

From Out of Sight to 'Outta Sight!' Collaborative Art Projects that Empower Children with At-Risk Tendencies

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Abstract

Children with at-risk tendencies are often left out of sight/site/cite because of their potential for academic and social failure. Like all children, children with at-risk tendencies have something of value to contribute to society and yearn for opportunities to show of their talents. This article discusses how three different groups of children with at-risk tendencies in Florida and Tennessee participated in site specific community art projects that targeted their needs. Although each student population worked a different theme, the children expressed similar learning outcomes when describing their involvement with the project. This study demonstrates how collaborative community art projects engage students in constructive behaviors that help prepare them for life. The success they gain from their participation in these projects can be transferred to other areas of their lives and show society that they are truly *outta sight* individuals.

Children with at-risk tendencies are often left out of sight/site/cite because of their potential for academic and social failure. While the term "at-risk" has different meanings for various groups, the label is traditionally assigned to students who have a high probability of

dropping out of school according to predetermined factors assigned by educational administrators such as economic disadvantage, living with a single parent, geographic location, poor grades, and reading below appropriate grade level. Many children with at-risk tendencies are affected by the negative stigma associated with the label (Tucker, 1999). Like all children, children with at-risk tendencies have something of value to contribute to society and yearn for opportunities to show their talents.

Community art projects are effective tools to transform children who are literally out of sight of mainstream society into *outta sight* individuals who enhance their communities. Dewey (1934) argued that the arts are an essential form of human expression that build cultural experience. By examining the self and society through art, children learn about themselves and others. As they become more aware of the world and its diverse opportunities, children develop new ways of thinking. While broadening their minds and building experience, they take ownership of their work, foster a sense of pride, and feel good about themselves and their peers. Furthermore, students who participate in group work are better able to see other people's perspectives, have positive attitudes towards learning, and are concerned with the welfare of others (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

This article discusses how three different groups of children with at-risk tendencies in Florida and Tennessee participated in site specific community art projects that targeted their needs. Although each community project had a different theme, the children expressed similar learning outcomes when describing their involvement with the project.

Methodology

My professional interest in developing and participating in community art projects that teach life skills began when I worked as an art educator in a Title One school with a large population of children with at-risk tendencies. Many of my talented art students appeared to

be the children who had difficulties in other academic subjects and would get in trouble in school. Since both of my parents dropped out of high school and told me about their negative school experiences, I aimed to make my classroom a stimulating and nurturing environment where children had the opportunity to succeed.

Over a four year period (2000-2004), I participated in a variety of community art projects with children with at-risk tendencies and developed case studies around the projects¹. To frame the research design of these studies, I focused on the theoretical nature of participatory action research (Maguire, 1987). This paradigm allows the participants, who are either oppressed or ordinary people, to become actively involved with the researcher in posing and solving their own problems. Maguire (1987), based on her experience of working with a lower socioeconomic population, argued that children, minorities, women, and persons living in poverty often do not have a voice in society. Combining Maguire's model of qualitative research and my knowledge of community art, it was my aim to give children with at-risk tendencies a voice as they participated in collaborative art projects. Moreover, my objective corresponded with a goal of participatory action research: all people can work together to solve their own problems and/or better their situation.

Questions posed in interviews and conversations were open-ended and encouraged the participants to discuss and reflect upon their role within the project. The main questions that steered the projects were: How did the students make community art? What roles did the children play in these collaborations? What were the most difficult and rewarding aspects of these projects? How did they express their understanding of the messages that the community art project taught?

In this qualitative research approach, I was the primary research instrument. These stories represent the participants' and my interpretations of the projects. I portrayed the environment and participants as accurately as possible. Through details, conversation,

and observation structured on Eisner's (1998) educational evaluation model, and crystallization (Richardson, 2000), I aimed to demonstrate credibility in a qualitative sense.

The Teamwork Mural

A part of the Miami-Dade County School System, Pine Villa Elementary is located in Goulds, Florida. Approximately ninety percent of the school's population lives in impoverished conditions. As a result, many of its students have faced various challenges at young ages. While teaching the students, I noticed that several children had difficulty collaborating with their peers. At the beginning of the next school year, I developed a community mural project that had the potential to teach students about the benefits of collaboration through the creation of a teamwork mural. (*These three murals appear on the next page.*)

During the preliminary stages of the project, fourth and fifth grade students made drawings of teamwork as seen in the community, their families, work, and school. They talked about their own experiences with teamwork and learned how it was portrayed in art historical works. Next, the students designed and agreed upon three themes: (a) ballet dancers and musicians performing on stage [Figure 1], (b) two teams engaged in a competitive game of tug of war [Figure 2], and (c) a group of students painting a large mural of fruit and cleaning up at the sink [Figure 3]. They spent the entire school year creating the six foot by sixty foot mural on the art patio.

