

Creating Urban Art in a School Setting
Identity Development and Community Practice Through Graffiti

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ABSTRACT

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Graffiti, recognized as both a subculture as well as a prevalent part of current youth and popular culture, has developed through its evolution as an art form in its ability to reach those who create it in a positive manner. The research conducted in this study details a case study of the creation of a mural which was stylistically linked to graffiti and referred to as an urban art project by students at an elementary school, aged 10-12 (grades five and six). The project was led by a well-known graffiti artist who has developed a curriculum in which graffiti is used as a tool to open up a dialogue within the group of students regarding issues of identity, responsibility and awareness. In offering these students a unique experience using a modern and relevant tool (graffiti) it is shown that upon completion the students felt a sense of pride and accomplishment through the process of creation. Also they felt the final product represented them and their school as they grew in their understandings of graffiti and urban art as a method of communication and positive expression.

Historically, graffiti has been shown to give writers a voice and identity within a shared space as well as empowering them with a sense of belonging, purpose and pride. By introducing these aspects of this subculture into an academic context in the form of a graffiti mural the students were given the opportunity to develop as individuals at school as well as developing a sense of respect and ownership over that which they created.

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You can't knock the hustle

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

The purpose of this research is to first investigate the possibility of creating a positive student identity, sense of belonging and ownership within a school community when linked to artistic expression through the use of urban art. The term urban art was used throughout the research project but as an art form it is often referred to as graffiti, with regards to its cultural symbolism and stereotypical image portrayal. Graffiti in the context of this research is defined as the style of art which is seen mainly in city areas using spray paint as the main medium, and which has become more visible in popular culture gaining recognition and interest among youth. Another important area of focus throughout this research is the potential of diminishing existing stereotypes surrounding graffiti through discussion and reflection.

As will be noted in chapter three this study took place during an eight week project during which a mural was created at an elementary school using the urban art style. To design and implement the project the school hired a graffiti artist with a well-known reputation through the city as an ambassador of the graffiti culture in making it accessible to those who are interested. The school's principal sought out his knowledge and expertise in order to create a mural which would represent the students and the school community, as well as to raise awareness concerning all aspects of graffiti amongst the school's population. Throughout the process of creating the mural the understandings and meanings of urban art, aka graffiti, were discussed and discovered at

an age appropriate level in group discussions as well as personal discussions with the artist in place.

While this was not the first project in this vein to take place in a school setting in this city there were several unknown variables to be considered by the artist before the project began. Such unknown factors which may have influenced the outcome of the project or the learning experience of the students were the socio-economic backgrounds of those who participated. Given the historical relevance of the socio-economic and political factors behind graffiti's message to the community (Phillips, 1992), certain students may have been able to make a deeper connection with the art and its ability to create a voice for these artists in this setting. However, since graffiti has become a recognized and popularized form of art it has been able to grow from its original state and evolve into a form of expression representing a variety of artists from different age categories, races, genders and socio-economic class backgrounds. It was therefore up to the artist to be sure all aspects were well-represented for best practices. Another aspect which could have potentially altered the course of the project was the diversity of cultural backgrounds of the students who were participating. Kipnis (2001) was able to demonstrate, in his research, students from certain cultures, particularly those represented by a North American mindset, respond to or feel the need for a vibrant subculture to exist in their school setting in order to be able to create an identity within it. However, other cultures, such as middle or far-east cultures, have not shown such a need for a subculture to exist in a school setting. Given this, before the urban art project was about to take place it became an important factor to consider, in terms of how to engage students who

may have been culturally detached from the experience, even if they had taken the initiative to participate.

For the purposes of this research there are terms which are essential to the description and understanding of graffiti culture, and despite the fact they were not relevant to the actual project taking place at the school they were important when engaging with the students and explaining graffiti culture throughout the course of the research. Tagging and bombing refer to different elements of graffiti style and are done mostly illegally. This was not replicated by the students participating in this project as the focus remained on mural painting, however they are terms which are often seen and heard when discussing graffiti and were points of interest for the students while discovering graffiti culture. Tagging and bombing then, refer to the writing of a graffiti writer's pseudonym, in a stylized way, usually done with a fat tip permanent marker, in as many places possible, with greater visibility giving the artist greater recognition. Legibility for the masses is generally not an important concern, which was an important distinction from the mural being done with the group. Also, it is important to understand that those who create graffiti refer to themselves as writers and throughout this research are thus referred. It was essential for the artist leading this project to be able to explain graffiti culture clearly to the students in order for them to understand the social relevance and power of the art form, past and present, as well as the reality of the dangers and legal implications of illegal graffiti and the community practices of those who are writers.

1.2 Research Questions

The following questions have directed the study. By making urban art a viable form of artistic expression in a school, will it create the link between the socio-cultural contexts of a participating student's school life and personal life? Will participating in this project encourage students to increase their knowledge of the art form? Will the creation of this mural help to create a more welcoming and engaging learning environment for the school community?

Based on research done about welcoming urban youth culture into the classroom, drawing from aspects such as hip hop and art, these forms of cultural expression and identity can be very useful for potentially improving teachers practices and to positively affect learners' opportunities and their potential outcomes (Irizarry, 2009). Given the fact that this project took place in an after school setting the teachers would have been able to include this project in classroom activity or discussion, however it would have been their responsibility to inform themselves about the project as well as the art form. Even though this did not really take place, the learning which occurred in this extra-curricular setting had an effect on the students as connected to their school environment and was an opportunity to make connections between their two separate socio-realities (school and home).

1.3 Rationale

The school community decided to take a proactive step at reclaiming their property and refreshing their school's identity after the outdoor walls of the school had been tagged by an unknown person. In an attempt to reach both the students and the

community, a mural in urban art style was chosen as a way to identify the positive aspects of this art form and culture, particularly given its link to youth culture. The project was also chosen to encourage the students to seek out new ways to change and participate in their community and to create new avenues to understand this art form. The importance of this research stemmed from the fact that this type of project had never before taken place at this school, or at any of the surrounding schools in the community. The desired and potential impact of this project was to start with the school community and continue in an educational ripple-like effect after the project had been completed.

