

Engaging Disadvantaged Youth in the Creative Process

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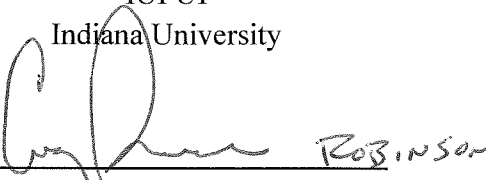
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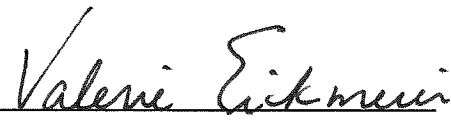
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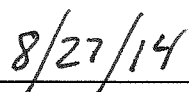
  
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## ENGAGING DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

### Public Practice: Engaging Disadvantaged Youth in the Creative Process

Public Practice is vital for personal and cultural development and it connects individuals to the larger world. Art enables creative exploration, helps build confidence, and enables children in disadvantaged schools to take part in a positive creative process that subsequently affects their school, community, and ability to take control of their future. As more research is conducted in this field, researchers are finding that art levels the "learning field" across socio-economic boundaries, improves student retention and reduces the achievement gap.<sup>1</sup>

In Indianapolis, Indiana and throughout the country, art budgets have been dramatically cut at schools, specifically in impoverished communities.<sup>2</sup> The positive effects of art on the development of a child and the stability of a community have subsequently been severely jeopardized. There have been several responses to such budget cuts with some people staging protests at heated school board meetings. The solution I proved through my thesis project is that public practice projects that bring resources from the greater community into disadvantaged schools and engage students, faculty, and parents in the process can achieve art's positive effect and serve as a force for change in that school and in the community at large. While facilitating the creative impulses and uniqueness of disadvantaged children, I developed and constructed several public art pieces for my thesis project.

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.eric.ed.gov> Champions of Change: The Impact of Art on Learning)

<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.indy.com/posts/budget-could-cost-ips-schools-teachers-programs>).

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The objective of my thesis is to initiate, pilot and complete a project where youth living in low income challenging socioeconomic environments are engaged in the creative process and the design and development of public art.

The goal is to facilitate students' direct interaction with the design and development of public art and to inspire creative thinking and cooperative effort. This project will serve as an example of the positive impact art can have on empowering disadvantaged students and the benefits of engaging the community at large in public practice and public art.

To initiate my project, I needed to identify a community and a school partner that were receptive to my philosophy for public art and would enable me to fully engage the students, faculty, parents and community members in the projects. I conducted research on Indianapolis Charter Schools because they have a track record of welcoming community involvement, have more open curriculum, and are not as constrained by state and federal regulations. I then made contact with Marty Dezelan, Founder and Board member of several Indiana charter schools. Mr. Dezelan facilitated a meeting with Tarrey Banks, the Principal of The Project School (TPS).

I proposed the idea to create a public art piece with his students that would be a gateway to the school and community. In my discussions with Mr. Banks, he shared that the school was designed to serve as a peaceful landmark in this community and a welcoming location for students, parents, and families. I thereby envisioned that the gateway would help the school project the message of open arms and that the community could gather there in peace. During this initial meeting I noticed a lack of any kind of public art in the area.

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I also had a vision for a second mosaic indoor artwork in the event that I could not get approval and permitting for the outside sculptural piece. This outdoor sculpture would be permanent in the school and a symbol of unity and peace within the school community.

Mr. Banks loved both ideas and I decided to move forward with both the inside and outside pieces. He then introduced me to Ms. Patricia Wildhack, Arts Coordinator at The Project School (TPS), who served as my primary contact in orchestrating the opportunity and facilitating the direct interaction with the students.

With the school and projects approved, I needed to secure funding for the project. I conducted a meeting with Ms. Kathy Pataluch, Director of the Basile Center, to determine if funding for the project was available. Ms. Pataluch then met with Dean Valerie Eickmeier and I was awarded \$2,500 from the Eli Lilly Corporation, an award to promote graduate-level study and scholarship.

