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Innovating schools through dialogic arts-based practice: ingredients for engaging students with a whole new mind

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Innovating schools through dialogic arts-based practice: ingredients for engaging students with a whole new mind

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Abstract

While the “scientific” debate about school dropouts has ensued, some have taken matters into their own hands, creating successful non-school based programs on the arts for at-risk youth based. Their efforts demonstrate powerful results for learning and human development. We suggest that it is time to incorporate this knowledge base, and as well, explore its potential for an integrated model of learning that considers the creative needs of all individuals. During the fall of 2011, we introduced a pilot project to work with storytelling and painting with a group of youth in a full pull-out program. In this article, we share stories from our experience and offer insights about the complex road ahead to inject creativity into mainstream schools. The importance here is to insure that all students will be better equipped for a future that engages the whole mind and being.

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Introduction

The number of students who have trouble in school academically and socially is a continuing problem in most western countries, despite the numerous efforts to address the challenge. The Canadian Council on Learning (2010) reports that,while in many countries the rate is decreasing, there are still troubling trends that require a continued effort to understand this phenomenon and develop effective responses. Dominant approaches to "solving the problem" have focused on the psychological health of children and youth, and their capacity to learn (Bernard, 1997; Woloszky, 1996). While this may be appropriate in some case, others argue that the phenomenon of drop out is more systemic and has to do with the culture of schooling and the way educators perceive students as resilient persons (Bernard, 1991; 1997; Tyson & Bauffor, 2004). The National Dropout Center at Clemson University found that dropping out is a process, not an event; it is a human response to a context. One of the top three cited reasons for leaving school is, "Did not like school" (Woloszky, 1996). Among the common descriptors used by students was, "It's boring".

If schools were businesses, the question of student dropouts would be seen as a problem of customer satisfaction. To succeed, the business would necessarily ask the question, "How can we better meet the needs of our customers?" or "How can we enhance customer value?" Yet, schools are not a business, but rather a government program that is traditionally designed around a model of accountability (with the exception of private schools and models such as Reggio Emilia and Waldorf). In public education, seeing the student as customer is not in keeping with the tradition.

Given the continued problem of school leavers and dissatisfied students, we suggest that it may be time for schools to change the view of dropouts and see students as customers. The plethora of proven successful practices that draw from arts-based learning and communication demonstrates innovative ways to engage students and meet their spectrum of needs from academics to social and emotional development. We suggest that it is important to explore the ways in which these typically extra-curricular based activities can be systemically integrated into the school curriculum as a pedagogical praxis to build resilient learning environments that engage students and respond to a multitude of needs.

In this article, we present findings from a pilot project that introduced a model for working with dialogic arts-based pedagogy in schools. The pilot was tested in a special program for youth who were given extra academic and social support to complete middle school in preparation for entering high school. Given the social-emotional make-up of these students who were already disengaged from the educational system, we aimed to demonstrate innovative approaches to learning to facilitate a different relationship to teaching and learning for both students and teachers. As school developers, teachers and researchers and professionally trained artists, we designed the innovation from a model that combined quality management principles (customer focus and satisfaction) with appreciative inquiry and arts-based learning to explore how these different components could create learning environments that engaged students to reverse the trends in dropout.

Background

Many of the studies in the areas of resiliency and learning styles point out that schools are not designed to engage students as whole beings with a whole-mind (Respress & Lufti, 2006). The dominant model of education is left-brain oriented with a fixation on productivity and results, at the cost of creativity, innovation and human development. As Silverman (2004) pointed out, underachievers and dropout students were more often right-brain oriented: creative, good spatial reasoning, strong higher order thinking skills, and strong leadership

capacities, among others. Instead of understanding the whole picture of needs of children and youth, educators focus on productivity, results and right answers, which in turn creates the conditions for many students to disengage. Silverman also found that students who engage in creative interests such as the arts are able to reverse patterns of underachievement.

Studies examining extra-curricular art programs have demonstrated a strong relationship between achievement and behavior that is well worth noting. According to Respress and Lufti (2006), ”The arts pay off most expansively in basic reading skills, language development, and writing skills. Increase in general academic skills also show up and appear to reinforce these specific literacy-related developments. These skills emphasize focus and concentration, skills in expression, persistence, imagination, creativity and inclinations to tackle problems.” (p. 26). According to one study by Franklin, et al., (2004), ”Participation in the arts … reduces stress, improve learning outcomes, enhance intrinsic motivation, regulate brain chemistry, augment body memory and literally renew neural pathways” (p. 24-25, as cited in Respress & Lufti, 2006).

