Van</td>
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<td>Michelle Stitzlein</td>
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<td>Heavy weight fishing line</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dish soap</td>
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### Motivation:
The entire school has been collecting bottle caps for the past two months. Bottle caps will be displayed in clear bags (sorted by color) at the front of the room.

### Questions:

**DISCUSSION (Part One):**

**Topic questions**
- What sort of materials does an artist use to make art?
- What do you think “recycled” art is?
- What is a symbol?

**Association questions**
- How do you think an artist might use bottle caps to make a work of art?
- How do you think these works of art were made?
- What sort of symbols are used to represent love/peace/happiness?

**Visualization questions**
| Procedures: | **Discussion (Day 1)**  
Teacher will display bottle cap art and guide students in class discussion of topic, association, visualization, and transition questions. |
| --- | --- |
| | **Distribution (Day 1)**  
Teacher will assign students to groups and distribute graph paper and group jobs papers. Table leaders will pass out markers. |
| | **Distribution (Days 2-6)**  
Group leader will pick up in-progress work and bring bottle caps back to the group as needed. |
| | **Work Period (Day 1)**  
Students will work in groups to brainstorm and design a symbol for their class following artwork guidelines. |
| | **Clean Up**  
Group leaders will return supplies and store in-progress work. Teacher will distribute Daily Student Reflection Questionnaires for students to complete independently at a seat in the school hall. Students will return questionnaires to teacher when finished. |
| Evaluation: | **Informal Evaluation**  
- Level of student attentiveness during presentation  
- Level of student participation in discussion  
- Student Daily Reflection Questionnaire  
- Behavioral Tracking Chart |
| | **Formal Evaluation**  
- Lesson Rubric |
Poethig, J. (2008). *Viewpoint: Community collaborative* |
http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/06/perspectives_on.php
### A2: Behavioral Tracking Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 1</th>
<th>Student 2</th>
<th>Student 3</th>
<th>Student 4</th>
<th>Student 5</th>
<th>Student 6</th>
<th>Student 7</th>
<th>Student 8</th>
<th>Student 9</th>
<th>Student 10</th>
<th>Student 11</th>
<th>Student 12</th>
<th>Student 13</th>
<th>Student 14</th>
<th>Student 15</th>
<th>Student 16</th>
<th>Student 17</th>
<th>Student 18</th>
<th>Student 19</th>
<th>Student 20</th>
<th>Student 21</th>
<th>Student 22</th>
<th>Student 23</th>
<th>Student 24</th>
<th>Student 25</th>
<th>Student 26</th>
<th>Student 27</th>
<th>Student 28</th>
<th>Student 29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Off-Task</td>
<td>Tattling</td>
<td>Verbal Aggr., Name Calling</td>
<td>Physical Aggr.</td>
<td>Peacemaking, Conflict Res.</td>
<td>Encouragement, Compliments, Positive Tattling</td>
<td>Cooperation, Teamwork</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Notes:</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DATE: None

Notes:
### A3: Behavioral Observation Notes

**Group X**  
*(Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Behaviors <em>(circle all that apply)</em></th>
<th>Positive Behaviors <em>(circle all that apply)</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Off-task</td>
<td>Peacemaking / Conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattling</td>
<td>Encouragement / Compliments / Positive tattling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal aggression / Name-calling</td>
<td>Cooperation / Teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
## A4: Assignment Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Execution</strong></td>
<td>Sketch is complete, exact, and neatly colored.</td>
<td>Sketch is complete and colored.</td>
<td>Sketch is incomplete or not submitted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Color</strong></td>
<td>Sketch demonstrates deliberate use of warm/cool, analogous, and complementary colors. Color distribution perfectly reflects availability of materials.</td>
<td>Demonstrates some attention to using contrasting warm/cool colors. Color distribution mostly reflects availability of materials.</td>
<td>Demonstrates little or no attention to color theory. Color distribution does not reflect availability of materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shape</strong></td>
<td>Shapes are large and clearly defined.</td>
<td>Shapes are mostly defined.</td>
<td>Shapes are tiny or poorly defined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symbolism</strong></td>
<td>Unique symbol incorporated into sketch. Meaning of symbol is thoroughly explained in 3 or more sentences.</td>
<td>One of classroom-generated symbols incorporated into sketch. Meaning of symbol is explained.</td>
<td>No symbolism attempted. No explanation of symbol is provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural connection (recycled art)</strong></td>
<td>Explains what recycled art is and can be made of. Describes how it is different from traditional art, and explains its significance (why it is important).</td>
<td>Explains what recycled art is and can be made of. Describes how it is different from traditional art.</td>
<td>Cannot explain recycled art or how it differs from traditional art.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of class time</strong></td>
<td>Always on task. Does not disturb fellow workers. Never needs to be reminded to refocus.</td>
<td>Usually on task. Occasionally (once a week) needs to be reminded to refocus.</td>
<td>Frequently off task. Must be reminded one or more times a class to refocus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation</strong></td>
<td>Contributes equally to group work. Strives to keep all group members on task.</td>
<td>Contributes equally to group work.</td>
<td>Regularly distracts others from work through talking or physical disruption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Speaks kindly and respectfully to other group members. Shares opinions but also listens and attempts to involve all group members in the conversation. Gives encouragement or compliments regularly.</td>
<td>Usually speaks kindly to other group members. Shares opinions and listens to others. Occasionally offers encouragement or a compliment.</td>
<td>Picks fights with or speaks disrespectfully to group members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neatness / Accuracy</strong></td>
<td>Order of colors strung together perfectly matches class plan.</td>
<td>Order of colors strung together mostly matches class plan.</td>
<td>Order of colors strung together does not match class plan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### A5: Daily Student Reflection Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOU</th>
<th>Name:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Following directions</strong></td>
<td>😊😊😊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staying on task</strong></td>
<td>😊😊😊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharing and taking turns</strong></td>
<td>😊😊😊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listening to others</strong></td>
<td>😊😊😊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Encouraging others</strong></td>
<td>😊😊😊</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being respectful (no insults or injury)</strong></td>
<td>😊😊😊</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Name:** ______________________________

| **Following directions** | 😊😊😊     |
| **Staying on task**      | 😊😊😊     |
| **Sharing and taking turns** | 😊😊😊  |
| **Listening to others**  | 😊😊😊     |
| **Encouraging others**   | 😊😊😊     |
| **Being respectful (no insults or injury)** | 😊😊😊 |

**Name:** ______________________________

| **Following directions** | 😊😊😊     |
| **Staying on task**      | 😊😊😊     |
| **Sharing and taking turns** | 😊😊😊  |
| **Listening to others**  | 😊😊😊     |
| **Encouraging others**   | 😊😊😊     |
| **Being respectful (no insults or injury)** | 😊😊😊 |

**Name:** ______________________________

Write one sentence telling me what you accomplished today.

__________________________________________________________________________

Write one sentence describing how you contributed to your group’s assigned task today.

__________________________________________________________________________
A6: Interview Form

Student Name:
Date:

What was the best part of this lesson?

What did you like least about making this art piece?

What did you learn from this lesson?

What problems did you and your group have with making decisions or getting along? (ask for examples)

How do you feel about making a work of art that nobody gets to take home?
Figure B1. A group of students puts together a string of bottle caps. They begin by taping their string to the table. They then lay the caps on the strip, matching the colors as closely as possible. Finally, they use a needle to put the caps on the string. (The instructor used a metal punch to put two holes in each cap as it was collected.)