



TRANSLATIONS

THEORY TO PRACTICE

National Art Education Association

Kristi Oliver, Editor

ISSUE 4 | August 2021

www.arteducators.org



New Ideas + Directions

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For her full bio, [click here](#).

Lisa Kay is chair of the Art Education and Community Arts Practices and program head for art therapy at Tyler School of Art + Architecture, Temple University. She is an artist, educator, Board Certified art therapist, and researcher whose practice explores the intersections of art education and art therapy, with a focus on art as resilience and healing.

For her full bio, [click here](#).

Trauma-Informed Art Education: Caring for Learners and Each Other

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ART TEACHERS ENCOUNTER MANY CHALLENGES IN ART CLASSROOMS. Dealing with the complex issues of students living in crisis, including the shared trauma of the global pandemic, often leaves teachers wondering how to adapt or intervene. Art teachers are not clinical therapists, but they are in a position to help children cope with adversity by utilizing the therapeutic properties of art education (Hunter et al., 2018; Johns et al., 2020; Kay, 2020). What does research say about trauma-informed art education? How can we avoid retraumatizing learners and prevent secondary trauma in art teachers?

Our research focuses on resilience with/for teachers and students. It addresses social-emotional learning and trauma-informed art education that complements and informs the field. Donalyn's research focuses on fostering resilience through art for teachers and learners who have experienced psychological trauma. Lisa's research is situated at the intersection of art education and art therapy, specifically resilience and artmaking with adolescents who have experienced trauma. We offer art-based practices that may prevent secondary trauma, support social-emotional learning, and model self-care practices that can be incorporated in daily teaching practice.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY IN ART EDUCATION

TRAUMA IS PREVALENT IN SOCIETY; therefore, trauma-informed art education is gaining attention in the field. Statistics reveal that each year millions of children are exposed to some form of traumatic event (Perry, 2013). Generally speaking, 50% to 70% of adults have experienced some form of trauma (SAMHSA), and in public behavioral health, 90% of clients have experienced trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). This can have a great impact on teaching and learning.

Trauma-informed art education involves commitment to relationships and programs that attempt to mitigate the effects of past traumatic experiences and to avoid retraumatization (Kay, 2020). Art educators who are trauma-informed build relationships, listen and affirm, empathize, assess to teach, and instruct in ways that help students build on their strengths. We utilize the therapeutic properties of art education to provide a safe space for creative expression. There is a difference between *therapeutic* and *therapy*. As art teachers, we focus on teaching while art therapists focus on diagnosis and treatment. While what we do may have therapeutic benefits, we are not practicing art therapy. The purpose of art therapy is for Board Certified Art Therapists (ATR-BC) to facilitate the use of the creative process to support personal and relationship treatment goals, such as to reduce and resolve emotional conflicts and distress.

CREATING CALMNESS

NEUROSCIENTISTS HAVE WRITTEN extensively about the impact of trauma on the brain (Panlilio et al., 2018). We will focus on the application of neuroscience in art teaching. For example, the vagus nerve controls how fast your body can control stress. Through art, we can stimulate the vagus nerve and speed up the ability to resume calmness after stress or anxiety. It can help get students ready to learn.

Specific things that stimulate the vagus nerve and create calmness and increase our ability to deal with stress are simple things like singing or chanting, laughter, positive thoughts, and social connection. Deep slow breathing is one strategy that can be used every day and multiple times per day to calm students and teachers. Other things you can do:

1. A review of art concepts like geometric shapes can be combined with breathing to create calmness. Have students slowly trace a triangle shape with their finger in an upward direction, breathe in for a count of 3, hold for a count of 3 as they trace in a downward direction, then breathe out for another count of 3. Also, instead of just having your students do it, YOU DO IT WITH THEM!
2. The Take 5 breathing technique can also be useful because no props are required. Hold your hand up to signal students to stop what they are doing and breathe with you. It works to calm you and your students.
3. Also consider having learners of all ages use their bodies to relieve stress and increase focus. Combine movement with reviewing line types and quality. Have them stand and stretch their arms to the sky to create the tallest vertical line, or create a zigzag or a squiggly line with their bodies.
4. Integrate play with artmaking to encourage deep breathing. Art teachers can mix 2 tablespoons of liquid tempera paint, 2 tablespoons of dish soap, and 1 tablespoon of water then guide learners to blow bubbles on paper, creating art while encouraging deep breathing. Another strategy is to have learners design a pinwheel to use when needed to breathe deeply. Blowing paint through a straw to create colorful imagery is also effective.
5. Artmaking activities that require deep pressure, like scribbling, repetitive coloring, and wedging clay, can also have a calming effect on the neurological system.