In another study, Walker (1995) found that students who participated in the arts had a greater commitment to schooling and achieved better grades, regardless of their minority status or other risk factors associated with their circumstances. According to Dickinson (2002), studies have demonstrated interesting relationships between different art forms and thinking and reasoning. For example, music has a strong correlation to spatial reasoning, which is used in mathematics, while drama helps stimulate problem solving, concentration and analytical reasoning. And dance increases self-confidence, tolerance and appreciation for others.

The arts have been used in a variety of successful programs for at-risk youth to help them develop a sense of self-esteem, identity, and belief in their own abilities to learn. Among the art forms, storytelling has been used extensively. Nelson, et al (2008) report that storytelling helped reduce drug abuse among 12-15 year olds, while Balmer et al (2002) reported increased sexual self efficacy among 13-14 year old youth in Kenya. In a separate study, storytelling, according to Nelson, et al (2008), has been shown to help youth clarify their own values that help them make decisions about self-destructive behavior. Storytelling helps children develop a sense of belief and a value system at an early age (Grainger, et al, 2005). Stories also enable us to communicate ideas that go beyond the rational and structural and help us to imagine and represent the difficult (Kornberger, 2008). Witherell (1991) writes that, ”The creative use of story and dialogue lends power to educational and therapeutic experiences because of their capacity to expand our horizons of understanding and provide rich contextual information about human actors, intentions and experience” (p. 79).

While such studies provide important insights into the power of the arts for learning and human development, they also reflect another significant reality: most arts-based programming is reserved for extra-curricular settings. Evidence of research on creativity in schools highlights this further. In an international comparison of creativity in educational programming and curricula, Heilmann and Korte (2010) reported that creativity in Swedish schools was linked to subject-specific definitions, occurring mostly in art curricula. Their definition of creativity recognized two separate approaches: subject-specific (art, music, language) versus skill-based (creative thinking or problem solving, which can be applied to all subjects). If we are to support creativity and learning and engage students holistically, then we may need to rethink the practice of integrating the arts in schools, a practice that is driven from a skill-based approach, rather than a subject-specific based approach.

The European Commission on Education recognizes creativity as one of the essential skills central to learning and workforce development in the 21st century. Defined as the ″ability to produce work that is both novel and appropriate″ (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999 in Ferrari , et al 2009). Ferrari (2009) reports that creativity and innovation have strong links

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with knowledge and learning, that is, the form of learning that builds skills in comprehension and higher order reasoning, as well as contributing to the construction of personal meaning. The Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education promotes the idea that helping students develop their creativity occurs through imaginative learning in the classroom (St. Clair, 2012), which is based on a number of capacities including, "noticing deeply, questioning, making connections, identifying patterns, exhibiting empathy, creating meaning, taking action and reflecting and assessing" (p. 3). In its work with teacher training, it focuses on the ways that the arts can serve as pedagogical praxis to support learning in all subjects. According to the European Commission report, creativity and innovation are considered essential skills to support lifelong learning and workforce development, with strong ties to entrepreneurship (Ferrari et al. 2009; Heilmann & Korte, 2010). For students to be prepared as workers in the 21st century, they need to develop skills for the jobs of the future, which Pink (2006) suggests, require "a whole new mind".

Pink (2005) claims that society is engaged in a paradigm shift from a focus on the left brain to a focus on the whole new mind, in which the left and right brain work in partnership with each other. The heavy emphasis on productivity and effectiveness in the industrial age, he suggests, is being replaced by a need among humans to have greater social connections, spirituality and creativity. He and others (Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2008) suggest that the jobs of the future will be more focused on artistry, empathy, emotion, design, invention, counseling, ethnography, networking, and global issues. These jobs incorporate right brain activities, including design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning (Pink, 2005). To meet the needs of students with a whole new mind requires a different approach to teaching and learning. We suggest that combining dialogic arts-based practice with traditional curriculum can be important to provide students with stimulating learning environments that also prepare them for living and work, as well as engage them socially and academically. In our pilot project, we applied arts-based methods to a broader approach to teaching and learning to support creativity and innovation in the school, as well as to stimulate conditions for engaging youth, who were, at the time, disengaged from schooling.

Method

The study presented in this article is based on action research method. As developers of the pilot program, we wore many hats that we have developed over 25 years in the field of education and school development. We have both served as school developers working from a systems model of organizational development and leadership. Moreover, we have conducted research in the area of special needs education, learning styles, and arts-based education. One of us is a formally trained musician and previously worked with the Lincoln Center Institute for arts-based education. The other is a painter. We have both worked with appreciative inquiry in school development programs, storytelling and cultural analysis. It is from this area of experience that we engaged in the pilot project as an action research study.

