

Chapter 12

Dewey, School Violence, and Aesthetic Response: Healing the Community through Arts after Disaster

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ABSTRACT

Since the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012 there have been at least 159 school shootings in America (Everytown, n.d.). This chapter focuses on application of Deweyan thought to school shootings and aesthetic responses. Educational and aesthetic theories are used to understand the effects of school violence and inquiry includes analysis of artful works made in response to shootings. Common themes are noted across all 3 sites in various aesthetic responses and the steps toward reconstruction of associated living. Findings suggest engagement in responsive art works may ameliorate the disruption and trauma of school shootings. Within aesthetic response, there is potential for reclamation, restoration, and re-presentation of experience through the doubled reconstruction of communal spaces/places and of relational identity after shooting incidents. Considerations include the use of aesthetic response and associated living practices by activist and educators as a potential means to understand and work against gun violence.

INTRODUCTION

Schools provide unique opportunities for civic engagement across the spectrum of joyful, prosaic, and even traumatic experiences. In general, Dewey (1916/2011) closely linked social practices of civic engagement, democracy, and education as modes of what he called associated living, “of conjoint communicated experience,” and a space of participation in common interests and actions (p. 50). Further,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1727-6.ch012

Greene (2005) makes the case for engaging the arts, or in the case of this chapter, an aesthetic response in times of civic unrest and crisis. She inspires teachers, “troubled and so often immobilized by feelings of helplessness” (p. 78) by local as well as global events, to enter into “spaces of imagination” (p. 77).

As well, when addressing disruptive and traumatic events such as school shootings there is a need for a pragmatic acceptance of the tragic sense of education (Burbules, 1997), which is basically understood as depending on a:

... dual perspective; of seeing at the same time the possibilities and limits, the gains and costs, the hopes and disappointments, of any human endeavor. By accepting the inevitability of doubt and disappointment in much of what we do, the tragic sense also frees us to take these moments of failure as occasions for new learning. (p. 66)

While school shootings will never be acceptable, focusing on development of practices and strategies in the aftermath of shootings moves research toward a fuller context of teaching, learning, and civic re-engagement.

In this chapter the authors analyze the engaged aesthetic responses to school shootings in three communities—Columbine High School (CHS), Red Lion Junior High School (RLJHS), and Sandy Hook Elementary School (SHES), where those affected try to come to terms with what has happened in a school setting. The first part of our research is to reveal particular perceptions, contexts, or understandings about works of art—in this case, artful response by those affected by school shootings. The second part of our research is the development a Deweyan model of conduct or steps of aesthetic response to school shootings, based on analysis of three identified communities. The authors explore the aesthetic dialog of art works to understand experience and socio-cultural context in the aftermath of school shootings with implications for applied and responsive strategies in educational settings and future research.

Individual and communal responses can take many forms, such as legislation, citizen action, protest, and so forth, but it also can be found in public displays of art. An aesthetic response is the creation of a social artifact and a type of artistic expression that attempts to make meaning of a senseless violent event. It re-establishes relationships between those directly and indirectly affected and, potentially, can help to move forward in the aftermath (Bourriaud, 2002; Jackson, 1998; Levine, 2009; McNiff, 2004). Social communication and civic engagement in aesthetic responses are active steps toward reconstruction of the bonds of associated living (Dewey, 1916/2011).

Though definitions of and statistics on incidents of active shooter incidents in public places vary (DOJ, 2014), since the tragic shootings at SHES in December 2012 there have been at least 159 school shootings in America (Everytown, n.d.). This chapter focuses on pragmatic acknowledgment of violence and tragedy as an ongoing presence in schools (Warnick, Johnson, & Rocha, 2010). This is not banal acceptance; rather, it is a pragmatic shift toward developing strategies for civic engagement, teaching, and learning. Concepts outlined here are not meant to be prescriptive or to make causal links but, rather, are exploratory practices and ideas to consider after an incident of disruptive violence.

Artistic responses to school violence are often seen as healing mechanisms, which they certainly are, but the authors are interested in educational and relational significance of such public art, interpreted with a Deweyan lens. We have chosen Dewey’s work on artful experience as our theoretical frame because he saw art as a consummate experience and as part of everyday life. Communal works of art in response to school violence call for an engaged response that re-establish shattered social bonds and go beyond individual attempts at healing (Fesmire, 2005; Simon, 2014; Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert,

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