



STOCK PHOTO IMAGE

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I HOPE THAT THEY UNDERSTAND what we want to express and this is that everyone no matter what race, color, or belief, can be together and share ideas, and see themselves as one.”

These words were written by a student from Plainfield (NJ) High School as she reflected on the semester-long art project that created a powerful message for her entire school. She is one of the 12 Graphics Arts II students at Plainfield who participated in a photojournalism project that strove to ease racial and ethnic tension between the school’s Black and Hispanic populations by emphasizing the values of togetherness and community inside their school’s walls. This project is part of a larger effort in Plainfield in which school administrators, educators, and students collaborate to strengthen the whole student.

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Over the past eight years, Plainfield's administrators have recognized that because their students are being confronted with the increasing presence of violence, drugs, and other health-damaging behavior, they need to be equipped with the resources to make responsible, healthy decisions. Among such resources are interventions that are designed to build students' social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, which include the ability to recognize and manage strong feelings, establish positive relationships, set goals, make plans, and solve problems effectively, while also developing compassion, ethics, and responsibility (Elias et al., 1997). SEL is not only a means of coping with problems and crises but also an essential part of educating the whole student. Its inclusion in the school curriculum increases the likelihood that students will develop into responsible, caring, upright individuals who will lead productive lives and become assets to their schools, families, and communities.

THE LAWS OF LIFE

Laws of Life is an essay contest in which students identify and write about some of the values that are central to their lives. These values, whether they have been demonstrated by the student's past or are principles for the student's present and future, are the student's laws of life. The student identifies some of his or her own personal laws of life, then writes an essay that explains, demonstrates, or explores one or more of these laws in his or her own words. The sample essays provided in the contest guidelines and in the Laws of Life newsletters show the diversity of possible topics and methods for addressing the topics, from an experience that taught one student to appreciate how fortunate he or she is to another student's exploration of several role models for perseverance.

The contest is designed to be held at any grade level, from within a single school to statewide. Georgia, for example, has held the contest statewide for the last six years and is awarding this year's prizes to the top contestants in the state and in each school. Guidelines for setting up a contest are given on the Laws of Life Web site. They include suggestions on how to find sponsors, how to encourage and guide the students, and how to judge the essays. For more information on the contest or to view or request contest guidelines, please visit www.lawsoflife.org.

Moreover, recent studies suggest that when schools promote SEL, academic achievement also increases. For example, programs that promote SEL have led to improved class attendance and reduced drop-out rates, both of which are strongly related to school success; other studies have shown strong connections between report card grades and SEL skills (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Although the arts-SEL integration may foster academic success in everyone, it is most important for high-risk urban youth, who are exemplified by the students in the Plainfield school district.

Multiple Intelligences and the Laws of Life

The Laws of Life is an international essay contest and SEL initiative that many school districts use to build students' SEL and related abilities. In the contest, students reflect on their identities—who they are, who they want to become, and what they want their lives to stand for—by writing about the main values by which they live their life, their “laws of life.” Laws of Life was adopted by the Plainfield school district during the 2000–01 academic year. Despite the popularity of the essay contest, however, its emphasis on literacy may not reach all learners, especially those at risk for academic difficulty. Educators at Plainfield recognized that not all students may excel in reading or writing but that some might be more comfortable expressing their values through another means, such as the arts.

According to the theory of multiple intelligences, students process and use knowledge in different ways. Gardner (1999) identified eight different intelligences—linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist—and suggested that students may experience varying levels of strength within each area.

Integrating SEL and the visual and performing arts is an exciting approach that allows educators to reach students who otherwise have been unengaged in school. The arts are well suited to enhance the educational experiences of adolescents (Allen, 2004; Campbell & Campbell, 1999). Involvement in the arts not only teaches artistic content, but also leads to the development of social and emotional skills that facilitate students' personal and academic development (Fiske, 1999; Jensen, 2001). Critical analysis skills, the ability to solve problems and deal with ambiguity, perseverance, and striving for excellence are all characteristics of arts education that can be applied to all other areas of learning. Moreover, the arts nourish students' sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor neurobiological systems and can lead to the development of leadership skills, self-esteem, and cooperation (Jensen, 2001). Research has also shown that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds particularly benefit from arts

Plainfield High School

Location: Plainfield, NJ

Grades:

Enrollment: 1,610

Community: Urban

Demographic: 35.9% Hispanic, 63.8% Black, 0.2% Asian, 0.1% White; 52% free and reduced-price lunch eligible

Administrative team: 1 principal, 4 vice principals

Faculty: 160

Staff: 46

education and are less likely to drop out if they receive the opportunity to study art in school (Paige & Huckabee, 2005).

Unfortunately, today's test-driven educational practices are primarily focused on fostering the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences. By neglecting the other six intelligences, schools fail to strengthen the whole student and, in many instances, miss reaching large numbers of students. In recognition of this, the educational team at Plainfield applied multiple intelligences theory to the Laws of Life program so students would no longer be limited to expressing their personal values in a written essay. Instead, students are encouraged to create a painting, a song, or a dance performance that reflects their laws of life. As a result, students who experienced difficulties when writing because of language barriers or lack of confidence now have equal opportunities to excel in the SEL program.