The Pilot Project and Case

The pedagogical pilot project that we field-tested was part of a sub-intervention within a larger, nationally funded initiative to examine the ways in which schools can develop healthy learning environments to support the health and well-being of all students (Warne, Snyder, & Gillander-Gådin, 2013). The pilot project was conducted during a three-month period in the fall of 2011 and initiated as a pedagogical intervention with high school students to explore the ways in which dialogic arts-based methods could be used to stimulate creativity and foster

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a healthy, stimulating environment for students who were identified as disengaged from school. The pilot project was designed from a theoretical perspective of the strength-based approach to development, at the heart of which is language and its role as a tool for shaping meaning and identity in a social context (Vygotsky, 1986; Wittgenstein, 1953). The project had two main goals:

1. Introduce storytelling and painting as tools for exploring, identifying and communicating ideas through creative processes that could be applied in a range of context and subject areas
2. Help students develop skills in dialogue and collaboration using a variety of techniques drawn from clean language, appreciative inquiry, circle conversation

the case. The pilot project took place in a school situated in a mid-sized community of approximately 70,000 inhabitants in Sweden. The school program, which we have named Lakeview, was designed in 2001 to meet the needs of students who met the middle school requirements, yet had incomplete assignments in one or several subjects. Most of the students also needed help in developing social skills, or sense of wellbeing. A total of six students are accepted within any given year, and acceptance is based on meeting a range of criteria. Students are required to test the program for one week to see if it can serve their needs. They must demonstrate the need for social support, as well as academic support, and demonstrate a clear commitment to the program and to moving forward in their lives. The caregivers and family for each child must also agree to the conditions of the program. The pedagogical approach, according to the program document, was "consequence pedagogy[1]", with an emphasis on helping the youth take responsibility for their actions and see themselves as survivors, rather than victims. The programming combined academic subjects, with social and behavioral skills training, each of which received time in the daily schedule.

A staff of four worked with the six students regularly, of which two were subject area teachers and two were assistants trained in social and behavioral development. Students worked from an individually designed program based on their academic and social needs. Among the social competencies that were addressed were self-regulation, responsibility, trustworthiness, respect, collaboration and vulnerability. The school day began with a group breakfast in which staff and students worked on social interaction skills, followed with academic studies. Each afternoon was devoted to social development, based on programming within the school and in the local community. Typically, students remained in the school for up to one year, with the option to return to the main high school earlier, if appropriate. The maximum amount of time a person could enroll in the program was for a total of two years, or until the age of 20.

the participants. To establish continuity in the pilot and help to integrate the methods in the general work of the school program, the staff agreed to participate in the writing and dialog process, as well as assist the students in their work between workshops. This provided the staff the possibility to develop their own working knowledge of the process, as well as decide how best to integrate it into their own school programming and curriculum. Six workshops were conducted in total during the three-month period, taking place during the time allocated for language development. Workshop sessions were chosen based on the program schedule and took place during the language curriculum space between 9:45 and noon. On one or two occasions, sessions began with breakfast in order to develop a sense of rapport with the students outside the classroom setting.

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In our pilot group, we met with five students, two of whom left the program within the first weeks of our pilot to return to the main high school. Of the three with whom we worked during the entire six-week pilot, one was present at all sessions, leaving early on two occasions. Another student was absent from the first and fourth workshops, but present at the rest. The third student was present at all but one of the workshops.

In preparation for the project, we met with the teachers at the main school building in town to learn about the students whom we would be meeting and to decide upon a theme for the stories that we would work with during our upcoming six week project. It was important for the students to work with a theme to which they could relate, without being too personal so as to make them uncomfortable. We chose to work with the students' experiences with animals as a way to both enter the world of dialogic storytelling, as well as explore metaphors of friendship through a study of the animals and their behaviors and symbols. By exploring another object, people often experience greater comfort talking and writing about the object than themselves (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Preskill, 1995), and over time, they become open for a dialog about themselves.

the dialogic arts-based model. The pilot method was based on a dialogic storytelling method, combined with Clean Language, *Levande Verkstad* and Appreciative Inquiry. A dialogic storytelling method was used with students in the pilot. This method relates to dialogic pedagogy, which gives students the opportunity to share their voice and create meaning and identity through interactions with one another (Mui, 2013). It is based on the belief that everyone can write. The challenge for the teacher is to help the students find something that is meaningful to them, important to share, and to have a listening ear. When we listen to stories that are close to our hearts, a trust develops and we begin to gain a sense of comfort with our own ability to write. We have something to say. As a writing process, dialogic storytelling creates a platform for students to voice their experiences and opinions about a subject and to dialog with one another to deepen the story and create meaning (Grainger, et al., 2005; Greene, 1991;Shotter, 1999). In dialogic storytelling, the focus is on process, learning and exploration of ideas and voice, rather than on outcome and perfection.

