

Aggressiveness cannot be drained

Section: Education

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Catharsis is a term seldom used among educators. However, it is not uncommon to observe certain cathartic practices in our schools. “Catharsis” can be defined as an action through which someone seeks to release anger in a therapeutic manner. This might include hitting foam noodles against a wall, engaging in sessions where plates are broken, encouraging someone to scream with rage, punching something soft, or allowing children to play violent games in a playroom, among other activities. Common vocabulary associated with catharsis includes terms like “release, vent, drain, unburden, let off steam, or uninhibit.”

From classical antiquity until relatively recently, there have been two schools of thought with differing views on aggression. On one hand, there were those who believed aggression could be drained through a cathartic session, much like poking a hole in a bucket full of water to let it empty. On the other hand, there were those who believed that catharsis, rather than reducing violence, actually increased it. Proponents of the first view included Aristotle and, more recently, psychoanalytic theory. In contrast, those who believed catharsis heightened violence included classical figures like Plato and social learning theorists such as

Bandura.

The debate, however, has been resolved. Scientific evidence based on experiments, systematic observation, and data strongly supports the views of Plato and Bandura. In other words, allowing children to express aggression—symbolically or in real terms—results in a weakening of their inhibition against violent behavior. In such situations, children often experience excitement tied to feelings of power and pleasure derived from violence.

Psychoanalytic theory, in this regard, has been refuted. Nevertheless, even today, some school practices are rooted in psychoanalytic theory, using the language of catharsis as a method to address violence through “psychomotricity.” It is important to note a significant divide within psychomotricity between the schools of Acouturier and Lapierre regarding the permissibility of expressing violence during psychomotricity sessions. Fortunately, Acouturier’s stance, which opposes violence, has been the more widely adopted approach in Spain. However, many psychomotor therapists admit they believe aggression needs to be symbolically released, for instance, by initially “breaking down the wall.”

I would like to conclude this article by sharing a success story in eliminating violent behavior, thanks to knowledge about catharsis. Several years ago, a teacher trained in psychomotricity convinced a tutor to allow an aggressive student to wear a villain mask and carry a small axe during recess to “redirect his violent behavior into the symbolic realm.” The child followed this practice for several years, during which his behavior progressively worsened. He developed a fantasy of power and violence that harmed his peers and himself, leaving his relationships entirely broken.

That changed the day I proposed he stop being a villain and instead become a superhero in the “Brave Club” I ran during my tutoring sessions. Within less than two months, all his

outbursts of anger disappeared, and he began showing prosocial behavior—caring for others in distress and standing up for victims.

Knowledge of scientific evidence remains one of the most powerful tools for equipping ourselves against violence.