While many of the school's second through fifth grade students participated in the project, the majority of the mural was painted by students in the art club, which met three hours a week after school. Throughout the process, the students talked about their experiences, shared ideas with their peers, and problem solved. At the end of the school year, I interviewed fifth grade students about their mural making experience. They expressed how they used teamwork and overcame obstacles to complete the mural.

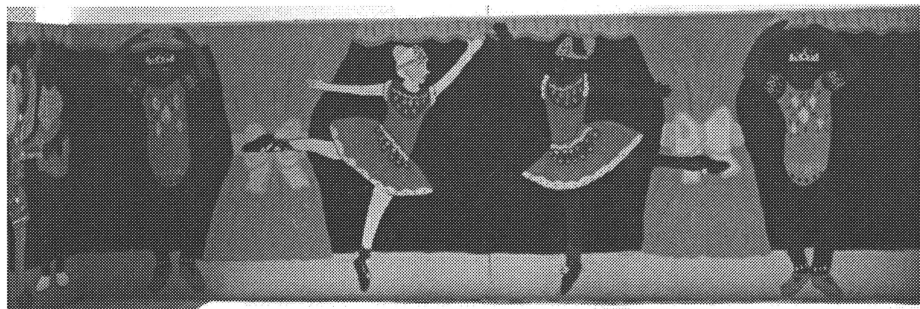


Figure 1. Teamwork Mural’s Ballet Wall. Pine Villa Elementary School.



Figure 2.. Teamwork Mural’s Tug of War Wall. Pine Villa Elem. School

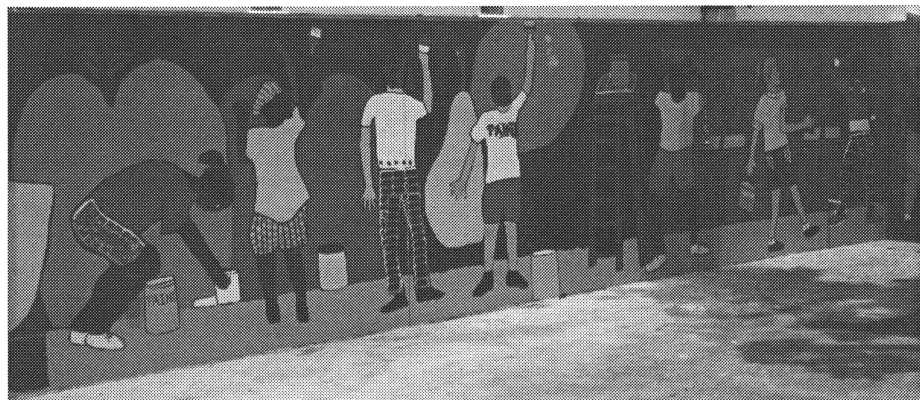


Figure 3. Teamwork Mural’s Fruit Wall. Pine Villa Elementary School

Robert, a gifted artist whose grades had started slipping in other classes, wanted every student to receive credit and be proud of his or her accomplishments. He anticipated the opening reception because he wanted his family to see the final product. Robert imagined that they would ask him: "Who did it, and who helped you?"; and he would respond: "the whole art team." Mary, an industrious student, was satisfied with the final outcome of the mural: "(It) makes me feel good because we worked together real hard and it's looking real good." She was especially fond of the ballerina wall that she worked on. When she looks back on her experience, she mentioned that she will remember the teamwork part the most.

The students also learned that creating a mural is challenging. Robert and his classmate Tyrone described how they had to work around other people's mistakes. Early in the mural's production, a group of second graders got carried away with painting leaves. Within a few minutes, green dots covered much of the mural. After Robert's initial shock of seeing green dots everywhere, he explained how he learned to cope with the situation: "Fussing ain't gonna do nothing! You got to go out there and redo it anyway." Tyrone agreed with Robert and responded: "We didn't get mad. We just said that's okay, we can paint over it. 'Cause its easy to paint over the dry paint." He further explained that older students have the responsibility of teaching younger students to avoid mistakes: "We are older than them and bigger kids (ought to) be nice to little kids." If Robert had the opportunity to teach another group of children how to make a teamwork mural, he said that he would teach them how to correct their mistakes and grow from them.

