

ADDRESSING TV VIOLENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

BY ALICE EVANS

As a culture, we have become so casual about violence that we turn our children loose in video arcades where they can shoot electronic guns at life-size human images. So casual that we park our seven-year-olds in front of TV sets where even the children's programs are filled with flickering images of violence. At this time in our history, when kindergartners to high-schoolers have been known to carry loaded guns into our public schools, teachers across America are becoming challenged—both personally and professionally—to face a national crisis of violence.

Susan Colonna has been educating first- and second-graders at Thurston Elementary School in Springfield, Oregon, for 10 of her 15 years as a teacher. She decided to tackle the ugly issue of violence by teaching her second-grade students to look critically at the content of their favorite television shows. How they went about it and what happened is the focus of this article.

Creating a Model

Colonna and fellow Thurston teachers Linda Ahern and Jennifer Carroll developed the segment on television violence, along with objectives and observable behaviors for measuring

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them, at a workshop in the fall of 1994. The topic—"Addressing the Issue of Violence in Children's Programs"—was selected as a way to implement a broader, state-mandated goal, teaching students to deliberate on public issues.¹ The knowledge and skills the teachers wanted students to gain from the instruction included: (1) understanding the concept of violence; (2) differentiating between violence and non-violence; (3) developing a reasonable argument to support a position; and (4) communicating a position orally or in writing.

Implementing the Model

Colonna returned to her classroom intent on implementing the somewhat sophisticated component with the second-graders. Her introduction to public issues began with a lesson on Martin Luther King. She read aloud and discussed with the 23 students the books *Happy Birthday Martin Luther King* and *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Free at Last*.² They watched a film about King's life. They talked about his commitment to non-violence, about how he died, about why he was important. They talked about segregation, role-playing what that might mean in terms of their own lives—not being able to use the drinking fountain, having to go outside to use the bathroom, being allowed only to use a certain area of the playground. They wrote in their journals.

As a culmination activity, Colonna directed the children to

think about problems they might want to change. This produced a variety of responses, such as “no more disease,” “an end to drug use,” “no more pollution,” “no more war,” “no more animal poaching.” The children asked that “people would stop hating each other because their skin is different” and that “teenagers would be safe.” (Incidents of violence, including a stabbing and an off-campus shooting involving students at the nearby high school, had prompted the specificity of the last concern.)

Colonna modeled for them a cloud-shaped mobile she had made. Across the white-on-blue surface, she had written, “I have a dream that one day there will be peace and happiness for all people.” Dividing the children into seven work groups, she explained that when they grew up, they would work with other people, and their boss would ask them to listen, to think about their instructions, and to carry out the job with their coworkers. Her job, she said, was to

watch them make dream clouds. If they had questions, they were to ask partners in their group for help. If no one in the group could answer, then they were to ask her.

“It was wonderful,” Colonna says. “No one asked me anything. I just gave positive feedback—‘I see you’re writing nicely. . . . I see you’re using all your rainbow colors.’”

Those who finished ahead helped others complete the task, so that by the end of the work period, everyone was ready to share. These were some of the messages written on the clouds: I have a dream that people would be safe at night; . . . everyone would be good; . . . everyone has enough food; . . . people would get along; . . . there would be no violence.

Colonna told the students their assignment was to take a look at their television shows to find out if they had too much violence. The students would be asked to form an opinion to present to

the program police, she explained. She showed them portions of three TV shows she had videotaped, *Power Rangers*, *Looney Tunes*, and another about two little bears that contained no violence, directing them to tell her to stop the tape “every time you see something violent.” She practiced with the class until everyone understood the assignment.

Collecting Data

After watching the shows, the students brainstormed, creating categories for TV violence: threats, hitting, kicking, weapons, bombs, other. These categories were used to create a violence tally sheet for collecting data. The six categories were listed in the first column on the sheet, followed by a column for “number of times” and another for “comments.”

Colonna sent home a letter informing parents about the assignment. Their child was to choose a children’s television program and tally the different categories of violence she or he saw. Parents were

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asked to help their child complete the violence tally and to help him or her write comments on the back of the page. Colonna provided both the school and her home phone number, inviting parents to call her with questions. Realizing that certain students were not likely to give the letter to their parents, Colonna contacted these parents by phone to inform them of the project.

After four days of data collection, the children brought their tally sheets to school. All the children had participated. Some had collected data alone, some with the help of parents, others with the help of VCRs. The tallies varied widely, but, as Colonna says, "The point is not accuracy of tally but awareness of what they tallied." In total, the students counted 649 incidents in 12 hours of programming.

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sent their conclusions to the class in the form of a poster, story, or other written statement. They were to state an opinion to give to the program police using one of these three forms.

National Spotlight

Thurston Elementary School Principal Kathi Dew was making a formal observation of Colonna's class the day the students practiced tallying violent acts on TV. Later that day, the district's public relations director called Principal Dew to ask if any classroom were involved in an activity related to the issue of violence. The PR director contacted the local newspaper about the students' TV violence research, and a *Springfield News* reporter visited Colonna's classroom. The reporter suggested Colonna contact the Lane County Board of Commissioners, which had as a priority the reduction of youth violence. One of the commissioners, Jerry Rust, visited Colonna's classroom and brainstormed with the children about how they could communicate their research results to others. Rust, an activist, explained how the students could put economic pressure on the sponsors of violent shows, perhaps even boycotting their products.

Rust and the second-graders came up with a six-point plan of action. First, they would write letters to U.S. senators and representatives to share their concerns about TV violence. Second, they would put out a news release about their findings and action plan. Third, they would identify the sponsors of the shows they had surveyed. Fourth, they would contact radio and other media to inform them of their efforts. Fifth, they would write a "Declaration of Independence From Violence." Sixth, they would ask the county commissioners for a resolution supporting their efforts.