To support the dialogic storytelling model, metaphorical writing was adapted from Clean Language and gestalt painting from the Living Workshop. Clean Language is an approach to writing that explores the use of metaphors to bring new perspectives to a subject and help student approach learning by examining life and situations through new lenses (Tompkins & Lawley, 2002). At the heart of clean language is a focus on understanding how we use language to describe events and ourselves and, therefore, to give us opportunity to select the words and metaphors to rewrite our stories and identity.

The "living workshop" (translated from the Swedish, *levande versktad*) is a process-oriented method in which students explore ideas together through paintings and gestalt. The process builds on the premise that through art we can explore our own ideas and forms of expression by testing different materials and techniques. At the end of each painting session, a reflective dialog is facilitated in which all the participants talk about what they see in the paintings and how they might incorporate it into other work that they were doing (Boström, 1975). Gaylean (1983) also promotes the power of imagery for learning and expressing, suggesting its effective role in stimulating creativity and meaning making. Given that the dialogic storytelling process would integrate both writing and dialogue, we thought the live painting workshop would provide the students with an additional exploratory exercise to stimulate creativity and build story. The painting workshop was introduced in the middle of the storytelling model to help enhance the development of the metaphors with which students would be working.

The last element of our model was the application of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperider & Srivastva, 1987) as a way to develop new mental models and relationships to learning and self. AI is an organizational change method that engages members of an organization in a process of identifying areas of change and helps them to imagine new possibilities. The method focuses on strengths, rather than on problems, which is a necessary ingredient to support creativity and innovation. All too often we get locked in a negative focus within a situation, never to see new avenues for change. Appreciative inquiry focuses on helping us to see those new avenues by asking questions, describing and imaging change. AI was integrated with a dialogic storytelling process to facilitate creativity and sharing among students.

Results

In keeping with the nature of the project, we have chosen to present findings from our experience in narrative form. Our story is not of a successful pilot project based on our intended goals. It does, however, highlight the possibilities that exist for creating another kind of environment in the classroom, even with students who were so angry and guarded at the first meeting that they refused to talk. By the end of our six week project stay, we successfully created a new communication with three of the five students who had remained in the program. This success gives hope to schools for the possibility of creating this situation for all students. In our story, we introduce you to the students with whom we met and highlight some of the pedagogical possibilities and challenges that we experienced. We have chosen to focus on these three students who continued in the program during our pilot project. Let us begin.

"The long and winding road"

We watched the town center fade in our rearview mirror, as we drove toward the alternative school program located on the outskirts of town. We turned off the main road and meandered down the winding street looking for signs of the school program, when we noticed a mailbox at the end of a dirt driveway. Unsure if we had come to the right place, we turned in and followed the road, coming to an old house that sat on the periphery of a housing development. The contrast in ages between the schoolhouse and the residential section was noticeable and made us wonder if we had come to the right place, and if so, why would the school chose such a location for an alternative program that sought to eventually integrate the students back into the main building? Over time, our question would be answered, yet we remained curious at this point as we parked our car and headed up the stairs of the old red house to meet the students for the first time.

"Is there an entrepreneur behind that ADHD?"

In the kitchen we were greeted by three of the five students and two teachers. We went around the room presenting ourselves to each individual, starting with Sam. (The identities have been changed to protect the students.) "Hi, my name is Sam." Unsure if we heard correctly as the dialect in Swedish was a bit difficult to understand, we repeated the name to which the student responded: "Sam, just like you say in America." We were pleasantly surprised, for in less than one minute, Sam had picked up on one of us as American, which was not always clear from the beginning. Sam, at first glance, was a quick, bright person. As Sam continued to talk, we heard signs of entrepreneurship and leadership

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coming through his voice and began to wonder why this student was in the program. Just a few weeks later Sam returned to the main school, which we understood clearly, since during our brief time with him, we saw a very bright person. We began to suspect that Sam was a good example of what Silverman (2004) meant by: "Students who are gifted and talented, yet have a hard time communicating their ideas because they are a right-brain dominated person in a left-brain dominated context." We could be wrong about this of course, since it was nothing that we tested[2].

"I can't write, the teacher told me so"

To the left of Sam sat Kim, a very different personality from him. Kim sat comfortably at the table, at home in this social context, speaking with an easy tone, and secure in his words and ideas. When Kim spoke, his eyes shined. All that changed when we entered the classroom setting: Kim's body language was retracted and pained, bent forward with head looking downward. What was it that changed this person so dramatically in just a couple of minutes from a social butterfly to a hidden soul? We would later learn, from both Kim and the teachers, that years of hearing how Kim was not bright had affected his self-esteem. This would challenge us through the whole project. During the writing portions of our meetings, Kim refused to write, and instead drew pictures of different animals: owl, parrot, other birds, crocodile, snakes, turtle, and other water animals, as well as a dog. The pictures were detailed and true to form, not fantasy figures. And all these animals, in detail, were drawn in the 15-20 minutes during which others had written their first idea. Of all the animals Kim drew, the dog was the center of the collage: we had a beginning.