Florida Arts and Community Enrichment: Ebony Gardens

Florida Arts and Community Enrichment (FACE) is an after school arts organization that is free to all interested children living in Tallahassee, Florida. The majority of the students live in the Frenchtown section, which has the county's highest crime rate and is home to many families living in impoverished conditions (Fletcher, 1999). Jill Harper, FACE's founder and executive director, chose the Frenchtown community so that children, who otherwise may not have arts enrichment in the non-school hours, would have easy access to the program. Since its founding in 1991, Harper has involved her students in a plethora of community art projects around the Tallahassee area. One of FACE's largest community projects is a mural, playground, and garden at Ebony Gardens, a housing complex in Frenchtown where many of FACE's students live. (See Figures 4 and 5.)

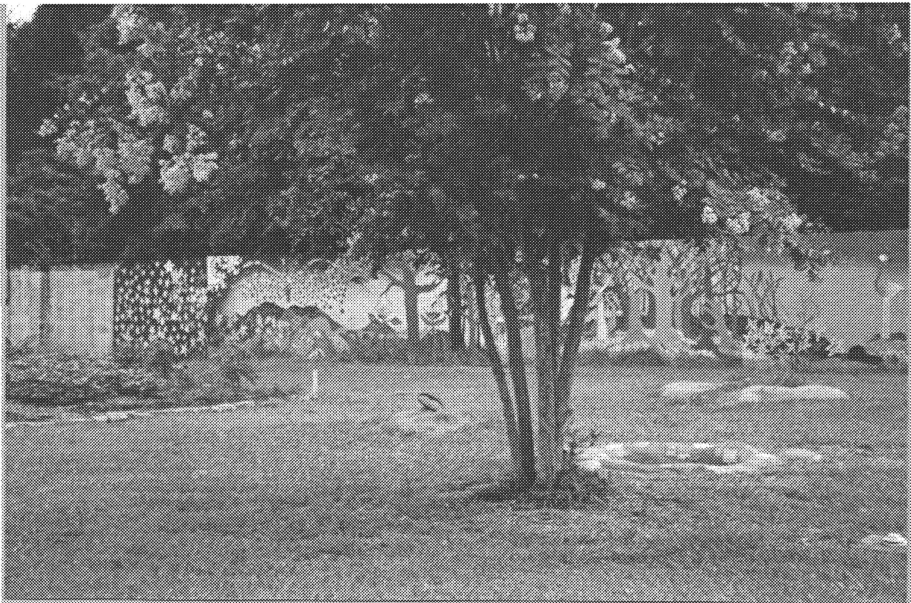


Figure 4. Ebony Garden's Mural, Playground and Garden



Figure 5. Ebony Garden's Community Garden.

FACE transformed a bare concrete wall and patch of grass on the property into a vibrant mural and play area. The wall blossomed into a tropical landscape covered with bright colors, flamingoes, and stars. After its completion, Harper invited Israeli artist Ellen Alt to work with the children and their families to develop a playground consisting of a turtle sandbox, a ladybug play car, and a dragonfly to sit on. These play sculptures were formed from broken cinderblock, concrete, and latex paint. While the mural and playground enhanced the grounds, the children did not have any shade to protect them from the harsh Florida sun. Harper contacted garden associations including the Damayan Organization and secured permission from the housing authority to plant shade trees and a garden on its property. On *Make a Difference Day*, FACE and its collaborating partners installed the garden. They spent the entire day digging, sowing seeds, and planting trees.

Wendy Chase, Director of the Damayan Garden Project, returned to Ebony Gardens weekly to teach the children and adults how to

properly care for the garden. The garden had its triumphs and set backs. FACE students, residents, and community members regularly worked together to ensure that the garden would flourish. However, some of the children saw the vegetation as toys and used tomatoes and corn stalks as imaginary weapons. Many of the participants were upset because they did not want to see all of the time and effort they put into the project wasted. Harper and Chase called a community meeting, where residents of Ebony Gardens gathered and spoke about their concerns. All parties agreed that they wanted to have a thriving garden. From that point forward, the residents of Ebony Gardens taught the children how to respect the garden through positive reinforcement and cogently explained the garden's rules.