Given the socio-economic status representation of the families which lived in this neighbourhood it is important to understand the link between urban art and these students. Throughout the history of urban graffiti, attention has always been paid to the writers from an economically disadvantaged background. While writing may have come from these circumstances it did not take long for it to expand and to be adopted by people from different class status backgrounds. The anonymity of graffiti allows writers to leave their mark, develop an identity as well as belong to a community despite their social status. When graffiti was described as an urban crisis in New York city in the 1970s (which is where this form of urban art began to evolve and gain recognition) it was the media who attempted to focus only on the negative consequences of graffiti, linking it to poverty and juvenile delinquency as a fear tactic (Austin, 2001). Instead of considering the message behind the art, or the reasons for its existence, graffiti was only understood in the context of vandalism and regarded as a problem which needed to be eradicated. In fact, in New York the mayor declared a war on graffiti, using the same terminology as was later used in the war on drugs, despite the fact that one is a form of expression and self-appointed

voice while the other slowly eliminates the individual's ability to have a voice or be an active and responsible citizen. Although there is more tolerance for graffiti today than in the past the general consensus remains that it is an act of vandalism. Rarely is there a distinction made between illegal and legal graffiti while little discussion occurs concerning the method chosen by these artists to express themselves in the way that they do and the culture that they represent. There is also little attention given to the fact that graffiti has the power and ability to appeal to people from a range of different class backgrounds, as well as from different gender, race and age groups, given the strength in self-expression as well as recognition within a society. Gauthier (2001) notes

Today, graffiti writers (both in Canada and elsewhere in industrialized countries) come from heterogeneous backgrounds. No longer only the language of the disenfranchised, it has expanded from an inner-city practice to an inter city and international one adopted and accepted by many people (p. 276).

It is also important to understand that graffiti has been mainly present in neighbourhoods and areas where there is less security which is a protective measure for those people who are writing. However, this point does not necessarily link the writer to that specific part of the city and as early as the 1970s one of the main challenges to writers has been to have as much representation in as many neighbourhoods as possible. Given this, the link between graffiti writers, poverty and dangerous urban city centers is easily created and graffiti then seems to appeal and speak on behalf of those from a similar social reality and economic status. Yet this is not simply the case, and despite the historically associated backgrounds of those involved with the graffiti, the power behind this art form comes not only from its edgy persona, but mostly from its ability to allow

writers to bond over an art form which is anonymous, relevant to them and speaks on their behalf, forcing others to take notice of their existence. Knowing the evolution of graffiti is essential towards forming an understanding of why this art form is able to transcend class and social barriers. This is why it was of utmost importance that the artist in charge of this project was able to bridge the gap between not only the students' different understandings of graffiti but also the parents' and teachers' understandings of the reality of this art form.

1.4 Significance of the study

Given the identity valorization and legitimization in participation within graffiti as a culturally relevant and accessible group as well as the sense of dedication, pride, empowerment and accomplishment that those involved with graffiti have recorded as truths, this art form's potential for positive community outreach can be desirable and useful, particularly in an educational context. Urban art understood as a form of expression, method of creation and identification and recognized within youth and popular culture, when appearing within a school setting showed the unique capability to reach the students in different and new ways. The art form seemed to allow students to create links between their socio-reality and their educational reality which also had a lasting effect on the school community given the permanency of the mural. However, there were stereotypes which needed to be discussed and worked through, beginning with the simple use of the word graffiti and what it implies and moving from there.

Based on studies of student identity construction in a social context as linked to subculture or oppositional countercultures, creating and articulating an identity within a

school setting can be an invaluable experience for students. In a study of student subcultures and countercultures it has been shown that in North America, the integration of school into the socio-cultural context of a student's life can help validate the student's identity within their school community (Kipnis, 2001) and this can be aided by using an element of youth culture or subculture as a tool. There is an important difference between subcultures and oppositional countercultures in terms of their meaning to the students who are involved with these groups. According to Kipnis a subculture is considered as "student groupings formed around particular expressive values" while countercultures are defined as "subcultures whose expressive values critically dismiss schooling and academic virtues" (p. 472). In this research student subcultures were more relevant to the work being done versus the oppositional countercultures.

Graffiti has been linked to subculture and oppositional counterculture since it began to appear in the 1960s throughout the urban city landscapes, abandoned buildings and train yards as it still exists today. Graffiti is often associated with the dismissive and negative attitudes of rebellious youth, however the value which these artists place on their right to expression is what became interesting and imperative to infuse into the project. Graffiti has always represented the need not only to create art but also to leave a mark determining that the artist accessed a certain area and takes ownership of it, desiring to be noticed, recognized and remembered. "How many people can walk through a city and prove they were there? It's a sign I was here. My hand made this mark. I'm fucking alive!" (Anonymous graffiti artist, interviewed by Walsh, 1996 pp. 34-35).

As noted previously graffiti as identified in a Western World context has been historically linked to vandalism and property destruction (Walsh, 1996). However,

within the past thirty years it is being increasingly recognized as a valid form of art and expression. This is shown by the allocation of legal wall space in city districts for writers to use at their discretion as well as its presence and popularity in recognized art galleries in North America and abroad. The term graffiti now has many connotations and has grown in its recognized capacity as a mode of self-expression. Graffiti has also been studied as a means of youth culture literacy and serves many different functions in this light. “Graffiti is therefore mostly taken to express the attitudes, experience and desires of late modern urban youth” (Jorgensen, 2008, p. 237).

Graffiti is an ever changing art form which exists as the artists do, claiming a space on property which belongs to the community. While denial of the fact that the majority of graffiti done exists illegally would be an exercise in futility, this fact does not take away from the skill of the artist, the strength behind their social commentary and conviction as well as the versatile nature of the art. Throughout urban graffiti’s history, graffiti writers have been creating their art in order to claim space and identity in a big and often hollow surrounding. The concept of identity and self valorization, not only within society but within the graffiti crew (as they refer to themselves) which one belongs to has been well documented by sociologists in ethnographic research. Ferrell (1993) detailed this existence, thought processes and creative reasoning in his study of Denver graffiti writers and Roberge (2004) did the same style of ethnographic research in her study of Montreal graffiti writers. A recurring theme in many of these studies is the creation and articulation of self-identity through the writer’s experiences and development in this subculture. The ways in which they are able to produce a cultural identity based on their art as well as claim their belonging to a community based on their

creative expression and desire to have their work be seen and reach those who share a common space. This can be linked to the shared space and community belonging of life in a school setting, as well as the responsibility one has to the shared space and those who use it which was the basis for this research. Understanding graffiti culture and the origins of the mentality through which it was born was essential in developing a strong base which this research could be built upon.

