

The Lasting Effects of Artist-Teacher Partnerships on Former Students of Broadview School

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2004, Broadview School began a six-year journey with ArtsSmarts Saskatchewan, a grant program that provided money for teachers to partner with professional artists in the classroom. Under the guidance of teacher Debbie Pearson, the school worked with Saskatchewan artists on projects in theatre, film, dance, hip hop, spoken word, and visual art. It has been 10 years since most of the students involved graduated from high school. This research aimed to discover whether the former students still think about the projects, and if so, how they think their participation might have affected their adult lives.

The primary research tool was an online multiple-choice survey which asked:

- In general, how would you say the experience of working with artists affected your overall school experience?
- Now that you've graduated from high school, do you ever think about any of the projects you worked on with artists?
- Do you think working with artists in the school influenced how you think today about the value of the arts in Saskatchewan?
- Do you think working with artists on the ArtsSmarts projects influenced you at all in your life after high school? If so, how?

“The ability to push myself out of my comfort zone has served me very well... Confidence - huge impact.”

Former participant

Fifty-six students participated in the projects in Broadview over six years. Twenty-six former students were contacted directly through Facebook and provided with a link to the survey and asked to forward it to others. It is not known how many former students received the link.

Twenty-two former students completed the survey, or 39% of those who participated in projects. Their responses include the following:

- Ninety-one percent of respondents said they think of the projects at least sometimes, and 23% said they think of them often.
- Seventy-seven percent said that the projects were good for school spirit and for gaining a new appreciation of each other.
- Sixty-four percent reported that their education was richer because of the projects.
- Ninety-five percent reported that they believe the projects have affected their adult life at least a little, with 41% reporting that the projects have impacted them either quite a bit or a great deal.
- The highest reported specific positive impacts were on students' ability to work in a group (86%), their attitude toward the arts (81%), their self-confidence (81%), their attitude toward learning something new (81%), and their creative ability (71%).

Based on the former students' responses to the survey, it can be concluded that the artist-teacher partnership projects in Broadview School had a significant positive impact on participants. They reported that they gained skills and attitudes that have affected their adult lives, and developed a better understanding of others and a better understanding of the arts.

INTRODUCTION

ArtsSmarts Saskatchewan was a program established at the Saskatchewan Arts Board in 2004 to provide grants to teachers and schools wishing to collaborate with professional artists on curriculum-based classroom projects. The program was designed to encourage meaningful working relationships between teachers and artists, and development of arts projects that focused on inquiry learning. The Saskatchewan Arts Board administered the program and funding originally was provided by the McConnell Family Foundation as part of a national ArtsSmarts initiative. Funding responsibility was later assumed by the Arts Board, SaskCulture, and the Ministry of Education. The grant program continues today as part of the Arts Board's Artist in Schools programming.

Broadview School was among the first to apply for and receive an ArtsSmarts grant from ArtsSmarts Saskatchewan. For six years running – from 2004 until 2010 – the school was successful in its grant applications and the students worked with professional artists from many disciplines, including theatre, film, dance, spoken word, and visual art. Teacher Debbie Pearson stated that she wanted to provide the students of a small town with an arts opportunity that would rival any in the city and open their eyes to the possibilities the arts have to offer.

It's been 14 years since that first project in Broadview. The students involved in the six projects have graduated from high school and moved into their adult lives. The purpose of this research is to investigate the questions: "Do those students who were involved in the ArtsSmarts projects ever think about their experiences with artists in Broadview School, and if so, in what ways do they believe the projects had lasting effects?"

THE COMMUNITY

The town of Broadview is about two hours east of Regina on the Number 1 highway, in Treaty 4 Territory. Broadview is primarily a rural farming community and there are a number of First Nations nearby, including Cowessess, Sakimay, Ochapowace, and Kahkewistahaw. The town's population is just over 500 people. Broadview is in Prairie Valley School Division, and there is a K-12 school with approximately 10 graduates every year. The student population is a mix of town, rural, and First Nations students from the nearby reserves.