The garden grew in abundance and during the initial harvest, the children picked fresh fruits and vegetables. Chase explained that it was a new experience for the children because many residents in housing projects receive canned and boxed food from the local food bank, which is nutritionally vapid. Her goal was to give the residents alternatives to these foods: "Instead of lecturing them about good nutrition, we just wanted it to be accessible to them." Ms. Linda, a community mother who lives at Ebony Gardens and works at FACE, assisted Harper and Chase in teaching the children about proper nutrition by cooking foods from their garden. Erick, an elementary student, described how meals at FACE taught him about good manners:

Ms. Harper and Ms. Linda, teach us (things) like when we eat we wash our plates off. If they are plastic plates, we throw them away and we put napkins in our laps. And we put knives and forks and spoons on the plates when we (are) done, and say thank you and goodbye.

At FACE, children have learned about more than proper etiquette. They attend the program because they know that their involvement in the arts and the community makes them feel good about themselves and helps others living in Tallahassee. Rosalyn, a high school student, reflected on her participation in community art projects: "When you paint a mural you step back and see your work. And it's like I made a difference and it makes you feel good and you come back and you want to do more." Since Rosalyn has grown with the program and is a senior in high school, Harper offered to pay her to work on community projects and assist younger students. She explained why she declined her financial offer and preferred to volunteer her services:

I said I don't go there (FACE) to get paid. I've been going for 5 years. And you (Harper) haven't paid me once and you're not gonna start. Basically, I like the music and painting murals. She (Harper) doesn't need to pay me. I have a job.

Like Rosalyn, Nikki, an elementary student explained the benefits of producing community art. She felt that she earned respect from others for the art projects that she helped create. Living in project housing, Nikki explained: "Some people, they don't come out to other places (like Ebony Gardens) just because they see some bad kids they think all of the kids are bad." She feels that the recognition that the projects bring help highlight the children's talents.

Rosalyn's sister, Monique, has worked on dozens of projects at FACE. She felt that her participation has made her a better person because it provided her with the opportunity to associate with people who care about her:

When I was young I'm going to admit I was bad. I was BAD! But I mean I got out of it because I came here and I had an outlet.

And, you know I met people who told me that's not the way. I came here and I had people to talk to. And I had people to tell my problems to and they'd listen and you know we got along and you know it helps when you have people who will help you out when you need it.

Michael, an elementary student, also feels good about the work he does at FACE. He explained that he sometimes felt depressed at school because of negative incidents with his classmates and teachers. When creating a community sculpture with his peers at FACE, he worked to the best of his ability and used teamwork to make a sculpture. Under Alt's guidance, his group smashed cinder blocks with a sledgehammer to form a concrete figure. He explained: "People were working with me together. The reason why I liked it (is) 'cause it was really a lot of teamwork.... I really learned a lot about working together and working on projects that are really kind of hard."

Their participation at FACE and the community art projects that they created made a positive difference in their lives. They worked together, overcame obstacles, and enhanced their community. Furthermore, their efforts have turned the project housing grounds into a place of beauty that families can enjoy.

Planet Respect

In Murfreesboro, Tennessee, children at Mitchell Neilson Extended School Program created a mural called Planet Respect, which portrayed how aliens with different skin colors and body types lived together and celebrated their diversity. (See Figure 6.) Although children who attend the program come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, a significant portion of its student body consists of students who are at risk of social and academic failure due to impoverished living conditions. Suzanne St. John, the site director, wanted her students to create a community art project that would help

them learn about respect. She felt it was an important topic since she observed some of the children's difficulties with respecting school property and people who are different from themselves. To implement the project, St. John, pre-service art educators from Middle Tennessee State University, and I engaged the students in a variety of activities that focused on respect and disrespect, which included brainstorming, journaling, open discussion, and games. During a one month period, the students created art projects that portrayed self-respect as well as respect for one's peers, family, community members, and property and developed the mural design.