TPS, located on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street in the downtown neighborhood of Indianapolis, has been in operation since 2007 and serves students in kindergarten through seventh grade. According to the TPS website their vision is:

The vision of The Project School is to eliminate the predictive value of race, gender and special capacities on student success in our school and in our communities by working together with families and community to ensure each child's success. The mission of TPS is to uncover, recover and discover the unique gifts and talents that each child brings to school every day. The school works collaboratively with families, community members and social service agencies to solve real problems, as well as create art for public space. Students graduate from TPS as stewards of the environment with the will, skill, capacity, and knowledge to contribute to the greater good.

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Although the school's mission clearly states that it is committed to the creation of public art, the school had yet to solidify an avenue to make it happen. This Public Practice project served as a model to help further their mission objective into reality.

Starting on September 17, 2009, I taught a Thursday morning class with a select group of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (the "core group") who were handpicked by Patricia Wildhack. Ms. Wildhack is a seasoned professional painter whose achievements with public art and empowering young people include several pieces of her work in the Indianapolis Ronald McDonald House. She was responsible for single-handedly teaching art classes to 174 students and is charged with fulfilling TPS's mission to create public art. Ms. Wildhack was extremely receptive to the idea of working together with the students towards a piece of public art with every student involved.

The group consisted of students who excelled at art and others, who because of what they had already experienced in their young lives, Ms. Wildhack felt would benefit the most from being involved in a tangible, creative project, from start to finish. The core group was a mix of races, religions, socio-economic backgrounds, and family structures. Most of the students were being raised in single-parent households, and some by siblings or relatives. The project was designed to give the students of the core group an outlet, perhaps from a challenging environment of neglect or abuse in a household where their voices were rarely heard.

In my initial assessment of possible locations for artwork inside and outside of the school, I determined that a metal sculpture with mosaic components was appropriate for my objectives and for the site. I chose metal for the longevity of the material and because I had extensive knowledge and experience working with it. I

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chose mosaics because I had never done or even been involved with a mosaic piece before, and I wanted to learn through the experience. I then completed a financial analysis and a budget to ensure that metal and mosaic would be cost effective.

The primary activity during the initial teaching sessions was intense brainstorming with the students to determine some of the components of the piece we were going to build. In the first four classes, we began the process by talking and generating ideas on not only what the pieces would look like but also how all students could be involved.

The core group, who later called themselves the “Art Leadership Group”, had little knowledge of what a mosaic piece was. We looked at images on the computer of other mosaic pieces to learn more about the process and what we were collectively going to make. We took a large piece of paper and sketched what would go on the piece, and the students also drew their own pictures. This process was effective, but the group was still having trouble grasping the concept, so we took a field trip to the Indianapolis Deaf School where an outdoor mosaic had just been unveiled. When the core group saw this piece, you could see the light bulb click in their minds; their expressions were fantastic, and they understood what we were going to do. I realized at this point that it would be critically important at all points for the students to have direct visual and simultaneous hands-on connection with the project in order to grasp the concepts.

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The students had assumed that the piece was solid, and I had to share with them that it was made up of separate pieces. I conducted several demonstrations with different students directly involved in the process, showing how pieces could be placed together to make one solid picture. I then showed them pictures of several additional mosaics, and I brought the Art Leadership Group to the Herron School of Art and Design to tour Eskenazi Hall, the main Herron campus. We met with other graduate students in all the different mediums to show TPS students all of the unique art forms that are being produced. When we got back in the classroom for ongoing Thursday creative design time, the forthcoming ideas were vast and diverse from bumblebees to bazookas, but we narrowed down the detail for the gateway mosaic piece, how it would be created, and what we wanted it to say. Through one-on-one conversations with each student, I determined that the message of the mosaic would be each student reaching out and saying hello, as if they were standing at the gateway of their school and greeting the community.