THE TEACHER

Debbie Pearson taught in Broadview School for 28 years and retired in June, 2011. Over her teaching career she taught everything from grade 1 to middle years to high school English, arts education, and practical and applied courses. For many years, Debbie ran an extra-curricular drama program in the school, which evolved into a curriculum-focused program and became a credit course for grades 10 to 12.

"The development of social conscience, creative vision, flexible and fluent thought, we need those ideas in our world. One of the best ways I have found is through those BIG DEAL projects - learning from professionals in the Arts."

In her first application, Debbie was hoping to learn first-hand along with the students about "collective creation" because she suspected this method of play development would offer students a more enriched experience than rehearsing an already scripted play. In addition, Broadview was planning its Centennial Celebrations for the summer of that year and she thought a co-created drama might be a way for students to explore their own community. When Debbie applied for her

first ArtsSmarts grant she was looking for an enriching experience for her students, a professional development experience for herself, and a way to bring diverse groups of students closer together in understanding each other. She notes that her school administration and her school division got behind her undertaking right away, and provided the support that allowed her to “think big.”

Debbie says she learned through the projects that a deep level of engagement with knowledgeable professionals in the arts can affect students in a profoundly positive way and change their attitudes toward themselves, to others, and to the world they live in. She also believes that ArtsSmarts changed her teaching, and led her to focus more on each student’s unique ideas and ways of participating in their own learning. She suggests the following as specific observations about the impact of ArtsSmarts projects in her school:

- Involvement with arts professionals develops self-awareness and confidence.
- Collective work in the arts develops relationships between diverse communities.
- Experiencing artists’ ways of working can change teacher practice.
- Interest in artist projects can spread in the school as others see the benefits.
- Meaningful relationships developed through school projects last into adult life.

THE PRINCIPAL

Sandy Pinay-Schindler was the principal at Broadview School for eight years, including the years of the ArtsSmarts projects. She has also been a classroom teacher and a consultant in Indigenous education for Prairie Valley School Division and the Ministry of Education. She is currently the Director of Education for Cowessess First Nation. Sandy is a registered member of Peepeekisis Cree Nation in Treaty 4 Territory and she has ancestral ties to Sakimay and Ochapowace First Nations.

Sandy describes herself as having played a supportive role in the Broadview projects. As a result of Broadview School’s experience with ArtsSmarts, when she moved from Broadview School to Prairie Valley School Division in 2009 as First Nations/Métis Education Coordinator, she became involved in helping other schools in the division apply for ArtsSmarts grants focusing on Treaty issues and Indigenous worldviews. Wolseley, Milestone, Edenwold, Arm River Colony, Sedley, Lumsden, Kelliher, and Fort Qu’Appelle schools all received grants in those years following her tenure in Broadview.

She suggests the following as her observations of the ArtsSmarts projects in Broadview School:

- ArtsSmarts offered a way to address diversity in the student population and the community.
- The students’ creative skills and processes grew over the years of the projects.
- The projects brought out students’ strengths and abilities in ways that were sometimes surprising.
- The climate of the school ultimately changed as a result of both ArtsSmarts and Debbie Pearson’s popular drama program.
- Administrators have an important supporting role to play even when they are not directly involved in the projects.