Figure 6. Mitchell Neilson Extended School
Program's Planet Respect

After the walls were prepped, staff members and pre-service educators oversaw the students as they applied layers of base color. The children were so excited to paint on a wall that they mixed too many hues together and created large sections of muck. Brandi, a nine year old student explained: "We were all hyper and we were trying to get through, work quickly and just try to rush through it. We didn't think about stopping and checking on it. And we were spilling paint

everywhere." Unfortunately, the staff members and college students did not have much mural experience and did not know how to stop the students from painting carelessly. When St. John and I arrived, we had the children step back from the mural and reassess their performance. We discussed respect for school property and explained to the children that the principal would not let us keep up a mural that did not represent our best efforts. Most of the children understood this and went back to their preliminary drawings and reviewed the color schemes and designs that they had planned to use. Together the students decided what changes to make, reevaluated their color choices, and partnered up with pre-service teachers. Although most students felt comfortable with this arrangement, Chelsea, a third grade student, cried because she had to stop painting. The two of us sat together and discussed the situation. To validate her feelings, I told her that I understood she was upset because painting a wall is fun. However, I wanted her to understand our perspective that the mural needed to accurately communicate a message of respect. Showing respect for the wall and the people who viewed it was part of the process. The next day, she brought in reworked sketches of her alien. Chelsea felt proud of her revised work. St. John explained: "She came in with a new attitude and liked her second design much better than the first because she put more time into it. She was so proud that she even added glitter on the teeth to make them sparkle."

After the mural's completion, the students critiqued their work and explained what they learned from the project. They agreed that it helped them make new friendships and try their best. John, an eleven year old student, established a positive working relationship with a college student named Katie. He felt that she was an excellent role model because she showed him respect by helping him fix his alien in a fun and non-threatening way. Brandi felt that students who were involved in different cliques grew more accepting of each other. "People

forgive us now. We (have learned that we) shouldn't be mean to people just because of how they look." Furthermore she added: "You don't need to be famous or something to make you special because everybody's special."

Reflecting back on the process, both John and Brandi noticed how the group's belief in their capabilities changed. John stated: "It was nice to see how much we improved. The group's skill level went from 75% to 100%." Brandi added: "We were all thinking we're not artists. We're just going to make it nasty. But, when we really looked at it we thought it looked cool." The project has taught her that everybody has a special skill: "I think it would inspire people to put their heart into something because they may really have a talent for that thing because not everybody's going to be perfect at everything."

Discussion

Through meaningful art projects under the supervision of caring adults, the children involved in these projects revealed that they are *outta sight* individuals who have made a difference in their communities. They have shown that they are capable of transforming ordinary sites into meaningful works of art that communicate their views. Interestingly, by analyzing the children's cited words and actions, it is easy to see that even though each project had a different theme and was created by children in different settings, the children exhibited similar behaviors. In all three cases, the students constructively employed collaboration, problem solving, respect, and self-efficacy to achieve their goals.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a meaningful part of children's educational experience because it demonstrates that children can learn and grow from each other (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). By working together,

children take ownership of their work and feel that they have an active role in the educational process. Students who participated in these community art projects expressed that they learned cooperative skills by establishing a feeling of camaraderie with their teammates and working towards the group's goals.

The frequent use of the words *we* and *teamwork* during their interviews expressed the groups' solidarity. Instead of taking individual credit for the work, they described how their teammates' contributions made the artworks possible. Children, such as Michael who normally did not feel a sense of belonging at school, felt good about working in a group because they felt like significant members of the team. Furthermore, the projects brought children together, who would not normally interact with each other. They became close during the art making process and learned to value one another.

As the children's relationships grew, they learned how to share and combine disparate ideas to make their projects work. When the students made their preliminary designs for the community artworks, they, as a group, decided which themes they wanted to turn into a large scale artwork. Ultimately, they elaborated on each other's ideas. As Brandi commented, their combined efforts made their project turn out much better than they thought it would because they shared ideas and still had the opportunity to incorporate their own unique aspects to it.

Problem Solving: Fussing Ain't Gonna Do Nothing

Problem solving involves using both critical and creative thinking skills to accomplish specific tasks (Church, 1999). Creative thinking is an essential component of problem solving because it enables individuals to look at a problem in many different ways. Through brainstorming and experimentation, the groups of children learned that

there was often more than one solution to a problem. They imaginatively searched for resourceful ways to solve problems and received encouragement and support from adults so they could achieve maximum outcomes. As a result, the children learned to recognize and overcome obstacles as well as transform areas in their communities into aesthetic sites.