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I then worked to finalize the design and structural components. I adapted the size so that the faculty would be able to observe the students in the playground from the school doorway. I was able to determine a location that was in line with the underground cables and gas lines. With size and location determined, the design was finalized to fit within the budget.

I determined that the mosaic was to be located by the playground across from the main entrance to the school.



Simultaneous to the development of the outdoor mosaic, I created an indoor project to be executed by the students in the winter months, a quilted mosaic wall hanging, which would involve the entire student body and faculty. This project was inspired by the quilts in the school. When TPS first opened, the acoustics were poor and to combat the noise difficulties, the school had a quilt drive and then hung the quilts to better the acoustic environment. A local woman donated 47 family quilts that were made by her grandmother over the years. This was a grand gesture, an example of

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community involvement in the school's success. The quilted mosaic wall hanging is now another symbol of this community involvement in the school's success.

To begin execution of the quilt mosaic, I needed to first teach the concept to my Thursday Art Leadership Group. We started with pencils, moved on to markers, and finally to paint. Painting was new to the Art Leadership Group, so we started with black paint. We looked at artworks and discussed a number of artists, and we then discussed different elements of painting, line, and gesture and moved on to experimenting with color. Initially the simple task of keeping one color out of another seemed like the hardest part, but then we moved on to landscapes, and much progress was made as the group took control of the creative process. In the beginning, the core group had an idea of what they wanted to paint, but they could not do it because they did not have the skill sets. Through the creative learning process, they gained the skills needed to expand what they wanted their tile to say. Seeing the new capabilities of the students, I realized this would not just be colors on the wall, but a piece of every student's personality.



For the quilt tile wall hanging, 180 students and faculty members in the school each painted a 6x6 tile, and all tiles were affixed onto four boards creating a 120 x 54

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inch quilted mosaic wall hanging. I met with Tonia Roberts, owner of Ceramic Dreams, and arranged for her to supply the tiles, and glaze, and to clear coat and fire the tiles. To facilitate this project, pairs of students from the Art Leadership Group worked with me to help instruct the younger students as they painted their tiles during their regular art classes.

I initially thought the quilted wall mosaic would take about a week. With snow days and school events, it actually took three weeks, but it was an amazing process. I learned that nothing goes as planned, and you cannot foresee all the hurdles when working on a piece. Working on such a large collaboration with so many people involved lends itself to unexpected setbacks.



Once all the tiles were fired and returned to the school, I brought in David Howe, a videographer from California, to do a documentary about the project. He interviewed students and faculty. He also let the students experience the role of director, cameraman, and interviewer. The students loved participating in this process and

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elicited such great candid responses from each other. One young man shared how art was his outlet to take out aggression and anger without hurting anyone. Another boy stated that art was something he could do without being judged by others. One ten-year-old girl shared that art was a way for her to express emotions. At this time, members of the Art Leadership Group laid out the tiles in the order they would be adhered to the boards, creating our quilted mosaic. He filmed for a week, interacting with all age groups.



Next, it was time to put it all together and install the mosaic. I brought in a local installation expert and within three days, had the tiles off the floor and installed in the quilted mosaic's permanent home. The wall the quilted mosaic is on is in the lunchroom and main gathering area for meetings and events which was chosen so the students would see their work every day.

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The primary audience for these works of art will be TPS students, parents, and teachers, and community members. While the pieces were being completed, I was able to interact with each group to assess the impact of the process and the final products. During installation of the projects, representatives from each audience were interviewed for their feedback and reactions. Some of the collected responses provided specific information on a disadvantaged community's view on art in Indianapolis, the level of community interest in and acceptance of art, and the social atmosphere and environment of TPS and the greater community. The results will be useful for my own creative research and to inspire the work that I do with future projects.