THE PROJECTS

The project descriptions below are adapted from the grant applications:

1. 2004-05: To offer a learning experience to students, seniors, First Nations partners, and adult drama club members, under the guidance of Michele Sereda, in which participants will collectively create a musical snapshot of our town, farming community, and nearby First Nations communities. (Theatre)
2. 2005-06: To bring professionals from Filmpool Co-op in Regina into our school and community to conduct workshops and guide students in creating their own short films. (Film)
3. 2006-07: To have students, under the guidance of dancer Meredith Laroque, experience what it is like to train as dancers by learning their favourite dance styles and taking part in a dance showcase. (Dance)
4. 2007-08: To invite teams of students [from other schools around the province] to come to Broadview High School to participate in a 24-hour project in order to conceptualize and produce their own short movies. (Artist workshops in all aspects of film production)
5. 2008-09: To organize a joint cultural exchange between the students in Saskatchewan and the Maritimes, with the intent of bringing together two diverse populations from distant parts of the country in one shared undertaking in the arts. (Hip hop, spoken word, visual art)
6. 2009-10: To do an outdoor art installation in the Qu'Appelle Valley, in which the students will create and showcase symbolic art pieces inspired by the prairie they are a part of, and join in a ritual – a dedication to the future, a Treaty. (Visual art)

METHODOLOGY

Retired teacher Debbie Pearson was approached and asked for her advice on the best way to contact former students. She agreed to reach out through social media and provide a link to an anonymous online survey. Twenty-six former students were contacted directly through Facebook with a personal message and a link to the survey. They were asked to share it with others among their contacts. It is not known how many students in total received the link this way.

The survey asked six questions and provided multiple choice checklists and comment boxes. It was kept short in hopes of encouraging as many students as possible to respond. The survey questions were as follows. (See Appendix A for more detail.)

- Which of the six projects did you participate in?
- In general, how would you say the experience of working with artists affected your overall school experience?
- Now that you've graduated from high school, do you ever think about any of the projects you worked on with artists?
- Do you think working with artists in the school influenced how you think today about the value of the arts in Saskatchewan?
- Do you think working with artists on the ArtsSmarts projects influenced you at all in your life after high school?
- If so, how?

Twenty-two former students completed the survey. Five students provided their email addresses for further elaboration and three replied when approached. Teacher Debbie Pearson and principal Sandy Pinay-Schindler were asked for contextual information about their roles in the program and personal observations. Quotations by former students throughout this report are from survey comments or follow-up responses.

“These projects opened your eyes to a broader world outside your small community.”
Former participant

THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Forty-eight graduates participated in projects over six years, plus another six students who left the school before graduating, for a total of 56 project participants. The 22-student response to the survey represents 39% of all project participants. Although it is not known how many students in total received the link, it can be safely assumed that most students who completed the survey were among the original 26 contacted directly. Therefore, a very high percentage of those contacted completed the survey, possibly as high as 85%.

Participation in the projects ranged from one project to five among respondents. The highest number of respondents participated in two projects (41%). No respondents participated in all six projects, which is to be expected since many students from the first project would have graduated before the final project. Figure 1 below illustrates the percentages of total respondents who participated in one or more project(s). Figure 2 illustrates the number of respondents per project.

