

## **Case Study: Building a Sustainable Community**

At P.S. 8, students worked in groups of three or four to create a mural painting related to the topic of rebuilding a community to make it sustainable. This LTA project ties directly to study of sustainable communities that the students are studying outside the LTA work.

The Teachers College researchers observed a third-grade class with two teachers. Ms. Gentile, the classroom teacher, took an active role in the classroom, speaking to the students as a whole, going from table to table addressing the different groups, and talking one-on-one with students. The special education teacher did not speak to the entire class, but moved from one table to another, sometimes talking to individual students, sometimes talking to a group of students working at the same table.

In the beginning of this project, each group had received a statement about the specific problems that their community was facing. For instance, one group had the following statement about their community:

You live in a remote village in the middle of the rainforest. Everyday more and more of your trees are being cut and removed to create wood products (furniture/paper). Many acres are being clear-cut to create farmland leading to erosion of the soil. Something must be done to save the shrinking rainforest around the world. Your team has been assigned to address these issues.

(Note: all six scenarios are listed in the discussion of the selection of residencies for the research in the Methodology section.)

Each group was asked to write down five elements that they consider important to make their community sustainable, a Mission Statement for their community. Each group then made a sketch that represented the specific community, including the five elements listed. After finishing the sketch, each group worked on the mural painting incorporating steps that artists take, such as preparing canvas with gesso as well as creating underpainting. Students wore smocks when painting. The brushes and pallets with three primary colors

of acrylic paint were prepared by the teaching assistant and placed on tables for the students.

### *Cross-Modal Thinking*

As discussed earlier (see *Creativity in the Classroom*), cross-modal thinking can be important in creative work. It encourages students with different modal strengths and different emergent goals to learn and to create. It also helps them to gain insight of the same topic from diverse perspectives.

During the initial instruction for each class session observed in this residency, the teaching artist talked to students about what ought to be accomplished in that session such as using a medium brush to add more details. During the discussion, the teaching artist would spend some time focusing on artistic vocabulary, such as “composition,” “brush stroke,” and “background.” She also put emphasis on vocabulary related to the social studies curriculum that the students are working on such as “sustainability.” The teaching artist asked for definitions for these vocabulary words, reinforcing ideas that had been discussed in previous sessions.

At the end of the one instruction period, both the teaching artist and the classroom teacher asked each group to begin with a meeting, going over their mission statement. When the researchers walked around the classroom and asked students about the mission statement of their specific groups, students were able to articulate the mission statement and the five elements they discussed as essential to make their communities sustainable. They were also able to verbalize the link between their statement and the visual images they created. For example, a student from the mountain range group explained to the researcher that their group decided to build an underground city so that when the volcano erupted, people could stay alive underground and had the food that was stored or sent down there.

During the session, students were reminded at various points to go back to their mission statement and the five elements listed to make sure that they added every element they had listed. The teacher, the teaching artists, and the teaching artist’s assistant all

instructed and reinforced the point that students should not add new elements but should follow what they had listed as the five important elements. They also emphasized that students had to follow the sketches they made in a previous session. The classroom teacher stressed the need to work from the sketches to apply what the class had learned from composing drafts to writing compositions. She explained that instead of going in an entirely new direction, students needed to execute and refine what they had outlined in their drafts.

At the end of each class, the teaching artist gathered students on the rug with their sketchbooks. The teaching artist wrote two or three questions on a flip chart.. For instance, in the second to last class for this mural painting project, the teaching artist listed the following three questions for students to answer:

- 1) My recipe for \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2) Something that surprised me today was \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) Something I am curious about is \_\_\_\_\_.

Each student spent some quiet time reflecting on and writing down the answers. The teaching artist then invited students to share their reflections with the larger group.

The recipes that students mentioned were all related to color mixing with much attention on how to make brown. The teaching artist took this opportunity to help students see that there was more than one way to mix some colors. The conversation about surprises also focused largely on paint mixing, for instance, how difficult it was to mix brown.

