

Violence

Essential question: What are some of the causes of fighting that lead to violence and what can we do about it?

School: Edward Gideon Elementary School, Philadelphia, PA

Year of project: 2005-2006

Picture this scene: Seven-year-old Jada leans across her desk and whispers into her classmate's ear, "Nashaderra called you 'stupid' in the lunchroom." In a matter of minutes, this not-so-harmless rumor has spread like brushfire, inciting a near riot in the classroom.

Fortunately, this snapshot from Katie McGarry's second grade class is not entirely real. The students, coached by their teacher, wrote the script, cast the parts, rehearsed the scene and critiqued the first "rushes." With the help of a volunteer video producer, the students made a movie to address their service-learning project's essential question: "What can we do to prevent violence in our community?" It's a movie based on real life.

Their principal, who witnessed the initial filming, said, "The project is powerful because it's interactive. The students are living it, experiencing violence on a daily basis. What they need to do now is experience the solution."

Ms. McGarry helped her students select the focus and the idea for their project. She guided them in the administration of a community survey to determine who at school and in their community had been a victim of violence. They met with a police officer from the 22nd precinct who affirmed their efforts and gave them more to consider. They charted the responses to their surveys and written reflections on what they've learned and what they still wondered about.

During "read aloud" Ms. McGarry read excerpts from newspaper articles related to their topic, which fueled heated (and often emotional) class discussions. One article told the story of 23-year-old Kevin Johnson, who was rendered paralyzed after an argument with friends ended in gun violence. Subsequently the class invited Kevin and his mother to visit them at school, which they did. Their interview with the Johnsons became part of their anti-violence video.

The students' passion, along with that of a 3rd grade class at the school, led to the organization of school's first ever "Peace Week, which culminated with a school-wide assembly. Their 17-minute video was a centerpiece of the event.

During a class discussion, students shared insights gained from the project. Said one student in response to how he now helps control his temptation to fight: “I look at my mom's picture. I stop and pause and picture what could happen. I stop and think about it first.”