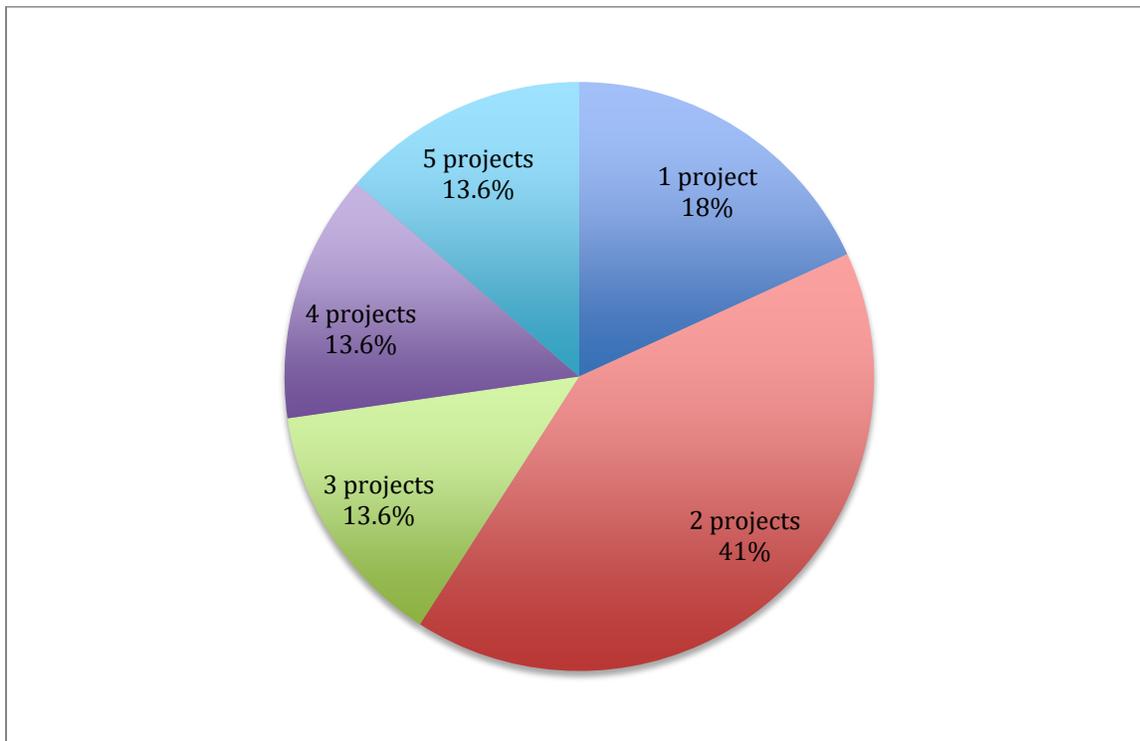


Figure 1: Number of projects participated in by respondents (e.g., 13.6% of respondents participated in 5 projects)

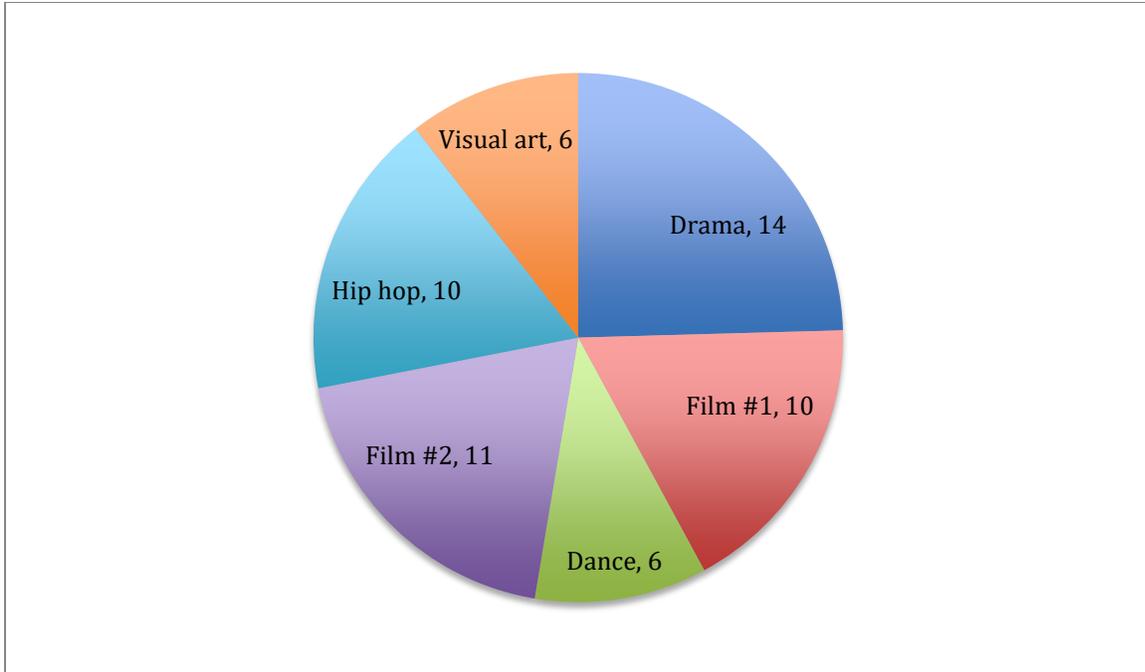


Figure 2: Number of respondents by project (e.g., 14 of 22 respondents participated in the drama project)

STUDENT RESPONSE BY SURVEY QUESTION

In general, how would you say the experience of working with artists affected your overall school experience?

