



## Gang Recruitment in a Second-Grade Classroom

“27, 28, 29... “I’m counting the number of safety scissors we’ll need to finish our “Feeling Forest” activity when I’m reminded how quickly things change in my second-grade classroom in North Lawndale where I am a JPA therapist. “Face the door! Face the door! I need everyone either under their desks or facing the door!” I look up to see the teacher pressed against the classroom windows, yelling over her shoulder, jumping to reach the window shade resting just above her hand. Beyond her, through the window, I can see six or seven men walking quickly towards the classroom windows.

Something isn’t right. **Why are adults climbing through the bushes that ring the school to get to the classroom window?** Why does the teacher look panicked, but also like she’s seen this before? The kids crowd past me to line up against the wall facing the door, some sitting on the floor under their desks hugging their knees.

I look back to the windows and see these men aren’t adults at all. They are probably 16- or 17-year-old boys. They look like grownups since they are so much taller than the seven-year-olds I’m working with, and because they’re walking with so much authority. I had just been asking the kids questions like “everyone feels proud sometimes. When do you feel proud? Everyone feels nervous

sometimes. When do you feel nervous?” Looking at the kids, I realize they don’t look nervous. They look stunned; they look numb; mostly, they look compliant. It strikes me how vulnerable these vivacious, exuberant kids are. They’ve dropped their activity and re-organized themselves to face the door without anyone having told them what’s going on yet. They’re doing what the teacher is telling them because they can hear the panic in her voice and they’re dependent on her to stay safe.

The teacher jumps high enough to grab the shade and wrenches it down. The teenagers are right up against the window, knees against the glass, shouting things I can’t hear well enough to understand. We can see their silhouettes through the white canvas of the shade. The teacher turns on the radio to a classical station, talks loudly above the music to drown out the teenagers outside, and tells the kids to go back to their desk and to ignore what’s happening outside the window.

One of the kids shouts, “That’s my brother!” and starts running towards the window, when the teacher yells, “Stop!” He stops in his tracks. His eyes dart towards the window, back at her, towards the window, back at her, until he slowly pivots and walks back to his seat in slow motion, eyes still on the window.

## He says in a quiet but angry voice, “I really didn’t like it when they came. I hate it when that happens.”

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This is what I’ve come to learn in this school community: Kids struggle with contradictory messages about scary things at home and what they are told to think, feel, and do at school. One kid in my office tells me he’s in trouble at school for hitting another student who called him a name. But he tells me that if he hadn’t hit the student, he’d get in trouble at home for not “bloodying his [opponent’s] nose” to defend himself.

The teacher is telling the kids to continue coloring and cut out their drawings. I’m feeling torn between addressing what’s happening and going back to the activity as if we can’t hear pounding on the windows around us. The teacher stands at my shoulder and whispers, “This happens from time to time.” She explains that gang members come to recruit the little kids; a show of intimidation and strength is intended to impress them. Being active in the gang means you’re impervious to school rules. You can trample over bushes and interrupt the school day because they’re more powerful than the teacher. Exploiting kids’ vulnerability is gang members’ most powerful tool. The fact is, kids spend more of their lives outside of school than in, so which are they going to choose? What is most likely to make them feel safe and powerful?

The kids turn back to their drawings, the music blares and the teacher yells at them to look down at their papers and not up at the windows. I suggest we take the kids into the hall to get away from the windows altogether. The teacher responds that the principal is probably about to call a lock-down, in case any of the gang members got into the school and are in the hallways already. She says that happens too: 17-year-old boys who look like men walk in the front door, pass the unsupervised metal detectors and barge into her classroom shouting allegiance to the gang. I turn the music down slightly and go to each kid individually and ask them to draw whatever feels best to them right now and tell them I’ll be back to

talk about this. The classroom group is almost over; it’s nearly time for the kids to go to lunch as though none of this ever happened. I plan with the teacher to come back in two days. I tell her I’ll come back with discussion activities to let the kids talk about what this is like for them. She looks surprised and uncertain but agrees.

It’s my job to meet with these kids as a group and also one on one, and be available for their thoughts and feelings if and as they share them. Sometimes they share their feelings in words, sometimes through drawings or at the dollhouse, and sometimes through behavior outside of our session that gets them suspended. My job isn’t to tell them they’re having feelings and to talk about them. My job is also not to shut down their feelings and tell them it’ll all be OK, just think about something else. That’s a message I hear the kids receive a lot at school. My job is to be available to witness and support kids with their feelings in whatever way they feel safe enough to share them.

Two days later, I come back and we address what happened “at the windows,” which is what the kids are calling it. The kids talk about feeling scared, but also about feeling angry that they’re usually told not to talk about scary things that happen at home or school. I feel a tug at the corner of my sweater and realize one of the kids has taken hold as I walk past his desk. He says in a quiet but angry voice, “I really didn’t like it when they came. I hate it when that happens.” His teacher overhears and walks up to his desk, biting her bottom lip so hard I can see it turning white. She puts her hands on the student’s shoulders and says “I didn’t like it either.”

It’s hard to leave that day at the end of our time together, knowing there will likely be other visits “at the windows.” Before I leave the class, I look over the group and see they’re still engaged in a conversation with their teacher, who now looks much more relaxed. They’re talking. She’s talking. That seems hopeful. **JPA**