The Photojournalism Project

Students in Plainfield's mixed-grade Graphic Arts II class participated in a project aimed at integrating the Laws of Life into the existing graphic arts curriculum. Students were given the opportunity to use photography and graphic arts techniques to create a visual representation of their Laws of Life concerning friendship.

First, students were asked to discuss the importance of values, particularly those values that relate to being a good friend. On the basis of that discussion, the students' teacher, David R. Smith, explored ways to reflect students' values of friendship and togetherness. He proposed that the class photograph groups of students with

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their friends and then incorporate the photos into one large banner to convey how each student has his or her own group of friends but all of these groups together make up the larger school community. To further celebrate diversity in the community, the teacher suggested incorporating national flags that represented students' backgrounds as well as other parts of the world into the frame of the banner.

Integrating the Laws of Life into the graphic arts curriculum gave personal meaning to the students' work and elicited a sense of ownership. Students had a personal stake in learning the compositional and technical aspects of photography, a new medium for most, and in expanding their skills and knowledge in the graphic arts. The young graphic artists diligently designed fliers and hall passes to advertise their project and encourage their fellow students to get their photos taken. Several students helped to build a backdrop for the photo shoot. After the backdrop was built and more than 200 students had signed up, the graphic arts students began taking photos of their peers during their lunch periods. This process, driven by group work and cooperation, took about two weeks to complete.

After all the pictures had been taken, the graphic arts students began working on the picture files to "mask" each figure, which involved digitally separating each figure from the white background. Each individual file was then incorporated into the final banner on the teacher's master computer. The final product was printed onto a 25-square-foot full-color banner that was hung in the school cafeteria. After several weeks, the students reflected on what they were able to take away from the entire experience.

Impact on the Students

When the students were first introduced to the project, their overall reaction was one of excitement, especially over the opportunity to use the digital camera. The students responded well to learning the photographic techniques. However, they were not as enthusiastic about learning the new graphic art techniques that were essential for the project. When introduced to a new technique, the students were less productive, frustrated with the process, and less engaged in the project.

The teacher also found that delegating responsibility evenly among his students was challenging; often, at least one student was absent. The class also experienced some technical difficulty during the later stages of the project when their teacher's computer had trouble working with the large picture files. These became important teachable moments that the teacher used to build students' SEL skills and teamwork and to encourage them to live up

to their laws of life. Despite being faced with various obstacles, the students were able to keep a positive outlook and were determined to see the project to its completion.

The reflection exercise revealed some telling results for the project as a whole. When asked to describe what they thought and felt when they looked at their completed project for the first time, 50% of the students expressed that they felt a great appreciation for all of their hard work, and 25% noted that their school was a diverse community. The overwhelming majority of students hoped that their peers would look at the banner and see a message of unity. The overall reaction from students who participated in this project was one of genuine pride and accomplishment. All of the students involved with this project expressed their desire for the Plainfield High School community to regard itself as a unified society. Given this taste of empowerment and togetherness, many students asked to do another photography project next year.

The students recognized that by working with one another and interacting with so much of the school population throughout the course of the project, they were able to put many laws of life to use in ways they could appreciate.

Current literature on SEL and multiple intelligences theory asserts that working in other modalities gives students a chance to develop and strengthen a range of abilities, like the graphic arts students who expanded their SEL skills through their use of photography. Plainfield administrators recognized how this process created synergy between academic and SEL. In the words of Eloise Bryant-Tinley, who retired in 2005 after serving as Plainfield's director of special projects and the school district's SEL coordinator, "Expression through the medium of art, music, dance, design, or photojournalism can be viewed as an acknowledgment that students have unique learning styles.... Imagine the impact on the student who has to reflect on and examine his or her values and ideals by using a creative process and choosing a means of representation that captures and communicates these ideals to others. Think of the richness of engagement for the student and the class and its impact on their academic success. I believe that this creative process provides an added element to the Laws of Life activity that is different from the written essay."

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many laws of life to use in ways they could appreciate. This was echoed in the comments of Otis Brown, the principal of Plainfield: "Laws of Life is a great way for kids to develop in terms of their wisdom and character, and to show respect for other people. These kids become more expressive of things they come across and that have an impact on their lives. It's a powerful tool for bringing out expression in kids.... The spoken word is good, the written word is great, but a picture speaks a thousand words. The best way to get a message across is by seeing it; the banner really speaks volumes.... These efforts should continue with vigor. The social and emotional element is what a lot of kids are missing."

Lessons Learned

Students in urban schools face more than their share of obstacles. Few resources, high absence rates, and little tolerance for frustration can shatter the fragile momentum that accompanies the start of many projects. Reflecting on their laws of life, emphasizing the importance of SEL skills, and working through modalities in which they have some sense of success and confidence can build students' resilience, especially when these tools are used by sensitive and caring educators. For many learners, the visual and performing arts can be the anchor of their school day and the vehicle through which they will stay engaged in learning and be willing to work through academic challenges and frustrations. **PL**

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