The highest three responses to this question were:

- The projects were good for school spirit and appreciation of each other (77%)
- Teachers and students gained a new appreciation for each other (73%)
- My education was richer because of the projects (64%).

Half of the respondents indicated that they had an interest in the arts and the projects offered something special for them. Forty percent said they were not “artsy” but they were still glad they had participated. Two choices that might have elicited indifferent or negative assessments of the projects received 0% response (see chart below).

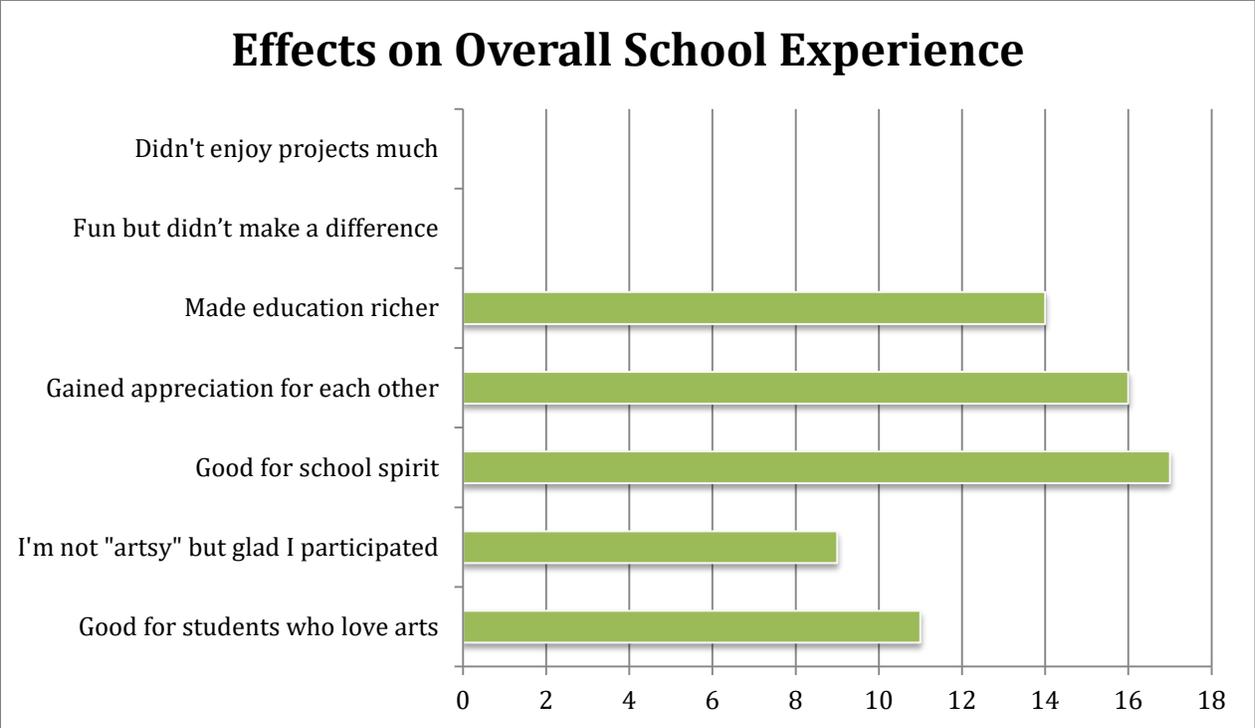


Figure 3: Effects of projects on school experience (number of responses)

Now that you've graduated from high school, do you ever remember or think about any of the projects you worked on with artists?