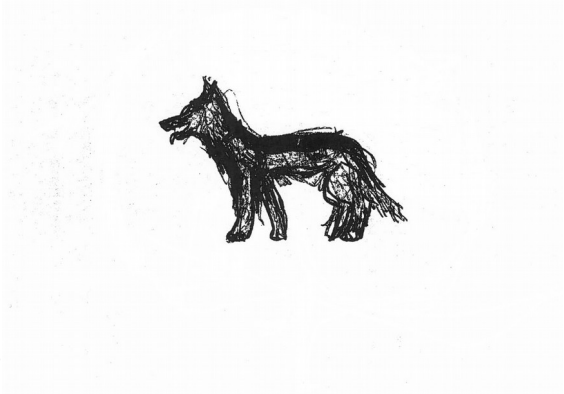

Figure 1: Kim's dog

When we initiated the dialogue process, Kim withdrew, head down on the table, answering "I don't know" to every question we asked. Since Kim was resistant to writing, we created opportunities to work with each student individually for a portion of the workshop time. It was during the first session that Kim told us he couldn't write. "How do you know that"? we asked. "Because the teachers told me so, not the teachers here, but others. The teachers here believe in me." We spent time with Kim talking about the writing process, and how it can be difficult, because it takes longer to write than speak. We offered to write down the stories that he shared to help him see how the story that he told could be the same in written form. Kim's story began to develop and was about a workshop that he liked to spend time in. Later on, during the painting workshop, Kim found a picture of a flame that he chose to fit with the story of the workshop. Unfortunately, the story was never finished. Kim was offered extra support from us to work one-on-one with the story, as the teachers didn't have time, but that support was never accepted. Instead, Kim returned to the picture of the dog, which was used as the focus of the verbal dialog around storytelling.

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During the group dialogs Kim remained silent, hugging the words"I don't know" when asked a question. On the last day, we saw Kim sitting silently with the picture of the dog as we shared the final stories. Kim had written some text around the dog. Perhaps our message did get through.. Since completing this project, we have had contact with the teachers and learned that Kim has completed the program and has begun to write.

Figure 2: Kim's dog with text

"Getting back on the horse again"

The third student was Charlie, buried in layers of pain. Our first impression was of a person guarded by high walls. Charlie, we suspected, would be hard to connect with. Yet, when we entered the classroom, a new person emerged,, making eye contact with us and soaking in every word. Charlie was one of the few to welcome the writing process, even though the focus of the story was a painful personal experience with a horse. Charlie shared with us his narrative about a horse, a good friend for several years, who one day threw Charlie into the air. The event was unexpected and made Charlie very angry. The first day, Charlie was uncomfortable reading the story, and instead chose to share with us a picture that he had begun to draw. It was a picture of an eye embedded with the reflection of a horse. (Unfortunately, this is not clearly visible in the printed copy). This picture was soon followed by second picture of a horse dancing in the wind.

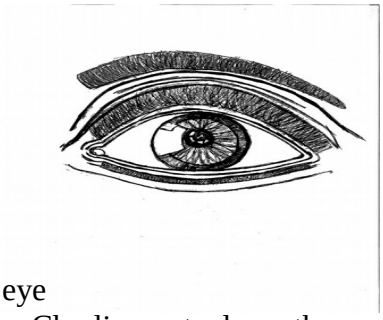

Figure 3: Charlies horse eye

During the dialog process, Charlie wrote down the questions from classmates and teachers with care, not missing a thing. Over time, we witnessed the integration of various questions and perspectives as Charlie worked through a difficult trauma in the story.

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Additionally, the pictures began to develop to eventually reveal to us the full horse, with an accompanying metaphor.

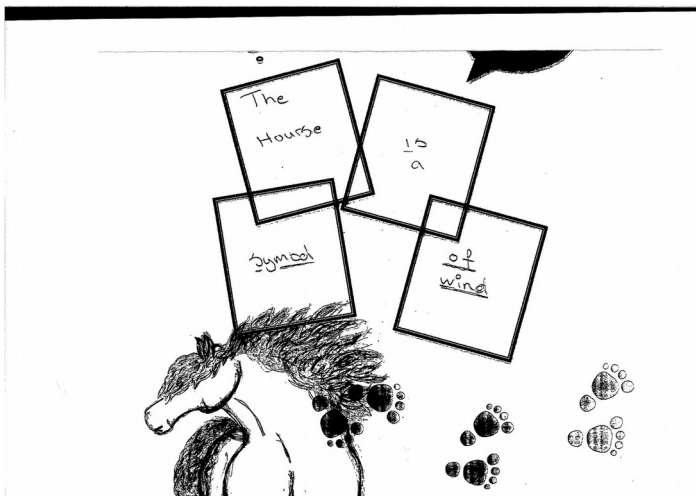

Figure 4: Charlie's expanded horse picture

Charlie was the only one of the students to embrace the entire process, using both the dialogs and painting sessions to bring the story to life. From the group painting event, Charlie spotted a picture of a dragon that Kim had painted. Charlie asked Kim if he could use it in his story to represent the fear of being thrown from a horse.