1.5 Background/Theoretical Framework

In broad terms the theoretical framework of this research began with using empowerment theory as Mohajer and Earnest (2009) discussed Wallerstein's broadly defined understanding of one version of empowerment. "By definition the participants of empowerment programs define their own goals thus the aims of empowerment itself may only be relevant for that particular social and cultural context" (p. 425). It is also important to keep in mind that as Tengland (2008) states there are more elusive and difficult forms of empowerment to measure such as self-esteem and self-confidence. In this project measuring self-esteem, self-confidence as well as identification within a larger school/community context was done through discussion and observations of students and listening to their conversations as they worked with their peers.

Also, to be considered as a theoretical starting point would be Freire's concept of praxis as well as his study of the development of consciousness or awareness of a person's place in the world and being able to act upon the world in a transforming way. This theory is discussed in his work which focuses mainly on adult education but is also often referred to by others while discussing empowerment such as being outlined by

Mohajer and Earnest (2009) with regards to youth. As later described in the methodology section in chapter three, this project was not simply aimed at encouraging the students to participate in a project concerning their school community but also to increase their awareness of the surrounding environments as well as their responsibility towards the space which they occupy and to encourage them to seek out change if they desired it and believed it necessary.

As student empowerment, self-identity and self-esteem articulation lay at the heart of this research, it was equally important to understand the framework in which graffiti exists both historically and currently, as a subculture as well as a tool for expression concerning ownership and community belonging. The research mentioned earlier concerning ethnographic research of graffiti helped in this analysis as well as Austin's (2001) research regarding the history of New York graffiti and the way in which it was documented and dismissed by the media and the public. A scope of the entire graffiti culture and lifestyle can be found in a book written by Wimsatt (1993) which gives a much rawer and real view of the actual graffiti culture as it currently exists and is described by those who were present throughout its evolution. There have also been studies about the action of participation in graffiti as it exists as a subculture. An example of such a study was conducted by Valle, Imunirs, Weiss and Eduardo (2010) which outlines the artist's activity in public spaces based on social participation and having value as informal education.

Once the history of graffiti art is explored it is then important to explore the concept of culture as existing in a social setting for students as a link to identity and empowerment. Relevant to the research for this project is a study of youth subcultures

and cultures in London, England conducted by Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1975) defines youth subcultures and their need to exist, succinctly. “Culture refers to that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give expressive form to their social and material life-experience” (p. 10). Hebdige’s (1979) book is also a helpful tool towards constructing an understanding surrounding this phenomenon of subculture and its need for existence. He argued that a subculture is a diversion from normalcy and that subcultures can often be perceived as negative as a result of their deviance from mainstream society. This will be discussed in greater detail as relating to the project in chapter four.

1.6 Ethical issues

In this particular project it is important to mention that the principal of this school is a family relation to myself (the observer). However, it is most important to note that the project was not discussed unless it was in a formal setting. Also, to avoid any possible ethical issues with the families, obtaining parental consent to allow the children to be observed throughout the project was done before the observations began by distributing a consent form which parents chose to sign or not sign. This form stipulated that the children would be observed while they participated in the activity and that parents were free to withdraw the consent to observation at any time. Once the project was completed the children were welcomed to join a group discussion about their participation in the project; the intent was to use it as research data and the information collected from this research may be published.

Finally, it is important to mention that this research was conceptualized through personal interest and involvement within the graffiti community in the city and that although they are separate events, I do act as an organizer for the annual graffiti festival which is an internationally recognized event.

1.7 Summary of the thesis

Chapter two presents a review of the relevant literature concerning graffiti in terms of its existence in relation to empowerment, identity and stereotypes. Chapter three observations from the research are discussed. Chapter four offers an analysis of the findings, which will create a link between the relevant literature and these findings. Chapter five offers conclusions and suggestions for further research.

The conflicting views about graffiti as well as the limited access to researching this subculture could be potential reasons why there have been few recorded attempts at implementing this aspect of youth and popular culture into a school setting. However, when given access into the world of graffiti culture the history of the art and its artists presents a new lens with which to view the art and with which to utilize it as a teaching tool. Attempting to do this could become particularly important to the current student population as graffiti is recognized as a part of popular youth culture and further misinterpretations and misunderstandings lead to further alienation of those involved or interested.

The next chapter is a review of the literature which focuses on the historical development of graffiti culture as an art movement as well as the negative construction of

its image in the media. This is to be examined within the context of how it affects youth and how academic settings may be involved to undo some of this stereotyping as a method of empowering those students interested in this art form and having it as a beneficial experience as related to their school life.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Early Negative Image Construction

The existence of graffiti, according to those who are responsible for the creation of the current social order and academic structure, has since the early days been largely labelled as an act of vandalism, negatively affecting all those who are exposed to it. Thayer's (1840) comment is a clear example of how all forms of graffiti are often lumped into one category which links the word graffiti with property destruction, lack of respect for shared public space and a list of moral degradations. Thayer notes that

Next, marking, cutting, scratching, chalking, on the school-house, fence, walls etc., are forbidden, as connected with much that is low, corrupting, and injurious to the property and rights of others. They are the beginnings in that course of debasing follies and vices, for which the idle, ignorant, and profane, are most remarkable; the first steps in that course of degradation and impurity, by which the community is disgraced, and the streams of social intercourse polluted.

(Lecture on classroom courtesy, <http://deweycsi.blogspot.com/2009/11/boa-constrictors-filthy-slime-gf.html>)

However, if Thayer's statement was entirely true all of humanity would have most likely been destined for moral failure early on. Given that graffiti has been broadly defined as; the act of marking a common space, we have also historically recognized it as a demonstration of artistic development, expression and communication since the first cave paintings were discovered dating back to 35,000 years. Literature which follows the history of graffiti, as well as the history of art, has shown these paintings to be the first

indications that the human being has not only a need to create art but also a need for communication through these artistic practices and in gaining public acknowledgment. Even the earliest of cave paintings are known to have been made by what we understand to be anatomically modern humans and not Neandertals (Whitely, 2009), thereby linking art on a public space to some of the earliest forms of human behaviour. The potential for a public space to be used as a method of expression, self-affirming action and connection to the community at large seems to have been accepted at the primary level of human development. Yet, as history progresses these practices seem to be expected to be left behind or to evolve into planned acts of socially acceptable creation rather than a definitive claim of existence.

Human society, throughout its evolution, continued steadily in its growth and development of social communication partly through its early reliance on public art and early graffiti for expression and communication. Advancing societies produced the concepts of education, languages and culture all while this form of community art and practice was taking place. If urban graffiti shares some qualities with the earlier notion of graffiti being socially permissible, relevant and useful, then is urban graffiti truly an evil of current society? Has it earned the mostly negative attention and association from the media, government and academic institutions of modern time?