- 23% said often
- 68% said sometimes
- 9% said rarely
- 0% said never.

Do you think working with artists in the school influenced how you think today about the value of the arts in Saskatchewan?

- 68% said definitely
- 32% said maybe, not sure
- 0% said not at all.

Do you think working with artists on the ArtsSmarts projects influenced you in your life after high school?

- 23% said a great deal (5 respondents)
- 18% said quite a bit (4 respondents)
- 54.5% said a little (12 respondents)
- 4.5% said not at all (1 respondent).

If you think the projects did affect your life or choices, in what ways?

The highest responses were:

- ability to work in a group (86%)
- self-confidence (81%)
- attitude toward learning something new (81%)
- attitude toward the arts (81%)
- creative ability (71%).

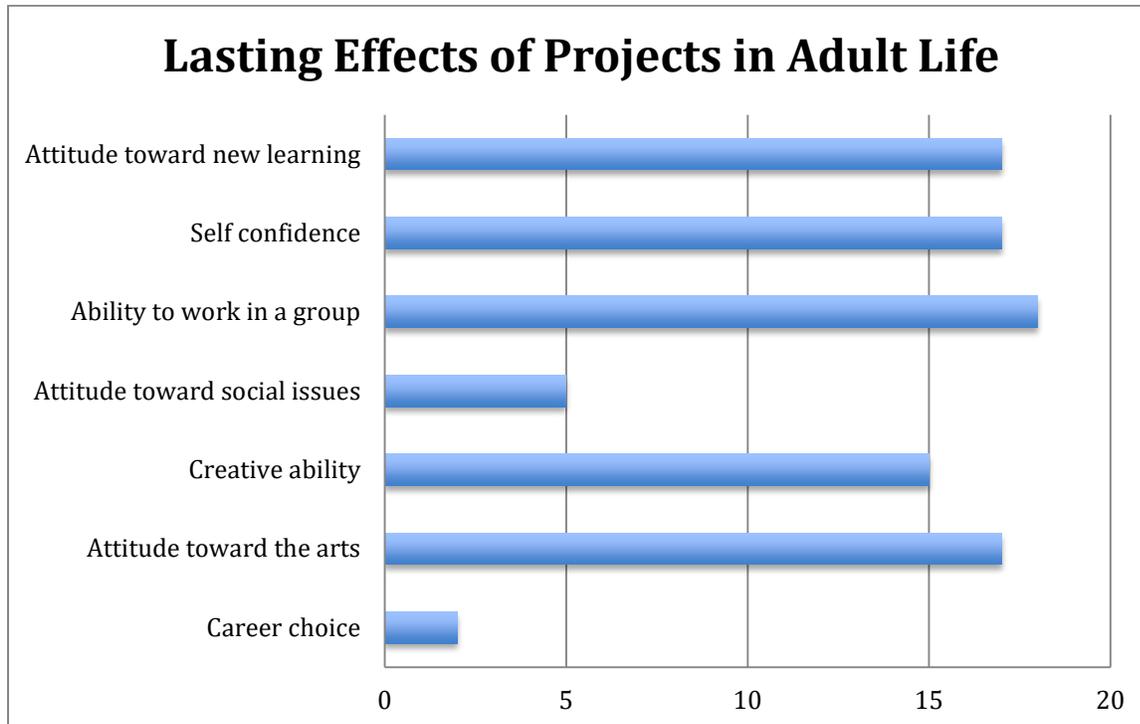


Figure 4: Lasting effects of project participation on adult life (number of responses)

OBSERVATIONS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE SURVEY DATA

- 1) The high response rate, especially among those contacted directly, indicates a certain level of respect for the teachers and the projects themselves.