Figure 5: Charlie's Dragon

On the last day, Charlie shared with us that the process, although difficult, had been very useful, and he was eager to start riding again: a 360 degree turn of events through the storytelling process, moving from fear to openness. The final product was introduced with a new picture of a person riding a horse, representing the inner transformation that had occurred during the writing process.

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Figure 6: Charlie's final horse picture¨

"Show me your true colors"

We didn't meet Robin, the fourth student to participate in our project, until the third workshop. The teachers had shared with us earlier that he was a tough person with a strong attitude, which we experienced as well. He had body language that demonstrated both an inner strength as well as strong integrity, which could also be easily interpreted as bitterness and aggressiveness. Robin, we suspect, developed this external core over time as a survival mechanism to meet the high expectations placed on him to succeed both socially and academically. Robin was in control, and we were challenged to meet his conditions. At the first meeting with Robin, he refused to read his story, for it was not complete. Instead, he demanded time to finish it. At this point in the project we recognized the need to work one on one with some of the students and chose to use this opportunity to create such a space. Robin would get his wish to finish the story, and we could meet with each student individually. This decision paid off in many ways, as it was a turning point for developing a sense of trust and better contact. with the students.

Robin's story was of an encounter with a fox that jumped in the family car while on vacation. The story wasn't long, yet it introduced us to a world of creativity that lied behind the facade of brashness.

> My family and I were on our way to Ges on vacation, when we stopped by the side of the road for a bathroom break. All of sudden, a fox ran out of the woods and hopped in the car onto my sister's lap. It was a very beautiful fox, tame and young and probably missing companionship. My half-sister thought it was really exciting since, there aren't many who get to experience a fox on their lap at the age of 17! In the beginning she thought it was a little scary, but soon she thought it was perhaps awful to leave behind the fox all alone. But we were forced to leave him behind so that we could come to Gelstad. The fox stod still, watching us as we drove away. We sat for a long time in the car and talked about the fox, wondering if the little orange-like fox's mother had died or just left him.

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Stealthy messenger of the gods,
Cunning and wise, reliable friend,
Guide my steps through this maze of deception
And see this problem to its end.

Figure 7: Robin's Fox

What's interesting about this story is the possibility of interpreting Robin through the symbolism of a fox. According to some native American traditions, the fox represents hidden layers of deception, at the core of which is a wise and cunning being that is reliable and works to solve problems. This rang true for our short experience with Robin, who, on the one hand, presented an attitude of anger and bitterness, and who also worked committedly on the task. Accepting some of Robin's need for control, without challenging it, we believe helped us to see another side of this person who was bright and capable, as well as caring and committed. We were able to develop a good rapport that went from a person who controlled the conditions of interaction to a person who sat around the table and engaged in a dialog.

"I may sit next to you, but I have nothing to say to you"

As we learned more about each of the students and how best to connect with them, we also gained insight into the strength the traditional school culture has had on shaping behaviors for teaching and learning. In particular, we would like to highlight the role of grading and independent work that has bred a culture of passive learning and isolated students. One of the themes that permeated the learning environment was the individual nature of the learning program. Although designed to meet each student's unique needs, it didn't appear to incorporate significantly any of the research on collaborative, self-directed, or social learning. Up front, we need to recognize that this may be an inappropriate expectation of the program, since its existence was developed as a last resort to reengage youth who were struggling socially and academically. What was interesting to us was not so much the particular programming to which we were privy, but the resistance the students demonstrated toward us when we introduced activities that would require them to share their thoughts and ideas, as well as indicate a curiosity for others.

The classroom was rather small, most likely the original living room in the house before the building became a school. In the middle of the room were several tables interconnected, around which we all sat. The walls were sparsely decorated with a whiteboard and a flow chart. One of the walls was lined with bookshelves, which housed the students' resources, including fact books, art supplies, magazines and games. On another wall was a bookshelf in which students could store their work. In the corner was a single computer without Internet connection, reserved for upstairs so that students wouldn't surf the Net during their lessons. Back at the table, we anticipated that students would be comfortable communicating with each other, because of the dialog conducive formation of the tables. As we quickly learned, the students' inner discomfort with sharing was strong enough to create isolated islands within

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the shared space. What a marked difference this was from the openness we experienced in the kitchen.