In leading up to what would be labelled the “war on graffiti” in New York City, City Council president Sanford D. Garelik claimed “Graffiti pollutes the eye and the mind and may be one of the worst forms of pollution we have to combat” (quoted in the New York Times, May 21, 1972). This hyperbole was never able to be proven and yet in developing this use of negative language in association with the roots of modern day

graffiti writing, this seems to have permanently created both a conscious as well as subconscious association in the public's mind between this art form and acts of criminality and delinquency often without evidence or proof to back up the claims.

An ethnographic study and photo essay done by Walsh (1996) opens up the possibilities of both hearing from the artists as well as seeing what they consider to be accomplishments. This is a new and unique lens not often used to describe the attributes of graffiti and urban art. Walsh went on to show that artists use the tools and spaces around them to explore their emotional and conceptual realities. However, because of the illegal roots which modern day graffiti was born out of, and because the modification of property as connected to a financial loss in having to remove the art, the positive social attributes of this art form seem to be regularly ignored and dismissed. In reading the early reflections by Kohl (1962) a different picture emerges which speaks of the empowering nature of the art form and later according to Austin (2001), a subculture based on a social commentary which demands the attention of those observing it.

As will be discussed graffiti has been a way for those who belong to its community to create an identity in an environment which is often cold and dismissive and feel empowered by the fact that others who had ignored their presence can no longer ignore their names. When considering the power behind graffiti, the force with which it operates, and the transformation which can occur in one's sense of empowerment when one goes from being "insignificant" (an important term discussed later on in the chapter) to active in the city's environment, a link can be drawn between those who paint and as Freire (1967) notes the development of consciousness. "It is necessary that the weakness of the powerless is transformed into a force capable of announcing justice. For this to

happen, a total denouncement of fatalism is necessary. We are transformative beings and not beings for accommodation" (p. 36).

Several studies done concerning graffiti discuss the unwillingness of most writers to abide by societal standards. These studies have pigeonholed them as negative stereotypes, dangerous criminals, and demonstrate that graffiti can be used as a method of opposing societal hierarchies as well as a way claiming the right to an identity, recognition and representation in their communities. Although graffiti is often described with threatening language, it can potentially be socially productive.

2.2 Early Recognition of Graffiti Art

In his early reflections on wall graffiti, Kohl (1962) wrote about the graffiti which he had regularly ignored, as actually being part of an identification process for those who write it, as well as a glimpse into the lives of those who surrounded him but often remained invisible. He stated:

As one scrutinizes wall inscriptions, discerning the recurrence of certain forms of expression and the energy and art with which they are inscribed, it becomes clear that name graffiti are not attempts to deface walls. Nor are they attempts at showing off. There are too many regularities in the forms which wall graffiti manifest themselves not to suspect that what one is dealing with is a complex cultural phenomenon. It may have to do with the important roles names play in our lives, and in a larger sense, in the whole fabric of identification in the society of men (pp. 58-59).

As Freire (1967) also mentions in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, without identity there can be no real struggle and that language is never neutral. Given this, the identities created through the graffiti subculture can be seen as creating an identity which can be a voice for strength in binding a community as well as giving a sense of accomplishment and pride to the writer for their contribution to society. The importance of a person's name in their placement in society can also be seen in connection with writers who have commented that having their name visible to the city gives them a particular fame. "It's all in the name. When you're poor, that's all you got" (Iz the Whiz, quoted in Austin, 2001, p. 40). The language used by writers is not neutral in that they are conveying a message to society at large, whether it is an actual written message or their name, the principle is that they need a place where they can claim their existence, which in some cases has been a struggle to achieve. As discussed by Austin many graffiti writers in New York in the early days felt that they were beautifying the city due to the neglect of city officials to maintain a humane environment in the urban communities (p. 183). Their ability to comment on this allowed them a voice and chance to have an opinion about the social decline of those who were not wealthy. They were speaking to an audience in an attempt not only to defend their art but to defend their rights as citizens. Austin states "In reaching out to the rest of the city writers became more consciously involved with issues outside their own subculture." (p. 183)

It is important to understand that the alternate conception of the power of graffiti has been underexposed to those who remain uninformed about it and unquestionably it remains largely inaccessible to those who are not involved with the culture. This is problematic when attempting to demonstrate the value and the holistic reality of the

power of urban art and that which it has to offer society because a public exposed solely to the mainstream media has little information to create a well-rounded opinion.

It is also important to acknowledge the fact that in terms of localizing the perception of graffiti in recent years, the city where this research is taking place has become increasingly supportive of creating a dialogue between communities and recognizing the contributions that the graffiti writers are making towards beautifying the city landscape. Since 2008 the city administration has created itself a role with this city's graffiti festival. This festival promotes the community oriented side of graffiti mural painting, and the development of ownership and active citizenry in its participants. The city decided to devote its support to the festival as those who campaigned for this unification voiced the opinion that simply cleaning the graffiti off the walls could never eliminate it because there was another message being left behind. The festival founder, who is also the artist in charge of this project, explained that through many meetings and idea exchanges, his role has been to act as a bridge between the graffiti community and the city. Opening the lines of communication between both parties and attempting to create a working relationship between the two communities were the first steps towards promoting a greater understanding and appreciation for graffiti culture as well as a respectful behaviour towards that which is shared space in the city. While the two sides do not always agree on all aspects of these topics, it has been a positive advancement in furthering peaceful community relations. For more information about this festival, its mission statement and its alliance with the city, please see Appendix 1, p.93).

2.3 Early Studies of Graffiti Culture

A reasonably small yet growing body of research about graffiti culture and those who participate in it has shown that graffiti has received enormous amounts of negative attention in society labelling those who practice or appreciate the art form as delinquents, disrespectful and dangerous, as indicated in Thayer's (1840) comment stated previously and as will be seen again in the comments of current citizens. Yet the community which exists within this subculture is shown to be empowered and validated by their artistic contributions to the shared spaces in society (Kohl, 1962, Castleman, 1982, Ferrell, 1993, Austin, 2001). Although these spaces are often taken without asking where the strength of the art form comes from is its raw existence and ability to empower those who create it, regardless of their social background. The popularity and draw of graffiti does not come from the senseless destruction of property, as has been portrayed in the media, but in its ability to free the artist from the constructed social reality and to take ownership and responsibility of those spaces which they paint.