When the teaching artist moved to the curiosity question, a number of students' hands shot into the air. The teaching artist asked if this was their favorite question, and a number of students said yes. Several points about "curiosity," however were stated as concerns about how the groups would finish all of the work left to do in one more class session. This question, however, spurred one student to think more broadly about the intersection of the group and the artistic processes. He was curious to know how their "artistic ways" would change from this week to next. When asked to clarify, he explained that some people were good at color mixing and others are good at putting images on the canvas. He was curious about whether that would change.

### *Work in Groups*

This project emphasizes working and communicating with others in groups. In both sessions that were observed, the classroom teacher introduced steps to facilitate that work. For example, at the end of the initial instruction section, the classroom teacher suggested to the entire class that each group should start by going back to the mission statement and talk to their group members about what should be done next. Both the teaching artist and classroom teacher stressed several times that when adding an element to the mural or changing an image painted by someone else in the group, students had to ask other people in the group whether it was okay to do so. The teaching artist also explained that it could be difficult sometimes for everyone to feel happy about certain decisions when working in groups, but it was important that everyone come to an agreement.

Most of the groups demonstrated both cooperation and strongly defined authority structures. One student would be directing the activity with varying degrees and types of cooperation from the other group members. In the following description, different instances of group work will be described.

#### The Mountain Range Group

The mountain group had a boy as definite leader, directing the group on what should be painted. During the session, two of the other boys in this group were not happy with the group work. One told a researcher that this was not a good day because he was not happy with the decisions of the boy leading the group. The leader of this group spoke up twice during reflections at the end of the session, voicing his concerns over how the group would be able to finish the work next time and how they would be able to fix mistakes they had made. Based on his tone of voice, he appeared to be task-oriented in this thinking, concerned more about the project than criticism of peers.



### The Coastal Village Group

There were only two students working on the coastal village mural. The girl in this group directed the work. The boy generally followed instructions, expanding her ideas, but also pushing limits at times. For example, they were using red dots to represent a community tomato garden. He executed her idea but extended the garden beyond where she wanted, and would not stop when she asked him. She would sigh and roll her eyes when he did not cooperate.



### The Flooded Village Group

On the flooded village with polluted water, a girl was the lead in directing the work. In this group, the challenge to her authority was more playful and covert. This group was using a red to represent roses growing in a garden. With a sly smile, one of the boys asked the girl, what about dead flowers? She ignored him and he proceeded to add a patch of yellow-brown which he declared to be dead flowers.



### The Polar Icecap Group

The polar icecap group had a less well defined authority structure in this observed session. The members seemed to be working independently without as much verbal communication as other groups. One of the icecap members spent much of the period walking around the room with energy and a sense of purpose, but without any obvious destination. In the last session of the mural project, a girl in this group shared in the reflection section that she was mad because someone in this group painted over an image that she painted earlier without permission. But, she said that she got over the anger.



### The Rainforest Group

The rainforest group had two boys who took alternating roles making decisions for their mural painting. Another boy who was also in the group would come up to them for every decision or even every step that he took in the group painting “Here, do you want me to add blue here?” “Yellow, do you want me to use yellow for the sun here?” After one of the group leaders nodded his head or said yes, the boy would then take a step toward

finishing the work. In a different instance, another group member asked whether he should add a leopard to their rainforest, the two group leaders conversed and decided that there were no leopards living in the rainforest. One of the leading boys then replied to the group member that a leopard did not need to be added.



### The Desert Group

In the desert group, a girl led the group with another boy actively involved. Sometimes when he wanted to make changes, he would ask the leading girl. Other times, he made the decisions with other group members. For example, a member of the group drew approximately 8 coconuts on one of the palm trees. When this boy wanted to paint over the coconuts because there were “too many” of them, he asked the group member who had painted them on if it would be okay for him to paint over them and was told yes. This decision to paint over was made between them.



### *Conclusion*

The sustainable community mural painting project was a strong example of the integration of LTA projects with curriculum material. It also provided many opportunities for cross-modal thinking.

In the process, the project took on the challenging issues of this kind of group work. The classroom teacher suggested some processes to help the groups work effectively. In this case even more structure for the groups during the LTA work might have been helpful. Since this pilot research did not examine how the classroom teachers linked the art work to curriculum during their regular (non-LTA) lessons, we do not know how the teachers may have used the group experiences in social studies. However, given the central importance of the group dynamics to this work, reflection on the group experiences would be appropriate.