Pencil Drawing – Tashi, 2nd Grade

Art Making in the Moment (Teaching Observations).

By Noel Caban

As an art teacher working with students in a community persistently shaped by fear and uncertainty, I often witness the quiet toll these conditions take. Short of an administrator stating outright that we have lost over fifty families from the school, what I see in my classroom is a subtler form of loss: withdrawal. There are no outbursts, no overt disruptions. Instead, there is a marked remoteness—a sense of

disconnectedness. Students who were once open and expressive now appear distant, disengaged, and hesitant to connect.

From a clinical and educational perspective, this kind of remoteness is often understood not as apathy or disinterest, but as an adaptive response to prolonged stress. When children experience ongoing uncertainty or threat, they may shift into patterns of emotional withdrawal or reduced engagement as a means of self-protection. In these moments, distancing can function as a way to conserve energy, regulate overwhelming feelings, or maintain a sense of safety in an unpredictable environment.

Rather than reflecting a lack of motivation or capacity, this disengagement is more accurately described as a change in emotional regulation. Students may appear less expressive, hesitant to initiate, or slower to respond, not because they are unwilling, but because the cognitive and emotional resources typically available for creative risk-taking are being diverted toward managing stress. Within trauma-informed frameworks, such behaviors are understood as context-dependent and relational, often shaped by circumstances beyond the classroom and responsive to environments that offer consistency, patience, and care. With this in mind I try to draw them back to the work. Sometimes it's a one-on-one exchange—*let's try this instead*, or *what if we switch that*—or a simple compliment for attempting something unfamiliar. I find these small moments reassuring. They feel like openings, moments that might lead to deeper engagement and

renewed connection with their artwork. Yet, for the most part, this quietude—this emotional distance—remains one of the most difficult aspects of responding to the trauma they are carrying.

For many students, art can be a lifeline: a way to express thoughts and feelings that words cannot hold. It offers space to process experience, make sense of the world, and communicate what cannot be spoken aloud. But even this outlet becomes fragile when fear and uncertainty take hold. When students are consumed by these feelings, engaging in the creative process becomes difficult. Instead of immersing themselves in their work, they hesitate. They question. Ambivalence sets in. They stall, squandering the short amount of time we have together.

Tasks that once felt intuitive—gathering materials, sketching an idea, following through with execution—become overwhelming, and the basic sequence of making breaks down. Where students once dove in with enthusiasm, they now hover, uncertain, as if burdened by a weight they cannot set down.

I am not a therapist or behavioral specialist, but this is not simply about the work. Artmaking requires vulnerability—a willingness to try, to fail, and to try again. When a child is grappling with the fear of losing their family, safety, or a sense of belonging in the world, that vulnerability becomes harder to access. Trust in the process erodes, and with it, trust in themselves. Possibility gives way to barriers. This often surfaces in

persistent questions: *Is this right? Is this what you want? I can't do this—can you help me?*

And yet, even within this quiet resistance, something remains. I see students who, despite their withdrawal, leave behind small fragments of themselves in their work. A scribbled, layered drawing. A textured surface built through repeated strokes of color. Overlapping lines that seem to register a mood rather than an image. An abstract shape that, for a moment, offers control over an unstable world. These gestures—no matter how small—become a 9 × 12-inch window into their inner lives. In those moments, I sense them reaching out, trying to communicate, even without words.

So when the energy or expressiveness of a drawing leaves you wondering about the inner life of a student, imagine being allowed to express something you have not yet found language for. Then ask yourself: what other art form offers such an immediate and powerful connection to the inner self?

The act of making art mirrors a larger struggle. Steps that should signal progress—moving closer to a finished piece—often feel like insurmountable hurdles. Each step forward is weighed down by the uncertainty these young lives carry beyond the classroom. While I cannot know what that world will look like for them, I try to guide them gently—not only through a creative process, but through the emotional barriers they have built to protect themselves.

For these students, art is not about producing a final object. It is a journey of self-expression and healing—one repeatedly interrupted by forces far larger than the classroom. When they withdraw, disengage, or leave work fragmented and unfinished, it is not a measure of their ability or interest. It is often a reflection of the emotional burden they carry.

As an art teacher, I do what I can to create a space that feels safe for expression—a place where students can find a voice through their work, even when words fail them. The road ahead is not easy. The fear many of these students live with does not simply fade, especially as our current climate continues its relentless impact on their families and communities, shaping their ability to engage with anything, including their own creativity.

The challenge, then, is not only about teaching techniques or completing projects. It is about helping students re-engage with themselves—with their emotions, their agency, and their capacity to create. I continue to look for those small pockets of connection, those quiet breakthroughs, because I know that within art there is always the possibility of healing, even if it arrives one small line at a time.

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