A seminal study in this area was done by Castleman (1982). His early research about graffiti culture and those responsible for its modern existence and evolution investigates all aspects of the graffiti culture focusing on the writers from New York City who were known for painting the subways, starting from the language which was created by the writers not only existing on walls but also in spoken terms. In addition, the stories of graffiti creation and the reasoning behind the risks that the writers took daily in order to have their voices heard and their names seen spanning spaces throughout the city were investigated. Following the investigation were the interviews with the law enforcement officials who had the most contact with these writers as well as a detailed account of the

mayoral campaign against graffiti. This study represented one of the first of its kind in terms of ethnographic research geared towards exploring the realities of the graffiti subculture. Castleman was able to represent the opinions of both those who were against graffiti as well as those who were passionate about it, attempting only to explore that which had been rarely documented. This was a unique depiction of the drive and ingenuity of the writers, whose need to create allowed them to thrive in their environments, to have their voices heard, and to take pride in their work as well as their position in the community. The study also showed the relationship between the writers and the police which eventually developed into a mutual respect for that which both had to do, write and make arrests. This aspect of the study adds a layer of understanding towards the importance of the role played by the media in depicting the writers negatively. The conception of writers as dangerous or worthless criminals was created by those who held office and it was reinforced by their supporters in the media although it was not specifically that of those who were actually responsible for the pursuit of the writers and who had the most contact with them.

Ferrell's (1993) research of graffiti in Denver built on the foundations that Castleman (1982) had established years earlier. His study is a comprehensive guide to graffiti culture and the exploration of what he calls the "politics of criminality". He argues that the socially constructed politics of the hierarchy of criminal laws and the media's use of this language, ideology and value system have created a public view of graffiti and graffiti writers which does not reflect the entire reality of the graffiti culture or its potential perceived threat. While his study focuses on the Denver scene, what he is describing is not an isolated occurrence. As will be discussed later the politics of

criminality continue to take place in the media as well as in social institutions, which results in the exclusion of many youths from representation in society. This can also be associated with the difficulties encountered by youths in confidently and knowledgeably creating an identity within an academic context as connected to their socio-cultural reality also described by Kipnis (2001) in his study of identity representation in schools.

In his work of reflection on graffiti from a writer's perspective, Powers (1999) outlines many stories shared by writers concerning the hypocritical hierarchy found in the laws which uphold society and the graffitiists' willingness and need to fight back. Graffiti as a method of expression is most often done illegally and is dangerous in several regards for those who paint. Therefore, it is important to examine these realities of the graffiti culture which has seen many young artists in violent altercations, arrested, put into prison for a greater part of their adult life and owing fines to the city which they would never conceivably be able to repay. In one mentioned case the parents of a writer in the state of California had to re-mortgage their home in order to pay the \$43, 000 in fines incurred by their son's art (Powers, 1992, pp. 78-79). In some extreme cases graffiti writers have died while painting on a bridge, on the train tracks or on the subway rails. The intricacies of being a devoted graffiti writer rarely receive recognition investigation within the context of creating a developed understanding of the social realities of the subculture.

Graffiti art requires imagination, drive to create, and desire to be recognized as an anonymous yet undeniable contributor to society. Clearly there are many who share the perspective of viewing unauthorized art's existence simply as an act of vandalism and a disgrace to the community. Yet the ability graffiti writers have to form a connection with others who write and in turn create their own community are able to develop their own

understandings and expectations of social behaviour based on mutual respect and acceptance. Aside from developing their own active citizenry graffiti art affords writers an opportunity to take ownership over a space and pride in the work, which are concepts which need to be further explored and understood with possible hopes for extrapolating on these values and re-rooting them in an academic setting. This goes beyond a call for tolerance, but a demand for mutual respect and recognition of all members of society to have the right to a voice and place within their community. A need for responsibility, not only towards one another but also towards shared space is essential when attempting to explore and understand the existence of modern graffiti and to create a new lens with which to deconstruct the art form. Lomas (1973) states

We can no more understand graffiti by separating them from the walls on which they appear than we can fully understand dreams by neglecting their obvious connection with sleep or comprehend jokes by ignoring the laughter they produce in the listener. It is this relation of the writer to the wall that holds the key to our investigation (p. 88).

2.4 Graffiti as an Important Art Movement

Brown makes an important point when stating “Important movements happen because there is a void in our lives that demands to be filled” (Cited in Wimsatt, p.66).

Modern writing and urban graffiti as is currently recognized was born out of the imaginations of both Philadelphian and New York City writers dating back to the 1960s. What started as a simple identification of a person’s name and street number grew and evolved into the new writing and the art movement that it is now. Following the same

logic in understanding the criminalization of graffiti as Ferrell's (1993) and Austin's (2001) studies of the evolution of New York graffiti indicate by focusing and following step by step the creation of an ideology in the media which spreads within the public concern for safety and moral standard stereotypes are easily created and perpetuated.

When graffiti was in its early stages it received little notice from the residents of the city, who most likely ignored its presence, given the simplicity and similarity between each of the writings (Austin, 2001, p. 79). Yet, it developed quickly and noticeably as the challenge to writers was getting up (saturation) in as many places as possible, with greater visibility being the goal. As it became impossible to ignore the graffiti which covered the subway systems, within the media, and the New York Times in particular, much space was devoted to declaring graffiti as a malicious youth craze described by a psychologist in one article as "an attempt by insignificant people to impose their identity on others" (p. 81). The use of the word 'insignificant' is particularly important considering the context when the war on graffiti was beginning to take shape. There were many assumptions being made about the people who were writing the graffiti, mostly with regards to their class and social background. Graffiti was imagined as being done by people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, given where graffiti appeared most, and that these people did not deserve a voice or representation in the city's larger scale. The idea these people had no right to a voice can be ascertained by the use of the word impose, which insinuates that no one wanted to hear or see or be made aware of the existence of these people who would otherwise be invisible. It was not within their set of rights to have equal representation in New York City. The word insignificant also alludes to the idea that those who were responsible for the graffiti on

the walls were of little or no consequence to both the city and society in general. These assumptions were being made erroneously and an interview with police official clearly demonstrates this. This is an excerpt of an interview conducted by Castleman (1982) in which he writes:

When asked, “What sort of kids write graffiti?” police officer Kevin Hickey of the New York Transit Police Department’s graffiti squad replied, “The type of kids that live in New York City. They range from ultra-rich to ultra-poor. There is no general classification of the kids; its just a typical New York City kid that will write graffiti, if given the opportunity and if this is what his friends do.” Another police officer, Conrad Lesnewski, agreed: “Also some of the kids apprehended – their fathers were professors at Columbia, NYU, some were CPAs, some were doctors, architects. They live in a thousand-dollar house, apartments, some are living in a \$1.98-a-month ghetto. There are no generalizations (p.67).