When we introduced the dialog portion of the storytelling process and asked, “Who would like to begin?” the room was deadly silent, and all eyes were focused inward. We gave the room a chance to come alive, but no one dared to start. Finally, one of the teachers, who also participated in the process, volunteered to read their story first. We tried to use this opportunity to mirror how the process is done and demonstrate that the questions could be open and caring. No bites! The room remained silent, except for the teacher who read his story. Kim was completely silent, almost without contact, lying with his head down on the table. Charlie sat with his knees raised up to his chest, and Robin had a look of disgust on his face. It was clear that these students did not dare to ask each other questions. The student code of silence was strong and we would have to find another way to engage them in collaboration and dialog..

“I’ll do it only if it counts toward my grades”

Wanting to create a trusting environment, we returned to the second workshop prepared to help students understand “why” they might want to develop their dialogic storytelling skills. To show respect for their capacity to learn and understand, we presented a research base on the connection between creativity and learning and future job preparation. Also, they learned about right-brain and left-brain learning and the dominance of left-brain activities in school. It was our hope that we would paint a picture in which they would recognize themselves, as well as see there were possibilities for them despite their lack of interest in school. When we had presented the research, we asked them to respond to it. A dialog began to take shape as students shared with us that they could relate to the left-brain dominated schooling, and even experienced on many occasions that their own preferences for learning were not supported by their previous schools. The cloud of silence had been lifted slightly, and we used the opportunity to ask new questions: This time we asked them about their experience with the first workshop: 1) What did you experience last time? 2) Did you experience something that surprised you or frustrated you? 3) What would you like to do differently in the future, and 4) What are you curious about now?.

The majority of students had difficulty expressing themself, although several shared that they were uncomfortable reading aloud. Kim continued to answer with the typical “I don’t know”, and Robin wondered if he would get a grade for this work. As Robin shared with us, “If I can’t get a grade for this, then it’s not worth my time.” Once again, we were transported back to the strength of the dominant schooling model that year after year continues to set more stress on grades, rather than on learning. We reached for the curriculum plan and national goals to show the students that everyone should possess and demonstrate the ability to write a story and to collaborate with others in the development process. The resistance around the table decreased slightly, while the number of questions in our own minds rose. When in the schooling experience do children become more focused on grades then on learning? Why couldn’t the students be open to experiencing learning as fun? And why were they so resistant to cooperating and collaborating with one another in the classroom, when outside the classroom they were open? Curious about all of this, we regrouped after the second workshop and began to set our focus on helping students experience a sense of trust in collaboration and excitement in social learning.

”Eureka, we have contact!”

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Having observed that students froze and were almost catatonic when we sat around the table and shared with one another, we decided to get them active by moving around the room and owning the process.. Working with learning styles, we wanted to offer opportunities for students to talk, write, move, touch, problem-solve and create, as well as collaborate. The exercise was introduced during the workshop that focused on metaphors.

We came with pages of metaphors that the students hung around the room. Each person took time to read them and to select three that were meaningful to them. All of them were very hesitant from the beginning, and it took some time to help them move into the task. We even heard some of them talking a bit about the different metaphors. Each student was asked to share what meaning they gave to each metaphor. We then hung a series of verbs on the board and asked the students to brainstorm new metaphors. One of the students, who preferred to move about, was given the task to write on the whiteboard what he heard from the group. Suddenly the room came alive, and ideas were shouted out faster than Sam could write. Sometimes the metaphors came out in English, with a passing glance to us, proud of their ability to speak English. To end the exercise, we asked Kim (the one who couldn't write) to write down all of the metaphors and hang it on the wall so that they could continue to develop the list as new ideas came. Kim's hesitation revealed a sense of surprise that anyone would ask him to write. Even the teachers appeared to be taken aback and demonstrated reservation that Kim would accept the task. Instead of feeding into the hesitation, we showed Kim where to get the paper and gave him a pen to start writing. The teachers began to steer where and how Kim wrote and soon allowed Kim to work independently as a result of their observation that their intervention was not helpful. We never saw the sheet of paper with the metaphors hanging on the wall the next time we came to school, but we did witness another side to Kim who was willing to write when someone believed in him. We made contact! And the energy was rewarding.

Analysis and Discussion

The stories of Robin, Kim and Charlie are not new, nor are they unusual. In fact, they are rather typical for many young people. When we embarked on our project, we had hopes of creating a different context for at least a few students and demonstrating possibilities for integrating artistic processes in the current school structure. The literature on creativity, arts and achievement is strong enough to suggest that this is possible. What is interesting is exploring why the arts remain outside of the pedagogical theater in school, and why schools have such a hard time changing their practices to better meet the needs of students.

