

Personal Narrative

My interest in incorporating social and emotional learning practices into my art curriculum began during the 2020-2021 school year. I began working at Barrackville Elementary and Middle School, a rural school in West Virginia outside the city of Fairmont, that year and had a blended group of students. This group consisted of students who were learning fully remotely and a group of students who came to school part time, and then were learning virtually and eventually came back for four days a week during the spring of 2021 that school year.

During that year, I began to see the effect virtual learning was having on my students: students were stressed with the amount of work they were having to do in addition to learning online. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, the school counselor was also seeing how students were struggling socially and emotionally now more than ever as a result of the pandemic and the virtual/hybrid learning methods, advocating for social and emotional learning opportunities for our students. As students slowly acclimated back to face-to-face learning, they were having to relearn social behaviors and relearn being in the classroom full time, on top of learning their regular subjects, which included math, reading, writing, science, history, music, art, etc. Due to the various ways students were learning over the last two years, the gap both academically and socially in students became apparent this year.

During my first year teaching at Barrackville Elementary and Middle School, my students, especially the middle schoolers, expressed how they were stressed. That year, I was lucky to have small groups of students due to the in-person pupils being split into different cohorts by last names, so I got to form close relationships with my students and connect with them in a more meaningful way. In particular, in one of my sixth grade classes, I had two boys in the cohort who began expressing their struggles that year and from the previous year when learning went virtual. Students who were typically getting A's or B's in their classes were starting to see that they were receiving B's and C's. These students expressed how difficult it was to work remotely for three days and then come in person for two days. They were struggling to grasp their schoolwork as easily compared to the previous years they've been in school. The amount of work they needed to complete online was a lot for them too, and they were struggling to catch up after switching to emergency remote learning in 2020. The students expressed that they were always excited to come to my class and their other elective classes (music or media) because they felt these classes allowed them to de-stress from their other classes. Knowing that the students were stressed, I began looking for projects online to help them further. That year, I came across neurographic art from a Facebook group for art teachers and read about how the process is meant to help the artist de-stress or release tension or worries. These students expressed how they found the neurographic project very relaxing and how it helped them de-stress even more than the work they usually did in my class.

When I began my graduate classes and began thinking about what direction to go in for my thesis, I was thinking about the stress and pressure being put on students as they were reentering the classroom, some for the first time in over a year, and I was also enrolled in art therapy courses. These courses helped to show effective ways to incorporate art therapy techniques or projects into the art education classroom. Through these courses, I gathered a stronger understanding of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and began to formulate the idea to focus my research on SEL in the art education classroom to see the effects these practices had in helping students, and to encourage students to find different ways to help them process and deal with the extra stress they were under.

During this research project, I got to discuss and understand how stress affects students in first, fourth, and sixth grade. It was interesting to see and hear the students express what stressors existed in their lives, the ways they worked to de-stress (some without even realizing it before), and learn how art can be another way for them to deal with their stress. A lot of students' stress came from either their schoolwork or from additional responsibilities they had outside of school during that time. One student expressed to me that even though the project was helpful to decrease stress, they still felt very overwhelmed because they had sports practice after school and then had to clean their room and help their parents out at home. Towards the end of the research, I saw a spike in stress for my students, especially in the fourth and sixth graders. During the last group I worked with, students were completing their last math and reading diagnostic tests for the year, which was putting pressure on them as they wanted to perform well. Students, especially in fourth grade, were also overwhelmed with getting their last projects and assignments turned in on time. One fourth grader expressed to me that they were stressed because they had a few assignments that were not done or completed when they were due earlier that quarter and had to complete them all for a grade.

For the outside stressors, some students found that their extracurricular activities added additional stress. Some students were participating in a play being put on at the local state college and they had rehearsals every day after school for several hours. A lot of students, especially in first and fourth grade, also had sports going on, like t-ball or baseball. Students either had games or practice after school for their sports, and those were usually every day; having the sports practices and games or rehearsals made their time after school very busy along with having schoolwork to complete and any other responsibilities at home. Some students would have chores to complete or would need to help their parents with taking care of younger siblings. Some of the chores would be fixing their bed or cleaning up their toys; some of the older students would help their parents with cleaning up the house like putting dishes in the sink after dinner.

After completing this research, I found that these lessons helped students decompress and helped them find some relief from the pressures that they are under. I feel that these lessons will help students be able to recognize their feelings and find ways to help emotion regulation outside the art room on their own.