Led by Colonna, the children completed all six points of their action plan. To prepare the children to write their own version of the Declaration of Independence, Colonna went to the library, copied the original, and read it to the students. Using the original document as their model, the students wrote their "Declaration of Independence From Violence":

We, the second-grade students in Room 7 at Thurston Elementary

Table 1
VIOLENCE SURVEY RESULTS

Each second-grade student in Room 7 at Thurston Elementary School watched a 30-minute children's cartoon program of their choice on January 6-9, 1995. They tallied incidents of violence in these programs. The results are listed below. The programs are arranged in order from most incidents to least. Some programs are listed more than one time because more than one student chose to watch it. Out of 12 hours of programming, there was a total of 649 incidents of violence.

Program	Total	Threats	Hitting	Kicking	Weapons	Bombs	Other
Wildcats	62	7	6	0	35	10	4
Power Rangers	50	4	12	20	8	1	5
Power Rangers	45	8	15	1	4	7	10
Looney Tunes	40	2	4	0	6	8	20
Power Rangers	40	6	7	12	6	1	8
Monster Forest	40	2	0	0	26	6	6
Ninja Turtles	37	2	5	5	12	8	5
Power Rangers	36	9	7	7	7	2	4
Ninja Turtles	36	3	5	0	20	1	7
X-Men	35	6	6	7	7	4	5
Batman	31	5	5	3	5	3	10
Animaniacs	30	0	10	3	0	2	15
EEK!	24	2	2	4	1	3	12
Ninja Turtles	22	5	2	3	4	1	7
Alladin	21	2	7	0	6	2	4
Reboot	16	2	0	0	8	1	5
Tin-Tin	15	2	2	1	6	1	3
Mr. Bumpy	15	1	1	2	1	3	7
Beetlejuice	15	0	0	0	3	0	12
Labyrinth	12	3	4	0	3	1	1
Power Rangers	12	2	0	5	4	0	1
Mario Brothers	8	5	0	1	1	1	0
Cops	7	2	0	2	1	0	2

School, Springfield, Oregon, declare that the world must have less violence so that we may live safe and happy lives. Because we believe that children learn from what they see and hear, we pledge to stop watching children's programs that show lots of violence.

We also pledge to stop buying the products that are advertised on those shows.

We ask all children in Lane County, Oregon, to join us in our efforts to end violence.

Unexpected Gains

Besides helping the students develop some skills required by the Education Reform Act, Colonna wanted to teach them to be aware of the amount of violence they see on television. She remembers one student telling her, "Before this I didn't even know what violence was." Another key outcome proved to be the experience the students gained in speaking before groups. Colonna watched them mature and acquire confidence, sharing information with both fellow students and adults. The students knew they had to understand every aspect of the project because they didn't know when they were going to be called upon. In addition to the ABC news interview, the students presented their project to the Thurston Grange, to a group of teachers in training, and to other classrooms. At any point during a presentation, Colonna would call on different students. "I would say, 'Jennifer, would you get up and share?' The kids took my pointer, and they were the teachers then. That was just fantastic. They presented the whole thing."

Students kept journals—thick documents with original artwork covers.

As a culmination activity, Colonna directed the children to think about problems they might want to change.

These became their prized possessions, Colonna recalls. Each contained the student's personal work on the project as well as copies of newspaper clippings about their class, copies of letters to networks, sponsors, and political figures, and copies of letters to the class. Chellie's journal entry from January 19 read:

"I did a violence survey to find out some answers about how much violence is on TV, and we put all the incidents of violence together and it was 649. I watched *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. I learned I did not know there was so much violence. I think that we should stop watching those programs. I would stop showing those programs. There is too much violence and it controls kids' behavior."

On February 28 Jeremiah wrote: "Yesterday we told Mrs. Jansen's class about our violence survey. I talked in front of Mrs. Jansen's class. I was a little nervous after they left. Later on in the day a photographer came from *The Oregonian*. He took a lot of pictures and the reporter had lunch with us."

In a letter she drafted in March, Chellie wrote:

"I won't buy the products you advertise! My class hopes you will STOP advertising for the shows. We've heard from people all over the country that agree with us about stopping violence. Some in Eastern China. Lots in Louisiana and Florida. And we've been on TV and even on *ABC World News Tonight* and in the newspaper too! So could you please choose better shows to give money to?"

Conclusions

While all her other planned curriculum went by the wayside, Colonna recalls, everyone at the school was supportive of the venture—parents, administrators, teachers, and students. "Only a few students in the upper grades were negative," she says. A letter from a fifth-grader, written after the second-graders presented their project to his class, read in part, "I would boycott but I've grown too much with violence, and it has become a part of me. I don't intend to kill anyone. But I'm not sure how nice I'm going to be."

Another child wrote: "I wish I was in second grade again, and I wish I got to do that project. My mom always is pointing out violence, but you guys really showed me violence is everywhere."

Colonna talks to former students as they pass in the hall or when they stop by before or after school. Eight returned to her classroom to talk with a visiting Ohio couple touring the country to collect inspiring stories.

When the students decided to stop watching the programs they surveyed, they came up with a list of alternative activities, such as inviting a friend over to play, going fishing, jumping on the trampoline, or playing with the dog. 🐾

Alice Evans is a free-lance writer who lives in Eugene, Oregon. This article, condensed from the Research Bulletin, May 1996, is reprinted with permission from Phi Delta Kappa.

REFERENCES

1. This was one of the "core applications" or goals mandated by the 1991 Oregon Education Reform Act that students must master before graduating.
2. See Jean Marzollo, *Happy Birthday Martin Luther King* (New York: Scholastic, 1993) and David A. Adler, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Free at Last* (New York: Holiday House, 1986).

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