Scribble drawing.

(Right): Erin Steen, Overloaded, 2021. Pencil on paper, 4 x 6 in.

PREVENTING SECONDARY TRAUMA AND COMPASSION FATIGUE

AS ART TEACHERS WE ARE OFTEN ASKED to teach all students in the school. In such a situation, hearing the firsthand trauma our students have experienced can result in secondary trauma or compassion fatigue in us. The symptoms of secondary trauma are similar to those associated with firsthand trauma, and compassion fatigue is the result of secondary trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). Symptoms of secondary trauma can include:

- depression
- anxiety
- insomnia
- emotional numbness
- difficulty focusing
- anger and/or sadness
- aggression or lethargy
- appetite changes
- excessive drinking

Ultimately these experiences can affect our ability to teach, but also negatively impact our physical and mental well-being. Art therapist Barbara Fish (2006) poetically refers to this harmful and cumulative experience that impacts art therapists as “harm touch” (p. 6). This phenomenon also applies to art teachers. Since we are susceptible to secondary trauma or compassion fatigue, we need ways to process our experiences and manage our emotions. Fish advocates making art to counteract the negative effects of exposure to secondary stress and trauma (Kay, 2020). Art-based strategies for social-emotional learning, self-care practices, and artmaking that are incorporated in your daily teaching practice can benefit you and your students.



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING that is an integral part of education and human development can be modeled and taught in the art room. It encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. These competencies can also be viewed from a trauma-informed perspective. The following focused activities promote social-emotional learning in enjoyable, creative ways.

1. Follow the Leader Drawing. Students work in small groups. Students take turns being the leader, making lines on a large sheet of paper while the others follow. The minds and hands of the other students focus on the leader's marks and movements while all are listening to music. The activity embodies multisensory experiences and helps one attune to the immediate, blocking out thoughts of anything else.

2. Weaving. Start by having learners write for a few minutes filling the page with words as they respond to the prompt, "Write about a time that was challenging for you. You will not be asked to share information about that time with anyone else." Then have learners tear that paper into strips and use that to weave and create a visually appealing work of art. Afterward, reflect on the process. Our stress is part of who we are, and we cannot pretend it does not exist. But we do not have to let it define us. We can transform it like we did in this weaving and create a new narrative that celebrates the successful ways we cope.

3. Bilateral Drawing. An easy, short, enjoyable way for you and your students to reset your vagus nerve and prepare for teaching and learning. Everyone picks up a piece of chalk, a crayon, or a marker, putting one in each hand, and makes marks with both hands while responding to music.



Bilateral scribble drawing.

ART-BASED SELF-CARE

ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES for fostering resilience and addressing self-care of art teachers is to engage in our own creative practices. Teachers can use artmaking to respond and reflect on their teaching and life experiences. Artmaking is effective at expressing feelings and enables teachers to deal with their own feelings and to share their perceptions with others. By making art, teachers can tend to their own wellness and mental health needs, which can help us better support others (Kay, 2020). We believe that this study helps to imagine such social activity in relationship to learning, the study of objects, and the activities surrounding them. Making here was a process and embodiment by which place was performed and shaped. The stories we tell about place also provide a framework by which to experience the world. How do teachers help students cope during difficult times? They can



Avery Rogusky, Yellow Sky, 2021. Gouache on bristol, 4 x 6 in.

"While making this visual note, I was able to sort through some emotions and bring myself a little more confidence on beginning the journey of a new lesson plan that is slightly out of my comfort zone."

model art-based self-care to encourage students to care for themselves and each other. They can use art to help students cope and show kindness and concern. They can care for students by practicing basic acts of kindness. These basic acts are: practice empathy, normalize distress, emphasize the "here-and-now," emphasize safety, attend to sensory responses, introduce self-empowerment, and be culturally sensitive (Kay, 2020).

