

OPINION: Trading textbooks for dance?

When emotions can't be taught on paper



When I traveled to Bogotá, Colombia, as a Fulbright Scholar in 2007, my grandparents asked why I couldn't conduct my research in Europe. Colombia had a reputation as one of the most violent places in the world. But across the board, efforts have been made to reduce this violence, including increased focus on prevention in schools. That's where I was working.

As I watched the children, one dynamic jumped out to me from the beginning — students were taught conflict resolution through textbooks and quizzes. I thought, how can you teach emotions on paper?

Then I saw students dancing in the schoolyard. Almost everyone was engaged, a stark contrast to the classroom. It was clear to me that dancing broke down barriers and allowed students to participate in ways they felt comfortable. Through dance, they were able to safely express their emotions,

relate to one another and build empathy.

Up close, there may not appear to be many similarities between school communities I visited in Colombia and today's schools in America, but from 10,000 feet they share some sad trends. Violence and drug use are increasing among U.S. teens, and we rely more and more on standardized tests to measure success.

Get the best of our award-winning coverage sent to you weekly

But how can we measure success with such a limiting metric? The truth is, we can't. This ideology has given rise to the "whole child" movement, in which educators have pushed for a holistic approach to education.

Test prep alone will not prepare students for all that life will bring. We are not building resilient students. We are not building creative capacity. We are not increasing empathy among our youth. And the results of these failures are coming to light every day in deeply disturbing ways.

Some [research](#) suggests that low empathy coupled with high levels of exposure to community violence may serve as a predictor of whether adolescents will resort to violence themselves.

Empathy can inhibit violence and antisocial behavior.

That is where the magic of creative expression can play a crucial role.

Being creative is an inherently vulnerable process. When we are creative, we are putting a piece of ourselves into the world. When we write, when we sing, when we read poems and when we move, we are putting ourselves out there for review and judgment. By using creative expression as a vehicle, we are able to access a more authentic and deeper connection to ourselves and build more profound, authentic connections with others.

Movement allows us to feel the physical state of another person with our own

bodies, promoting empathy. Elements of movement are crucial to the perception and expression of emotions as well as [bonding and cooperation](#) with others.

We need to stop asking students to sit behind desks and fill out worksheets on self-awareness or emotional management, or to look at diagrams on anger management and resiliency. Instead, we should invite students to connect what is happening in their minds to what they're feeling in their bodies, to express themselves and use alternative means to communicate.

We embody feelings because we can understand them more deeply. We need to use creative methods to make connections and have our own realizations and “a-ha” moments about what we understand, or thought we understood, about ourselves and one another.

Giving ourselves the time and space to feel, name and express our emotions is something we must do every day. Ritualized practice is extremely important in cultivating social and emotional well-being, both in students and adults. Rituals can ground us and make us feel safe. They help us keep our emotions together and stay focused during times of chaos. Rituals pull us back to our values and remind us to honor what's really important.

Through a ritualized practice of social-emotional learning, we see increased empathy. We see stronger communities. We see students who recognize emotions within themselves and are equipped to manage the difficult ones. We see support systems. We see safe environments.

We saw this concept come to life at a partner school in Baltimore. One student was frequently sent to an administrator's office for outbursts in class, the beginning of a negative cycle that can cause students to miss lessons and lose support systems.

A few weeks after social-emotional learning was implemented, a beautiful moment took place in the classroom. As the student began experiencing a

negative emotion, he announced it to the class.

“I’m feeling really mad right now!”

Not only was the student able to identify the emotion, he was also able to communicate what he was feeling. That led to other students making suggestions for how he might calm down, using some of the strategies taught in the curriculum.

“I thought, how can you teach emotions on paper? Then I saw students dancing in the schoolyard. Almost everyone was engaged, a stark contrast to the classroom.”

“Why don’t you take a drink of water?” one student suggested. “How about going for a walk?” said another.

He decided to do both. The teacher agreed to the idea, and allowed the student to leave the classroom. Instead of a major distraction leading to conflict and lost class time, the student was gone for under five minutes and returned in a much better head-space, ready to learn.

Talk about passing a test with flying colors. By teaching students these skills and strategies, we can prevent thousands of children from being suspended or expelled, a slippery slope that can lead to isolation, incarceration and

addiction.

Ultimately, violent trends plaguing America are not without causes, just as they are not without solutions. We have ritualized stress instead of empathy. We have ritualized standards instead of creativity.

It is time to prioritize what we know to be truly important in life. It is time to teach students the skills they will need every day to get through the chaotic

world we live in. It is time to harness the power of creative expression, to rebuild connections within ourselves and one another.

This story about [social and emotional learning](#) and the arts was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for our [newsletter](#).

Sara Potler LaHayne is the founder and CEO of [Move This World](#), a social-emotional learning program that provides pre-K-12 educators and students with digital tools to strengthen their social and emotional well-being in order to create healthy environments in which effective teaching and learning can occur.

The Hechinger Report provides in-depth, fact-based, unbiased reporting on education that is free to all readers. But that doesn't mean it's free to produce. Our work keeps educators and the public informed about pressing issues at schools and on campuses throughout the country. We tell the whole story, even when the details are inconvenient. Help us keep doing that.

[Join us today.](#)