



# Empathy as a Medium

by Joe Petraitis, *Art Educator*

*Zenon Sykuta Elementary School*



There wasn't a book, college course, or mentor that could have mentally prepared me for what I experienced during my first year of teaching elementary art in a south suburban high-needs school district. I was the new art teacher in a school of over 500 students ranging from kindergarten to third grade. My annual budget was a whopping 1 dollar per student and my small room had barely enough space to host the sometimes 30 plus students in each class. I was asked to do more with much less than I had anticipated, but I knew I had to make it work.

In the beginning, my students and I had shouting matches with no real winner. Once the shouting stopped in my room, the sound of chairs bouncing off my walls in the neighboring rooms frequently disrupted my lessons. My brand new art materials were either stolen, used as weapons, or destroyed in front of me. Students would defiantly walk around my room and bully others until an inevitable fight would erupt. If told "no," some kids would just run out of my room and I couldn't rely on the emergency call-button to call for help because our intercom system was outdated. When I sought help from administration, they were quick to give advice but found they, too, were struggling to find their own answers. Lost and afraid for the well being of myself and my students, I knew something needed to change.



It wasn't until I took up a new self care routine to ease my stress and reframe my mindset that I was able to begin trying to understand the underlying reasons why my students were acting out. Instead of running around and barking orders, I slowed down, spoke softer, and began asking questions to try and get to know my students. The students who gave me the most trouble were acting out because they wanted a reaction and my attention. When I realized this, I started a breakfast club and joined an after-school program to begin building relationships with them. Once I showed them I truly cared by giving them extra responsibilities, free journals, and art materials to take home paired with an open door policy to conference with them, I saw a huge turn-around. They began opening up about their realities faced at home and although at times I was at a loss of what to say, they still felt appreciated that someone was there to take the time out of their busy day to listen to them.

Do I have all the answers? Absolutely not, but despite the unbelievable challenges my district and I face on a daily basis, I show up early every day. I give my whole self to my students because I know my art lessons aren't always enough. We are all struggling in our own way to be heard, but with art, we can all speak the same language.