I met with several other charter schools throughout Indianapolis and Indiana including the Lighthouse Academies, the Challenge Foundation Academy in Indianapolis, and Kipp Lead out of Gary, Indiana, who all expressed interest in having art students develop public art projects with their students.

I also met with the Craft Alliance in St. Louis, an art center that has youth outreach programs, to determine its need and interest in working with students. Furthermore, I interviewed a group called VanGo, the "arts-based social service agency

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that provides year-round after-school and summer job training programs to high-needs and under-served youth ages 14 – 21” in Kansas. Using art as the vehicle for self-expression, self-confidence, and hope for the future, “VanGo is devoted to delivering constructive activities for youth at risk of drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy, and delinquency”. The agency’s mission is to improve the lives of high-needs youth<sup>3</sup> and they are going to explore how an affiliation with art students could expand their program and reach new efficiencies and scale.

During this project I grew as an artist and as a collaborator. I had never worked with other artists before, so doing a large-scale collaboration was memorable and inspired me to collaborate on projects in the future. I gained valuable knowledge about how to initiate and complete projects, how to be more efficient in my design and making processes. I expanded my knowledge of different mediums to further my interdisciplinary personal art making style. I was able to learn about ceramics and mosaic pieces and I had never done an outdoor sculpture piece before.

Through my work here in Indianapolis, I have expanded my skill set as a fabricator and installer, not to mention as an educator, facilitator and organizer with the ability to execute large collaborative projects. I have learned that I can be inspired by what the students have done and facilitate my own artwork from that. I thought I was set in my ways and my individual art making aesthetics, and I learned that I have much more room to grow in knowledge of processes and what is available for me to produce personally and in the public eye. I have been educated on the subtleties of

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<sup>3</sup> VanGo Mobile Arts. (2010). What is VanGo? Retrieved from [www.van-go.org/about/what-is-van-go/](http://www.van-go.org/about/what-is-van-go/)

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being a contemporary artist in the public realm. These include needing to be more conscious of what the work is conveying beyond the concerns of the individual and how the work is received when exposed to the public eye. I also learned how public art has an impact on space, community and what the students gain from the project they are involved in. Finally, the ability to create a new, unique body of public art works specific to the needs of each individual community has me interested in further future partnerships and has given me confidence to describe one facet of my art making practice as public and community based.

While working toward my MFA, I was able to challenge and expand my artistic vision with new directions and drivers. I have been able to immerse myself in the work I did with The Project School, pushing me intellectually and broadening my making abilities. Through this project, I was educated in teaching and working with large groups of people. I enhanced my appreciation for the diversity of opinions, and I grasped the power that the student driven raw concepts have when developing works with grade school-aged collaborators. I gained vast experience by developing a project that allowed me to share my artistic vision with TPS and its community. I was honored to be able to share the quilted mosaic piece with students and faculty and collaborate with 180 individuals to achieve the final result. It was inspiring to see the effectiveness of the project with the reactions of everyone involved seeing the finished pieces for the first time and realizing they were part of something permanent.

Working with TPS helped me further my professional goals. I was able to research and expand some ideas I had coming into the Master of Fine Arts program,

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vastly increasing my knowledge and experience and helping me to establish a path to my future endeavors. It was a welcome change to be working outside of the studio. I was challenged with the responsibility of initiating a project, designing it, orchestrating it, teaching the students, and being a guest artist all at the same time. As an artist I was able to show my creative prowess, utilize my fabrication skills, inspire and teach hungry young minds, and expand innovative ways of creating a work of art. The TPS project has furthered my desire to work in urban settings and continue to engage disadvantaged youth in the creative process.

### References

- 1) Champions of Change: The Impact of Art on Learning (1999) Edward B Fiske from <http://www.eric.ed.gov>
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- 3) VanGo Mobile Arts. (2010). What is VanGo? Retrieved from [www.van-go.org/about/what-is-van-go/](http://www.van-go.org/about/what-is-van-go/)