What the psychologist was most likely not taking into consideration when making the statement concerning insignificant imposition was the reality that any youth could develop an interest in graffiti, making the statement untrue as an entire generation cannot be considered insignificant. It is also demonstrative of the societal values held as being capable of considering any human being insignificant.

Positive contributions to the urban landscape were largely ignored by the media and there were no interviews with those participating in this movement to increase awareness or round out the debate. In this way the media was able to conjure up a negative and frightening identity for graffiti writers, who were largely unknown and being excessively “othered”. Most of the public would never know the feelings the

graffitists had about their artwork, their own statements and their place within the society. One would have to turn to graffiti magazines, which are not easily accessible to those not in the culture, to hear a different version of this story. Graffiti writers SMITH and SANE explained

With the help of journals which cater to upper middle class like the New York Times, they have succeeded in giving our art the “vandalistic blight” image... The New York Times fails to mention pieces, thus effectively keeping the public image of our art to tags... Not only would the MTA have been able to reap the benefits of having a beautiful subway system, had they accepted our art, but they also would have been able to contain it. What writer, if given the option of painting trains without the fear of getting caught or buffed, could refuse? But now the artists have been rejected by the system, which makes them revenge their art works by ink-bombing, vandalizing trains, or completely giving up. Some writers have turned to the streets to paint. The streets are about as out of control as you can be... In this way our art can survive (quoted in Austin, pp. 267-268).

Graffiti did, however, receive some positive reinforcement from those who observed it every day. This unique art movement was not solely perceived as a threat and received notice and recognition by citizens who reacted to the negative coverage the art form was receiving. Letters written to the New York Times were written defending the graffiti which covered subway walls and trains. “The colourful names and blobs are not at all ‘pointless’... Even ‘feeble minds’ will chafe against the restraints of a social order that offers nothing but continued isolation and frustration” and “I say bravo to the kids

who are changing an otherwise depressing, dank environment into something which at least has association, color and vitality” (quoted in Austin, p. 83).

In this way an element of an emerging subculture was beginning to receive a great deal of recognition within society which would result in attracting greater numbers of participants as the graffiti movement undeniably grew.

2.5 The Media’s Role in Graffiti’s Negative Image Construction

Aside from historically situating graffiti and documenting its evolution the various studies presented illustrate the power of the media in creating stereotypes and unfair biases which are then often perpetuated throughout society. There are still few attempts made towards understanding the writers and humanizing them rather than using a public forum to sustain this negative image. An unfortunate recent local example is the tragedy which occurred in November 2009 with the death of a local graffiti writer who was murdered by two other graffiti writers in what would be presented as a turf war. The media which reported the crime after the accused had been caught (see Appendix 2, p. 95) mentioned that the young man was a tagger; a term which has a negative connotation as strictly an act of vandalism, and that his family knew about this. It also described the death as related to graffiti territorialism, yet offered no sources to confirm this as reality or investigated any other meanings behind this senseless act of violence. It would seem as though graffiti was the culprit in this situation while no other socially based problems were investigated or even mentioned. Yet, what was mentioned unrelated to graffiti or the crime committed was that the victim smoked marijuana, subconsciously creating an image of this young man as a law

breaker, dangerous and unstable. As the following comments indicate the public's reactions to the article seem to insinuate the graffiti writer who was murdered received an understandably severe punishment based on his illegal activities. These quotes were taken from a message board which followed the story reporting the murder, indicating three different reactions from 'Ryan', 'blm' and 'Pamela'.

Ryan

The loss of young life is a tragedy and I sympathize with his family but maybe he shouldn't have been out vandalizing property. Perhaps if his Dad had whooped his butt for this kind of stupidity before he wouldn't have been out making our city look like south central LA. Instead of talking UP the boys misdeeds maybe the family should start a memorial in his name and use the funds to clean the filth off our city's walls.

Anyway the waste of the boys is still sad but he is no martyr by any stretch.

blm

His family says regular marijuana smoker, or is this not a CRIME? According to sister he always finishes his graffiti. It seems like this is not a CRIME either(defacing public or private property). Quebec is beginning to sound like Somalia, no working government.

blm

It looks like somebody did not like the pothead writing on their property. At least that is 2 things he won't be charged with. I wonder what the rest of the family is like as they knew he was a pothead and tagger but did nothing.

Pamela

While it is tragic that this young man lost his life, I cannot help but wonder why his mother

and sister thought nothing of his going out to vandalize someone's property with his "graffiti tagging". His sister said on the news that he didn't know what to do with his life and in the next breath says he liked to go out and "tag" someone else's property. This is a crime. "Tagging" has cost the owners and the public hundreds of thousands of dollars. That said, perhaps he just got his comeuppance.

(Author of the article is unknown, 2009, November 30. Comments on public forum for Family Seeks Answers in Teen's Mysterious Death. Message posted to <http://www.ctv.montreal.ca>)

Apparently, according to those who posted their opinions in this forum, our society has been conditioned to think that writing illegally is a crime worse than any other given that we do not support the death penalty in our judicial system, while the comments made suggest that death was potentially deserved in this scenario. It also seems that there is no empathy for a young man in a society which has few accessible outlets or resources geared towards creating a comprehensive understanding of a subculture which undeniably exists within our society and which is of interest to many different groups of pre-adolescent and adolescent students with active and regular participants.

2.6 Creating a Bridge Between Communities

Given the image of graffiti presented by the media it would be difficult to present graffiti and its writers any differently. Therefore, a possible solution to creating a new understanding of the culture could take place in an educational setting where discussions can occur concerning both the positive and negative aspects of graffiti. This should be an environment which does not judge a student's interest but rather encourages all students to engage in a critical thinking approach to those actions they wish to associate with. "A

transformative curriculum teaches students to think and reflect critically on the materials they read and the voices that they hear.” (Banks, 1991, p. 131) A body of research exists which suggests, as Banks clearly summarizes, that it is positive and beneficial for students, within the curriculum, to create their own understandings of topics based on their own research as well as their life-experience and allow for a new perspective on society and their roles within it to emerge (Scott, 2006; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow and Associates, 2000). While most of this research has been done in relation to adult learning, there is a great deal of potential for this to positively affect young learners as well.