Over the course of these projects, the students learned that mistakes are a natural part of the artistic process. St. John's explained why she believed her students and others like them have had difficulty with problem solving in the past: "Many of them were not given an opportunity to go back and fix their mistakes. They aren't used to being able to make improvements and make their work better, to fix it for the team." Instead of feeling paralyzed by failure, as some of them had done in the past, the students stepped away from the activity and found a solution. When the art club at Pine Villa saw green dots all over the wall made by inexperienced second graders, Robert² knew that "fussing ain't gonna do nothing." The group had to go back out there and paint over the green blotches of color. At FACE, the community gathered together to find a way to preserve the garden. Their combined efforts enabled the garden to grow and become a mother bed for other community gardens. The students at Mitchell Neilson helped each other recognize and overcome mistakes. St. John explained:

Each student could see where someone else's work was messed up and say that doesn't look quite right. The next day they would regroup in the morning to tell each other what they thought needed to be fixed. The children shared their ideas. They had an original idea and another person would give a suggestion as to how to make it better.

Due to the students' hard work and efforts, they transformed plain areas in their communities into aesthetic sites of enjoyment. The largest transformation occurred at Ebony Garden's project housing, where

FACE's students and the residents turned their community's bare lot into an enjoyable community resource with a mural, playground, garden, and trees. Besides being a thing of beauty in itself, the fruit and vegetable garden provided nourishment to the people.

Respect

Respect does not happen automatically, it is a skill that children learn (Clark, 2005; LaFrankie Kokolis, 1999). Occasionally, school teachers and administrators become frustrated with some of their students with at-risk tendencies because they feel such students are not showing respect for themselves or others. Unfortunately, if respect is not learned at home or through other life experiences, a child cannot master it. Schools and extended school programs provide environments where children can learn about respect. First, adults must show children respect and believe in their potential. Next, they should talk to children about what respect is and teach them how to connect it to their lives so that they will be better able to understand and apply it. To make these community projects possible, the children were treated respectfully and were courteous to others.

Many of the children talked about the importance of being kind to other children. Tyrone emphasized that older students need to be nice to children who are younger than themselves. He and his peers were respectful of second graders who did not possess the same skills as they did. Monique explained that people at FACE listened and talked with her about her problems. Because of this positive influence in her life, she no longer describes herself as a bad kid. Her sister Rosalyn is so grateful to be part of the organization that she volunteers her services even though she has the opportunity to get paid. Chelsea learned how to respect the walls by using her best efforts to create an artwork that would effectively communicate the message that she and her fellow

students wanted to send. In addition to showing respect to others and for community property, the students received accolades for their significant achievements. They became the talk of their communities as other students and adults, some of whom had never spoken to them before, congratulated them on their fine work.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1998) has written extensively on self-efficacy, which he describes as a person's belief about his or her capabilities to produce effects. He explained that the sources of children's self-efficacy include (a) overcoming obstacles and rebounding from setbacks, (b) seeing people similar to themselves succeed, and (c) hearing from someone else that they have the ability to master new skills. Community art projects function as an avenue where children can enhance their feelings of self-efficacy. Through dedication and hard work they feel good about themselves by contributing their talents to society.

The children's diverse positive statements reflect how they boosted their self-esteem through the project. For example, they transformed initial doubts about their capabilities into substantial beliefs about their abilities. Similar to Bandura's findings, they learned that they could overcome obstacles, received praise from others, and witnessed themselves and others like them succeed. Furthermore, they gave back to the community. Their actions confirmed that they are adept individuals who make a positive difference. These projects provided the children with opportunities to shine. Likewise, it taught them they could use their talent to inspire others. As a result, the children took on the role of the teacher and constructively guided other students who needed additional support.

Conclusion

Children with at-risk tendencies often hear disparaging comments about their potential to succeed from others, which places them out of sight/site/cite of mainstream society (Tucker, 1999). Other people's negative treatment of them and their capabilities affects their inner voices and begets negative internal feelings. Unfortunately, repeating harmful comments teaches children that they are incapable of achieving their goals. As art educators, it is our responsibility to combat these epidemics against children with at-risk tendencies and use art as a tool to show them that they are valuable members of society. As this study has shown, collaborative community projects are an effective and safe method to creatively express children's aspirations, knowledge, and beliefs. They provide children with a voice in a society that all too often ignores them. As children continue to become successful through the arts and in their communities, they can learn to transfer these positive outcomes into other areas of their lives and show former doubters that they are truly *outta sight* individuals.

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Notes

¹ All children's names have been changed to protect their identities.

² By the end of the school year Robert raised his grades and was accepted to an art magnet middle school.