

## **Fighting**

Essential question: “How can we use the conflict resolution strategies we have learned in our classroom to teach other students and adults to stop fighting?”

**School:** Edward Gideon Elementary School, Philadelphia, PA

**Appropriate for grades:** 3 -5

**Year of project:** 2005-2006

**Subjects:** English language arts/communications, math, social studies

“I spend a lot of time building community in my classroom,” says 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher Jenn Wong. “In the beginning of the year, I noticed a lot of negative things, name calling, meanness among my students.” So when it came time for students to “vote” on the topic of their service-learning project, it didn’t surprise her to discover they were interested in exploring the issue of fighting – both in school and in the community.

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As the class explored the topic further, “taking it apart,” as Ms. Wong describes it, in group discussions, “the students would give me this look,” she says, “as if to say, ‘Am I allowed to talk about this in school?’”

One of the first large-scale activities the students tackled was a community survey. Ms. Wong adapted a survey developed by TOVA, a nonprofit organization that produces performance pieces around the issues of social justice. It provided students with a way to tally incidents of violence they observed at school, at home and in the community. The data collection process and the analysis of their findings became the centerpiece of their project.

“I have always felt kids need a way to bring their lives into the classroom,” she says, “that it needs to be a part of what goes on. It becomes a huge distraction if you don’t at least try to incorporate these things into what students are learning. It’s hard to do,” she confesses. “It’s scary sometimes.”

They also made a regular practice of reading newspaper articles related to violence and its impact on people’s lives. “As the year went on,” says Ms. Wong, “I could definitely tell the kids were involved. They would bring in their own stories after the weekend. We’d read them aloud or talk about them during shared reading.

Some of the skills they learned to develop included differentiating between fact and opinion and learning how to summarize.

One of the “bigger ideas” generated by the students for the service aspect of their project was bringing outside resources for parents into the school. To accomplish this, the class developed a relationship with staff from the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations. Together, they came up with “tips” for conflict resolution around which they eventually developed skits for a school-wide assembly and parents’ night.

The idea grew “bigger” when the principal embraced the project and that of a partner teacher who was also guiding her students in a service-learning project focused on conflict resolution. She decided to promote a series of related activities into a school-wide “peace week.”

Although parent involvement during the school year had been “disappointing,” according to Ms. Wong, the turnout for the parents’ night far exceeded their expectations. “We sent home flyers but had no ideas what to expect. About 100 family members attended – parents, grandparents, neighbors. We were all really pleased.”