1. Empathy: Listen, reflect, and affirm to mirror empathic relationships; practice patience and kindness. Make partner empathy drawings. Students take turns drawing without talking and observing each other's drawing process for 3 minutes. Each partner gives each other feedback about what they noticed or observed about their partner's drawing process. The intention is on process, developing reflective listening skills and empathy rather than critique content.

2. Normalize distress: Reinforce safety in the “here-and-now” moments. Suggest the student make a simple doodle on paper illustrating what they fear or what worry looks like in colors, lines, or shapes.

3. Attend to sensory responses: Help students relax their bodies by suggesting simple relaxation exercises that involve the senses. Have students create artwork about things they like to see, smell, taste, touch, and hear.

4. Introduce self-empowerment and agency: Reinforce a sense of being capable by acknowledging strengths and accomplishments.

5. Be culturally sensitive: Teach through students’ own cultural experiences, backgrounds, and frames of reference.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

TRAUMA-INFORMED ART EDUCATION can help teachers and students cope with stress and anxiety from traumatic experiences. The art-based strategies shared here are a starting point to better equip art teachers in dealing with trauma and secondary trauma.

According to Fred Rogers (1994), “Our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is... Our job is to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression” (p. 12). As art educators we are in a very special position to do just that! ■

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“Making art in my journal helps me cope with my intense emotions in my work and life. My artwork metaphorically provides a way to deeply express and a place to hold them.”

—Petra Fenton-Spaid
(Kay, 2020, p. 124)



“I love how art can help everyone who is depressed, or has experienced trauma or anxiety. Art truly opens new pathways in the brain that helps calm, gain confidence, resilience and problem solve.”

—High school art teacher



“It’s been quite a year to enter into teaching, but I have loved exploring the myriad of ways to support children and their families in the school setting. [The] insights and teachings have definitely guided my work this year and have been invaluable resources both in and out of the classroom.”

—PreK assistant teacher, art therapist

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- 1 *Healing Through Creativity: Visual Art Educators Guide*. Published by Scholastic Art and Writing and NAEA. (See www.artandwriting.org/static/b8f6fc4fed800815544685043273b6e7/Healing_Creativity_ART_2020_FINAL.pdf.)
- 2 Heise, D., & Kay, L. (2020). *Fostering Resilience in Teachers During Turbulent Times Through Self-Care* [Webcast]. NAEA Research Commission – Professional Learning Through Research. (See www.youtube.be/FuwDBtpLilg.)
- 3 National Art Education Association. (2020, June 8). *NAEA Position Statement on Reaching Learners Who Have Experienced Trauma*. (See www.arteducators.org/advocacy-policy/articles/690-naea-position-statement-on-reaching-learners-who-have-experienced-trauma.)
- 4 Heise D., Johns, B., & Hunter, A. (2018). *Art for Healing in Difficult Situations* [Webinar]. (See www.arteducators.org/advocacy-policy/articles/690-naea-position-statement-on-reaching-learners-who-have-experienced-trauma.)

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Translations was first introduced as an NAEA publication in 1991 to bridge research and practice, and to assist all visual arts educators in understanding the importance and applicability of research in the field of art education. In an effort to reenergize *Translations* and enhance its value as a member benefit, the Professional Learning through Research (PLR) Working Group of the NAEA Research Commission has assumed editorial responsibilities for this peer-reviewed publication. Find out more here: www.arteducators.org/research/naea-research-commission.

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Each issue of *Translations* will explore one of these NAEA Research Agenda content areas: *Social Justice*, *Emerging Technology*, *Assessment + Evaluation*, *Demographic Data*, and *New Ideas + Directions*.



Social Justice



Emerging Technology



Assessment + Evaluation



Demographic Data



New Ideas + Directions

New Ideas + Directions: New Ideas + Directions is a broad category that includes the exploration of new and evolving ideas relating to the NAEA research agenda. This category aims to highlight research that focuses on the content/disciplines of art and art education, students/learning, art educators/teaching, and the context/setting in which learning takes place as a means of improving art education theory, practice, advocacy, and policy.