Giving students a new perspective and understanding of something which is undeniably part of their own culture has been an empowering experience for students when dealing with the topic of popular culture as a whole. Giroux and Simon (1989) showed support for the study of popular culture to be used as a tool for both the students as well as the teachers to situate them within society. “This suggests a critical pedagogy operating to disrupt the unity of popular culture in order to encourage the voice of dissent while simultaneously challenging the lived experiences and social relations of domination and exploitation” (p. 228).

If educators have the power to demystify illegal graffiti and give students a new perspective towards understanding this art form then this is giving them a powerful tool and a method of creating new meanings for a culture which is growing steadily and continuously affecting the community.

2.7 Positive Youth Development and the Graffiti Subculture

In her study of graffiti writers Roberge (2004) confirms a new generation's passion for graffiti based on the need to leave a mark in a city where there is no other outlet regardless of which neighbourhood the writer is from or how much money their parents may make. It is a personal experience, an adrenaline rush, a confirmation of existence which is a sought after feeling for many of today's youth. This documented and factual account giving of writers who find a method of self-identity creation and discovery surrounding their art works shows a clear link with the study done about subculture in school settings done by Kipnis (2001). His study did not focus on one subculture in particular but he generally stated that students, particularly in North American schools, felt the need for a subculture to exist in order to create their personal identity within the school. Graffiti writers feel the need to participate in their subculture, because, among other reasons, it allows them an identity within society. These are different studies and yet they yielded similar results and therefore could point to the possibility that a new understanding of graffiti may be beneficial for a student population feeling a need for representation and the type of connection with other students and peer acceptance as described by those in graffiti crews.

Other studies being done in the field of education are those concerning the processes of positive youth development. For instance, Halverson (2010) links the artistic production process with positive youth development. She discusses the creation of the proper learning environment which would be conducive to fostering emergent identities, particularly in adolescents. While her study is relatively new and her focus is on dramaturgical situations to foster this identity creation and representation, she also

makes the argument for this possibility to exist in other art forms as well. Given the ability graffiti has had within its own community to help develop identities, concentrating these efforts in a structured setting with guidance from what Rowlands (1997) defines as a change agent could be a productive development. She defines this role.

Change agents are usually (though not always) outsiders; they are often extension workers, 'experts' in some form. The attitudes they bring to their work, and the form their work takes can have immense impact, positively or negatively, on the people with whom they work (p. 136).

In this way finding an ambassador to represent the graffiti culture and explore the reality of its existence is essential in giving the students an accurate education on the topic.

Students can also be the recipients of a unique form of education and information, not unlike some of which is found in the graffiti magazines.

2.8 Understanding Graffiti and Links to Subculture

More specifically, the body of research and large number of interviews which surrounds and attempts to explain the intricacies of the culture of graffiti focus on the fact that graffiti artists see themselves and their contribution to the surrounding environment very differently than the image being portrayed by the media. While it is impossible to speak on behalf of every writer, interviews appearing both in research studies as well as graffiti magazines, show that in contrast to the image being portrayed many artists contributing to the existence of graffiti appreciate the impact they have on their community and respect this responsibility and the opportunity to do so. The following

quotes demonstrate several graffiti writers' perspective on their work and art, as quoted in two different graffiti magazines.

Graffiti is an exercise of global citizenship. As an anarcho-architectural manifestation of free speech, graffiti bucks the bondage of propriety. An armed elite has controlled and manipulated the word plus image from parchment to the associated press, leaving the prophets the walls to write on (Yankee Junkie, *International Graffiti Times* 1 January 1984, quoted in Austin, 2001 p. 249).

With graffiti, anyone who has a hand on a can, can purchase the right to express themselves. Graffiti is for those who can't afford to buy the space on a billboard...It's an advertisement for the people (EKS, *Styles for Miles* 1 October 1990, quoted in Austin, 2001 p. 257).

Interviews and insights from within the graffiti culture are key elements when creating a well-rounded opinion about the art form and its cultural significance. The definition of culture outlined in the first chapter shares similarities with graffiti in its understood ability to create a feeling of belonging and self-confidence within the community. As writers who span across several different generations of graffiti have expressed repeatedly there is a certain way of life and mutual respect and understanding which exists amongst the participants. This way of life depends on the artist's ability to give an expressive form to their social and material life-experience, which is a definition of culture as stated by Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1975). Graffiti should therefore be understood not only as an art movement but as a cultural movement

complete with a sense of belonging and ownership to a community as well as a language which expresses the common goals and attitudes of the majority who participate.

Similar to the discussion concerning culture by Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts, in a more recent study Erickson (2002) points to the potential of a well-rounded education having a portion of its curriculum devoted to the study of artworlds. She describes artworlds as being cultures within cultures and mentions the idea of subcultures which exist in an art setting and generally develop within a larger cultural context. She defines culture as "...maintained by people who invest meaning in, and center all or part of their identity on understandings and values that come from shared experience" (Erickson, 2002, p. 17). Graffiti currently exists as a subculture which is part of the larger cultural context in North American society. Those who are a part of this subculture create their meaning and identity based on common understandings and desires within the current political and social setting. It is very possible to encourage the graffiti subculture to exist within a school culture as the larger cultural context. The learning which can come from this, both from those involved with the artworld as well as those who are developing a new lens with which to understand it, offers a great deal of discovery potential.

2.9 Empowerment Theory and Graffiti

Graffiti's ability to allow writers to create a positive, empowering self-identity as well as voice within the community and generate a feeling of responsibility and ownership for publicly shared spaces becomes quite apparent when access to these writers is made possible. Graffiti and its writers grow in the perceived ability to offer a

contribution to society which could be beneficial rather than destructive when a humanization of these people and their art takes place. After shedding light on the realities of the graffiti writers it is interesting to link their actions to the theories of empowerment and the positive potential outcomes of inviting this subculture into a school setting.

To transplant graffiti into a school setting could be to encourage the entire empowerment process to take place, and as Rowlands (1997) states in her research, empowerment is a process not simply a product. She also states that the core qualities of empowerment are that which “increases in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and of ‘self’ in a wider context, and a sense of dignidad (being worthy of and having a right to respect from others)” (p. 130). These qualities are very relevant to the findings of this particular research and are discussed again in chapter four. This is also an important addition to the definition of empowerment by Wallerstein (2006) which defines empowerment based on the outcomes of the individuals, which will be different given social and cultural contexts. Looking back on the research done concerning the graffiti writer’s abilities to connect and develop themselves as artists and as people within this culture, if an academic society is interested in helping to develop a student’s sense of belonging and empowerment, graffiti should no longer simply be defined as an act of vandalism. Its potential benefits have evolved alongside the culture and the culture of the popular and are useful for those looking to reach their students with new and relevant tools.