The method of contacting former students was a request on social media by a teacher with whom most had not been in touch for some time. There was no reason for the respondents to complete the survey other than a willingness to help and/or to contribute to something they believed was meaningful in their schooling. That so many who were contacted directly responded to the request to complete the survey says something in itself about their attitude toward the projects, the artists, and/or their former teacher. The explanation for the high response rate could lie in the respondents' belief that the projects were good for school spirit (77%) and that teachers and students working on the projects gained a new appreciation for each other (73%). Simply put, the projects made them

feel good about themselves and others in the school, and we know that relationships in school among students and teachers have a profound and lasting effect on learning.¹

“Schools are very cliquey, so I do agree 100% that [the projects] brought many different students together.”

“[The project] enhanced my collaboration with other diverse groups of students that I wouldn’t normally ‘hang out’ with.”

2) A significant number of former students still think about the projects 10 years after graduation from high school (23% said often and 68%, sometimes).

Aesthetic philosopher and educator Maxine Greene writes about a state of “wide-awakeness” that comes from meaningful engagement with art. She writes of changes in attitude and understanding that can occur when students are fully engaged rather than indifferent, and says that these changes can be transformative and lasting.²

In the case of Broadview’s arts projects, 91% of respondents reported that they still sometimes/often think about them. That so many students think about the projects ten years later is remarkable, but perhaps not surprising when you look at the project activity. The first drama project ended with students’ participating in the Regina Fringe Festival. The first film project culminated in an awards night in the community, which filled the town hall and modeled itself after the Academy Awards. The second film project saw students staying awake in the school for 24 hours to attend workshops in teams; write, shoot and edit short films; and attend a feast and festival in the gym, with another packed house. The hip hop project took students to Halifax to experience diversity of a different kind as they explored the Black history and legacy in Nova Scotia, along with Cree culture at home. Experiences such as these resonate and stay with students in ways that cannot be predicted, and can even change lives and communities. It’s fair to say that the ArtsSmarts projects could well have provided “peak experiences” for many of the students involved, and the state of wakefulness that Maxine Green says leads to self-awareness and learning.

“The projects left you proud and accomplished.”

“[We travelled] across Canada to another school.... I will have the memories with me for the rest of my life.”

3) Almost all respondents indicated that the projects influenced their lives after high school.

Two questions in the survey addressed this. The first question asked students to indicate to what degree the projects influenced their lives, and the second asked in what ways. Forty-one percent said the projects influenced their lives a great deal or quite a bit, while 54.5% said a little. Although only 23% of respondents indicated that their lives were influenced a great deal, the second more specific question provides a different picture. Over 80% of respondents indicated that the projects made them better able to work in a group, more self-confident, and more amenable to learning new things.

¹ To learn more about the importance of relationships in learning see, for example, *Teaching Each Other: Nehinuw Concepts & Indigenous Pedagogies*, Linda Goulet and Keith Goulet, 2014, UBC Press.

² For more information on Maxine Greene’s work in aesthetic education and social change, see *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Centre Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education*, Maxine Greene, 2001, Teachers College Press.

These are highly valuable skills in the work place and in living a fully rounded life, and they should probably have elicited to a response of “influenced a great deal” in the first question.

It is possible that the first question was interpreted by respondents as meaning something else, such as having chosen a career in the arts. It can be reasonably concluded that the follow-up specific question is the more important one of the two, and that the artist projects did in fact have a considerable influence on the former students.

“The projects taught me to be open-minded, not to be scared to try new things, and to have the ability to see my own strengths and weaknesses.”

“The ability to push myself out of my comfort zone has served me very well... Confidence - huge impact.”

“[The project] opened doors for me. If it wasn't for the opportunity, I wouldn't have done the things I did.”

4) Most participants in the projects said that working with artists influenced how they thought about the value of the arts in Saskatchewan.