The research on inclusive education is quite strong to suggest that when "problem" children are placed separately, they perpetuate a negative trend, and the divide between groups of students increases (Egelund, et. al. 2006). In particular, the role of segregating students has been shown to perpetuate the comfort with a system that moves the problem outside the room so that it is no longer visible. The problem with this solution, of course, is that new problems emerge in other areas. In our project, we were able to see evidence of a mainstream attitude toward certain youth that birthed a climate of "doing the least to just get by", and emphasized judgment rather than support of diversity and curiosity. These traits, which we experienced among the youth in our pilot project, were not the result of the pull-out program, but rather, we perceived, of the traditional mainstream elementary and middle school.

We also saw, hidden behind the deep-seated identities of hardship, students with a high capacity to communicate and reason both verbally and in written form when presenting facts. They encountered difficulties when they were asked to be creative and to share their own thoughts and ideas. Most stories appeared more like reports, in form, content and length.

Students were also quite resistant to work together around the table. Yet when we moved the focus to the whiteboard or the mural paper the mood changed and they connected. Students collaborated both in silence and open communication, and the boundaries among isolated islands once present at the classroom table vanished when students worked on the mural paper. Feelings of fear or resistance were driven away. We experienced the possibilities that art offered the students for developing a non-threatening collaborative environment.

The teachers also shared their reflections on the strength of the approach for helping students develop skills in connecting and communicating with one another, something that many of them struggled with, according to the teachers. They shared observations that the project stimulated students' fantasies and gave them possibilities to develop their social skills, for example, waiting your turn and listening to others. The staff also shared that they were pleasantly surprised when the students began to open up and share their perspectives with them. This affirmed our experience and the importance of working with them alone, both separate from the teachers, and at times giving them their own space to work individually. It is too short a time for the teachers to see any measureable results; however we did learn that during the following term of study, Kim began to write, a development that we all perceive to speak positively for the project.

The findings offer insights about the complex road ahead for educators to inject creativity into mainstream schooling, as well as challenges to see the student from a "customer" perspective in which meeting their needs is the primary question, rather than demanding a certain level of proficiency on tests. Our experience with this group of students has left us with reflections and questions about their earlier learning environments, and the messages they have received about writing and creativity. Can their lack of interest in writing and creativity come from earlier negative experiences in school? Have they been invited to tell their own, or other stories, before? Has anyone listened? Have writing lessons been filled with meaningless exercises instead of giving students their own pen to hold? Kim, we later learned from the teachers, was an incredible oral storyteller. So why didn't Kim believe that he could write? Our questions connect us back to the strength of the research on arts in education, as well as the dominance of left-brained learning environments in schools. From our short time with these students, we managed to make a connection, stimulate a dialog, and experience the creativity that lies beneath the surface. We wondered what our experience would have been like had these students been given opportunities to work with creativity and the arts earlier and to understand that learning is more than just a grade.

Conclusions

In this article we presented findings from a pilot study in which we introduced the use of dialogic storytelling combined with Clean Language, *Levande Verkstad* and Appreciative Inquiry to students disengaged with the school system. The pilot was intended to demonstrate how dialogic process can be used to support resilient cultures of creativity in the classroom. The project was too short to achieve innovation. However, we were able to generate positive responses from some of the students and teachers, which indicated that introducing a dialogic process in schools holds promise for meeting the needs of students who are disengaged from learning.

The research on arts in education, inclusive models and storytelling in particular, provides examples of tools and perspectives that can be used to create learning environments that stimulate participation, creativity, voice, new stories, community and an increased self esteem. Additionally, the arts can be used to explore new ways of thinking and doing, in order to actively engages students and remove them from the sleepy hollows of passivity. Learning in an artistic environment becomes a shaper of their own learning and a storyteller

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of their own experience. Unfortunately, the majority of successful examples in which the arts are used to create learning remain outside the general classrooms, despite the fact that most national curricula articulate the importance of the arts for human development, learning and creativity. On three occasions, students in our pilot project were genuinely engaged: when we worked one on one, we introduced the work with metaphors and painted together.

We want to conclude this paper with several questions that we believe need to be examined further. With regard to the prolific amount of research on learning, motivation, and creativity, as well as on dropouts and at-risk youth, one might expect to see greater developments within the school environment. The continued rate of school dropouts suggest that this work hasn't even touched the surface. Also, we have examined a number of studies that have followed concrete projects based on a resilient pedagogy in which social interaction, creativity, participation and inclusion are key success factors. With this, we return to a question from the beginning of our paper: given the extensive amount of research on this topic, what is it that keeps research and practice so far apart? Perhaps the answer lies in part in the stories we tell about our students and education. And perhaps part of the answer lies in how we perceive the student as "customer" over mere worker in a knowledge production factory.

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