

Little Pieces of Me:

Building Shared Experiences Across a Community of Middle Schools

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Working with a population of students who move frequently within the same area, means that teachers often share the same students from school to school. The majority of middle school art programs are structured so that students only receive art instruction for one quarter of each school year, but in an area where the students move frequently, the students may receive art for a fractured amount of time or from two different art teachers within the same quarter. In addition, some students may change schools at the conclusion of each school year. Teachers in high mobility areas share the same population of students as the students move from school to school, but have no commonality in the culture of their classrooms. According to Freedman, 86% of Americans believe that education in the arts encourages and improves a child's general attitude toward school. Further, Freedman states that 83% of Americans believe the arts help students to communicate with adults and peers (Freedman, 2011). Most middle school art teachers teach each quarter of students having planned alone or without any benefit of their colleague's strengths and best practices or support. What if all students knew to expect a commonality of creating certain art pieces that will be shared amongst the schools they attend? What if a student arrived to a school and a piece that they created at their previous school was on display in their new art room?

I propose the development of a professional community of middle school art teachers who share a singular culture of using Artist Trading Cards and portraits to link their schools students to the students of neighboring schools in the same county. The Little Pieces of Me Project will use the work the students create to culminate into an art show that represents each school who participates. Allowing students to deepen or build connections across the schools they attend, find commonalities with other children of their age group, and develop creative thinking skills with media and the beginnings of their own artistic personal voice. The participating art teachers and I will develop a professional community of support through the practice of working together while swapping our students art and ideas to organize a show of our students work.

Teaching Visual Arts in most middle schools is a profession that requires hours of planning that is often done alone and is not shared with the greater community of surrounding art educators. Collaborative planning does not have to exist just within one school, but can be executed by a team of teachers, who are committed to carry out the curriculum with a greater end in mind. Inger states that "teachers who work closely together on matters of curriculum and instruction find themselves better equipped for classroom work" (Inger, 1993). By planning together and using a bank of ideas teachers are better equipped to capitalize on their individual strengths and have their weaknesses supported (Inger, 1993). Freedman, states that the organizing of art educators is a movement toward social action and cultural engagement, because "to teach from a social perspective is to convey the conviction that the visual arts are vital to all groups" (Freedman, 2011, pp. 42). Thus by working communally, the organized art experience

we create will help our students to understand how their art can anchor them to their larger living environment.

Though as single art teachers we teach independently of each other at our individual schools, we will share the practice of having our students create artist trading cards and trade artwork that can travel from school to school. As participating teachers we will create a common culture from school to school, by using art swaps each quarter to facilitate shared art experiences for our students that move from one participating school to another. So as one student travels to another school, the commonalities will help them feel more connected to the new school. Artist trading cards were first designed in 1996 by Swiss artist Vänçi Stirnemann (Heck, 2009). The small works are the same size as traditional baseball cards and can be made from any art medium. The resulting counterculture of trading from artist to artist is highly democratic and allows for artists to share and have dialog with each other on a global scale (Heck, 2009). Artist trading cards (ATC's) are not meant for sale, but are for trading one for one. Each individual teacher will use the ATC's as a practice space for skills and to allow students to experiment with materials and ideas, thus giving their students the joy of making art for art's sake. By making art for others, students will begin to make art not only for the sake of fulfilling assignment requirements, but for themselves and to share the same with others (Bovio, 2011). When they receive the art of other schools, the students will have a second positive art experience by taking ownership over the art work that was made for them. Further, they will begin to see and feel a greater attachment to the larger project (Bovio, 2011).

The importance of sharing oneself with others through artwork is the goal of this art sharing project. My hope is that the involved teachers and I will develop an organic relationship of sharing lessons and resources, while the students learn that they have the power to communicate and share themselves by making art and that they can be empowered by their own art making. The relationships they build with their art teachers and fellow students will be invaluable and empowering over time. Freedman (2011) finds that students who have close relationships with teachers have a deeper motivation for their own learning. The final art show of student portrait work is where students can demonstrate the results of their shared experiences across schools by having mixed groups of students lead visitors through the exhibit and talk about their work.

#### Plan of Action

Implementation of this project requires the cooperation of at least three teachers who are willing to commit to the program. I will share my plan at the end of a school year with my colleagues and ask for any initial volunteers to join the Little Pieces of Me Project. The more teachers, who are involved, will add to the experience of our culminating art show of the student's self-portraits. As a cooperative group of teachers we will need to meet initially to plan our course of action for the coming school year. We will divide the tasks required for planning the program and set up the quarterly swapping meetings. Throughout the school year, the

quarterly meetings will act not only as swapping days, but as times for sharing ideas and best practices. As a professional learning community, we will begin to take advantage of this time to meet with each other as professionals with shared needs. Days for these meetings will need to be within the final two weeks of the quarter, to give the student's time to complete their ATC's and self-portraits, while allowing time for the teachers to bring the swapped artwork back to their classrooms and allow the students to enjoy the swapped work before their schedules change.

The students will each create a set of ATC's that will be critiqued in their class for which finished ATC's to include in the set to be traded. As teachers, we will have to decide on the number of ATC's to include in a set to make the trades equitable between schools. Teachers can use this as an opportunity to teach about aesthetics, craftsmanship, and design. Receiving the ATC's will build excitement for the show of the student's self-portraits. Teachers will have to be committed to saving the portraits for showing at the art show at the end of the program.

The art show creates an environment for the students and teachers to meet the other student artists who they have met through the swapped art work throughout the school year. The art show is also an opportunity to witness the greater community enjoying the students work. The art show will be at a local art center or venue that can display the students work for an extended period of time. As an added bonus, those students who transferred between schools that year will get the opportunity to witness the work from all schools they are connected to and visit with their past art teachers. As teachers, we will display as many portraits as the space allows and include a history of the project by including the students ATC's in the show for parents and other visitors to see.

I believe that through the bringing together of multiple art programs in my county, my colleagues and I will develop natural relationships of sharing and supporting each other professionally. Creating a culture amongst each other, we will be able to involve new teachers to the group which will add to the groups set of expertise and continuation. My hope is that we can take this design and implement it on a revolving basis, maybe expanding the themes of the final show each year.

### References

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