One of the original goals of the ArtsSmarts Saskatchewan program was to introduce students to professional artists and increase understanding of the work of artists. The Saskatchewan Arts Education curriculum requires that students learn about Saskatchewan artists and their work, and the hope was that the ArtsSmarts program would help teachers meet their arts education goals, especially classroom teachers without a specialist's training. In addition, the program envisioned teaching-learning relationships in the classroom that went beyond the “artist visit” model and resulted in deeper understanding of the arts and artists' processes.

The 68% response of “definitely” to the question of whether working with artists influenced thinking about the value of the arts is a significant indicator of the success of the program as measured against that original goal. The almost 100% response to this question of at least “maybe” indicates that the former students do believe they think differently about the arts as a result of the projects.

“I definitely am more interested in arts because of [the projects]. I look at videos/movies/acting/pictures, and respect the time that it would have taken to create such things.”

“One of my friends continued into a life of acting, and I feel that these projects had something to do with his choice.”

CONCLUSION

The projects in Broadview School had a considerable impact on students. The following are key points that emerged from this research:

- The fact that so many former students chose to complete the survey speaks to the importance they placed on their experiences working with artists in the school.
- Their own assessment of the benefits suggests that their work with artists contributed to self-confidence, increased ability to work in a group, and a better attitude toward learning new things, all of which are key to student success in school and transferable to adult life.
- Although the projects did not lead most students to a career in the arts, they did gain creative ability and a better understanding of the arts and artists' work.
- At a time when schools are searching for positive ways of addressing issues of reconciliation,

new immigration, and diversity, the former students' own recognition that the arts projects led them to a better understanding of each other is perhaps one of the most important findings of the research.

- Finally, the findings are a clear endorsement of the arts in schools and what can be achieved when students, artists, and teachers work together in inquiry learning partnerships.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to teacher Debbie Pearson for helping us contact former students, a difficult task when so much time has passed, and to Sandy Pinay-Schindler for her recollections. And thanks to the former students of Broadview School, now adults with busy lives, who took the time to complete the survey and reminisce about their experiences with ArtsSmarts. Thanks also to the Saskatchewan Arts Board for retrieving the descriptions of the projects.

APPENDIX A: THE SURVEY

1. Please check which projects you participated in. (Multiple answers possible)
 - 2004-05 Drama: Truth or Dare Drama Production
 - 2005-06 Film: Production and Awards Showcase
 - 2006-07 Dance: With Contemporary Professional Dancer
 - 2007-08 Film: 24-hour Film Festival
 - 2008-09 Hip Hop: With Exchange to Nova Scotia
 - 2009-10 Visual Art: With Exchange to New Brunswick

2. In general, how would you say the experience of working with artists affected your overall school experience? (Multiple answers possible)
 - I love the arts so they were great for me.
 - I wasn't an artsy kind of student and I wasn't sure I would like the projects, but I did and I'm glad I participated.
 - I think the projects were good for our school spirit and appreciation of each other.
 - I think the teachers and students working on the projects gained a new appreciation for each other.
 - I think my education was richer because of the projects.
 - They were fun but I don't think they made a difference for me or the school.
 - I didn't enjoy them much and I don't think they added anything special to school or learning.

3. Now that you've graduated from high school, do you ever remember or think about any of the projects you worked on with artists? (Check one)
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - Never

4. Do you think working with artists in the school influenced how you think today about the value of the arts in Saskatchewan? (Check one and comment)
 - Yes, definitely
 - No, not at all
 - Maybe, not sure

5. Do you think working with artists on the ArtsSmarts project(s) influenced you at all in your life after high school? (Check one)
 - A great deal
 - Quite a bit
 - A little
 - Not at all

6. If you think the projects did affect your life or choices, please check the appropriate boxes and/or comment. (Multiple answers possible)
- Career choice
 - Attitude toward the arts
 - Creative ability
 - Attitude toward social issues
 - Ability to work in a group
 - Self-confidence
 - Attitude toward learning something new
 - Other (specify in comment)