

# Artists in the Classroom:

Designing Memorable Learning Experiences

by Sarah Kim



Educators around BC know that the arts can make a real impact on young people. They recognize and promote the value of bringing professional artists into their classrooms and have been doing so for decades now. They know that through artistic experiences and processes, artists and educators working together can facilitate many benefits for students including a deeper understanding of themes and content being taught and an embodiment of their learning. Students also benefit from self-reflection that allows them to have genu-

ine discourse around themes and concepts, and provides a voice for students who normally wouldn't express themselves otherwise.

Through these interactions, 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners are building and applying their learning to real-life contexts transferable to many aspects in their lives. These instrumental experiences are important in delivering new ideas and perspectives and are often transformative for all involved – students, teachers, artists, parents and communities.

ArtStarts in Schools, through funding provided by the BC Arts Council and the Province of BC, offers funding support for hundreds of Artists in the Classroom (AIC) experiences across British Columbia every year. These projects, funded through Artists in the Classroom grants, vary widely as they are molded through collaboration between individual educators and artists. They range from small to large-scale, from inner-city schools to rural schools, and involve artists in all disciplines – ceramic artists, photographers, painters, cartoonists, carvers,

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Photos by (left) Jaelyn Martindale, grade 7 and (right) Kayla Arbuckle, grade 6.

musicians, film makers, choreographers, writers, new media artists, printmakers, dancers, metalsmiths, woodworkers, poets, storytellers, textile artists, animators, and more.

The following are stories of two projects recently funded through AiC grants. One demonstrates how through photography, students found ways to express themselves and feel pride for the small rural community they live in. The other project brings biology concepts to life through form and structure.

*This is Grindrod* was a photography project involving 33 students in Grades 5-7 at Grindrod Elementary in North Okanagan-Shuswap. The idea for this project was generated through the PAC and implemented by principal Jeff Abbott who worked with local photographer Zev Tiefenbach. This project was supported through an AiC grant, SD 83, a local business, an anonymous donor, and a local family. With this support, the school was able to purchase enough cameras for the students and engage the artist in the project. Students were tasked to photograph their environments with the outlying result of gaining a deeper appreciation for where they live through storyboards of photographs and text.

Whereas an educator alone could have provided the cameras and asked students to take photographs of their surroundings, bringing a professional artist into the classroom provided a deeper meaning to the project. By presenting and discussing with students the historical and contemporary context of art and photography and revealing stories behind the photographs and the photographers, photography became an art that provided meaning and discourse that went beyond just the artform. This gave students confidence and allowed them to de-

velop connections to their subject matter. Students took photographs of their sense of place – what and where was special to them about the place they lived. More than just providing the technical photography skills, Zev’s teaching allowed for a deep and transformative experience. He encouraged students to think of new perspectives through a creative filter – they started to see their world and how they related to it differently.

After a week of shooting, contact sheets were created of their photographs so students could see and decide which photos they wanted to work with to create their storyboards. A local graphic designer, Louise Wallace, came in to discuss the importance of design in telling their story of how they connect to where they live. Zev and Louise continued to work with students while creating their storyboards and emphasized meaning and narrative.

Their final works were then exhibited at the Salmon Arm Art Gallery with an opening event attended by community members, families of the students, district staff, board trustees and local artists. Having their work exhibited allowed students to feel their voices were valued

in the community. Having student work exhibited at the art gallery also provided this local cultural institution a stronger connection to the community, allowing families to see it as an accessible and learning environment.

There are several long-lasting outcomes from this project to emphasize. Students gained a strong arts-based experience that was deeply rooted in process and exploration. They learned that art can take many forms and that art seeks to communicate and create discourse on a wide variety of subjects – in this instance, students reflected on themes of social sciences and economics. This project was executed at a time where the school district released a report that recommended the closure of Grindrod Elementary. This project helped to cement the community’s appreciation for the unique character of the school – a hub of the local community. Students felt a personal responsibility to show how beautiful, valuable and fulfilling living in their community is. Lastly, through this project and the vehicle of the arts, students who had never shared personal stories and deeper emotions freely expressed themselves through their photographs

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EditorRichard Williams



Student work-post glazing. The Bear Bones project.

and storyboards. Teachers, parents and students were touched by the results.

*The Bear Bones* project was a collaboration between art teacher Keith Randall and mixed media artist Darrell Oike. Grade 11-12 students at Queen Charlotte Secondary in Haida Gwaii, integrated their studies on bones and skeletons learned in science class into their artistic process in the project. The central theme to *The Bear Bones* was around the integral link between natural form and structure, which students learned through hands-on experiences working with clay to create their own bones.


Keith and Darrell collaborated

ahead of time to create lesson plans and timelines for the project. Keith worked on the logistics of the project, which included a field trip to the coastlines for students to study natural environments and forms. Darrell introduced students to artists whose work specifically revolved around form and structure. He empowered students to use these concepts in their maquettes and prototypes leading up to their final creation. Darrell also provided the technical skills of working with clay, creating glazes and firing. Together Keith and Darrell enabled students to explore their own directions based on their ideas and research.

At the beginning, many students found it challenging to work with a medium they were not experienced with. However, with the support of Keith and Darrell, they grew more comfortable working with clay and through this medium could see how structures gain natural strength and enable weight and mass to be held erect. For weeks they worked on research, prototypes, glazing and their final creations. These works were then exhibited at the Haida Heritage Centre, an esteemed Aboriginal cultural tourism centre, for an

art show that the students created and installed. For many of the students it was their first time seeing their art exhibited to the public and they expressed their feelings of accomplishment.

This project exemplifies how through an artform students were able to demonstrate a deeper understanding of bones and skeletal systems by recreating these themselves. Providing students with these hands-on experiences allows for memorable learning that sticks.

*This is Grindrod* and *The Bear Bones* are examples of *Artists in the Classroom* experiences that occur every year. Artists, schools, districts, principals and vice-principals, teachers, parents, and communities bring these projects to life to offer memorable learning for their students. The ideation and collaborative process benefits both the educator and the artist. Technical and curricular learning through these experiences builds skills developed from artistic, design-thinking and creative processes *and* can also tie into social-emotional learning, inclusion and self-regulation. To learn about how you can bring this group into your school see the links below. 

Sarah Kim is the Development Manager at ArtStarts in Schools. Founded in 1996, ArtStarts in Schools is a not-for-profit organization that provides innovative arts programs for young people, practical resources for teachers and artists, and leadership in advocacy for arts in education. Information: <http://artstarts.com>

## Check out these ArtStarts grants

- **Artists in the Classroom** grants bring professional artists into classrooms for unique learning experiences. Grants of up to \$3500 for small- to medium-scale projects or up to \$10000 for large-scale projects are available. Information: <http://artstarts.com/aic>
- **Arts in Education Council of BC** offers grants of up to \$500 for schools to support professional development for K-12 teachers, to increase their appreciation of the arts. Information: <http://artstarts.com/aiecbc>
- **Cherniavsky's Mr. Music** fund offers matching grants of up to \$500 to assist schools in purchasing tickets for students to attend live performances of classical and traditional music, opera or ballet. Information: <http://artstarts.com/cherniavsky>