The idea of empowerment is generally reserved for those who are marginalized by society and those who have no voice and have no say in their realities. In a school setting,

while it is true that not all students face the same realities, all students should feel they have the confidence and wisdom with which they are able to make decisions and assert themselves. Students, who would be given an education in a subculture such as graffiti, could be being offered the tools with which to educate themselves and build on the knowledge and preconceived notions with which they arrived at school, as well as extending this same opportunity to those around them, including parents. Giving the students a greater role in the responsibility of their own education as well as the education of others can be seen as one of the characteristics of empowerment, which would be the sense of agency and self in a wider context. Through discussion, which involves reflection on their actions as well as their understandings students are able to develop in their autonomous personas with regards to their social and academic identities. The processes of empowerment and identity creation happen simultaneously and the results yield similar outcomes which both point towards a more complete understanding of particular surroundings and the ability to feel empowered through personal connections made to graffiti culture and the walls which bear its designs. As students decide to like or dislike graffiti culture they are learning to confidently make decisions about their environment based on a personal learning experience.

2.10 Summary

Graffiti culture is a complex phenomenon to understand, particularly as it depends on active participation in a subculture, which is difficult to document and accurately capture all its social intricacies, particularly in written words. As an art form and community practice, which depends on the energy and vibrancy of its participants, it is

easy to lose these positive and unique aspects in books and research. Yet, its continued development and membership from a younger generation facing a world which is radically different from that when modern graffiti first became prevalent speaks of its power and sustainability in both the legal and illegal contexts. Given its cultural strength and importance and its shown link to empowerment and positive youth identity development through the art practice there can be new layers with which we work at developing the culture of graffiti to achieve its positive outcome potential.

As has been illustrated in this literature review the history of the social evolution of graffiti has been documented in a way which has ignored the positive social potential contributions those who participate in this community have to offer. By continuously stereotyping these people as delinquents and dangerous, the youth who are exposed to graffiti are not being given the tools with which they can understand this culture and use it in the positive ways it has been used since its early stages.

Transplanting these positive aspects of the culture, by integrating an artist who can speak from knowledge and experience can open up the potential of empowerment and ownership to students using the culture of graffiti as a tool. Opening up a dialogue concerning the realities of this culture will give the students an advantage of being able to make informed decisions and being able to spread knowledge to others, giving themselves a greater voice in the community.

In the following chapter I present the school project which focuses on the creation of a mural and discussions surrounding graffiti, the methodology used and the main findings.

CHAPTER THREE

A CASE STUDY

3.1 Introduction to the Case Study

In this chapter I first outline the qualitative research method as well as the method of data collection used to study an urban art project in an elementary school. Secondly the research observation process is presented through the use of examples taken from field notes documented in the weekly sessions as well as at the art gala. The gala was the pinnacle of this project as the students' mural was officially unveiled to the community. Also taking place at the gala was a live graffiti painting done by the artist in charge of the project. I then discuss the different interviews done with the student participants as well as the individual interviews done with the principal and the artist concerning their reflections of the project, its final outcomes and the reactions received from those in the surrounding environment.

The research done for this project is a case study of one school in Montreal, Quebec. While the artist who was running the program was also employed at several other schools under similar circumstances, this research consists of a singular case study. As noted in other research such as Ngubane (2005) according to Patton (cited in Cantrell, 1993), using small samples or even single cases, selected 'purposefully' enables the qualitative researcher to focus in depth on issues important to the study (pp. 33-34). In the case of this research the issues discussed in depth were regarding the students changing perceptions of graffiti as well as their feelings with respect to the process and final product of the urban art project and finally the validation they felt both internally as well as participants in their school community. Given that a program similar to this had

never before been implemented, documenting the project's achievements and failures was extremely important to both the artist as well as to myself for future referencing as well as program development.

The concept for this project was rooted in informal observations made (by myself) of the graffiti community in this city and then grew through discussions with graffiti writers and other members of the community based on the notions of respect, empowerment and community practice. As Lindlof (1995) notes,

The qualitative researcher usually begins a study out of a personal and scholarly fascination with a phenomenon, and continues to respect its integrity while carrying out field activities. The researcher turns his or her attention to the forms and functions of the phenomenon as it operates in natural context. Yet a qualitative approach depends critically on the investigator's interacting with the subjects under study (p. 22).

Developing an understanding of graffiti as a phenomenon by being present within the culture afforded me the opportunity to conceptualize relevant theory in order to establish it in a school setting when discussing the achievements of positive action based on graffiti that the artist had personally experienced. As graffiti culture and positive youth development ran parallel for him the possibility of introducing these aspects through dialogue and began to take shape.

3.2 Methodology

The population studied in this particular project was a group of grade five and six students, aged 10-12, at an elementary school in a suburb of the city of Montreal.

Student participation depended on their interest in the project and the number of students who enrolled to participate in the project was 35. This school is located in a middle-class neighbourhood and the majority of the students were Caucasian and from middle class families.

This research was conducted while the urban art project took place both in the indoor and outdoor stages of its production. The final product was a large mural on the outdoor walls of the school which covered old and unwanted tags using the school's name and logo. The project was run by a well-known graffiti artist who has an extensive portfolio with regards to youth and community work. He has been working as a youth intervention worker for over ten years and writing graffiti for over sixteen years. He is one of the founders and organizers of the longest running and biggest graffiti festival in North America, previously referred to. He is also the publisher of a graffiti and urban culture magazine which uses the same name as the festival. He bases his work with youth on self-esteem and identity development. He has developed several different programs and strategies to target the different age ranges of students and youth with whom he works.

The program he developed for this particular school setting devotes time to the discussion of students' prior knowledge, assumptions and experiences concerning graffiti as well as developing their own artistic and creative ability in this particular style. As the students began to experiment and create a style which was a representation of them and was relevant to their life experience, self-identity was then discussed in small group settings as they worked on their portions of the project. As students learned more about the art form and began to develop a deeper understanding and interest in the project their

level of participation and enthusiasm grew alongside their sense of ownership and responsibility towards the school's appearance. Students worked in teams which also encouraged a sense of community amongst themselves.

The students spent several weeks discussing, drawing names and letters in different graffiti styles as well as coloring the letters to have them appear three dimensional and finally planning for the letter they designed in the group before beginning to paint outdoors. The students were responsible for picking the members of their groups and everything having to do with the design and creation of their letter on the outdoor panel. There were three weeks which were actually dedicated to painting outdoors where the students worked in their small groups starting by figuring out how to grid off their panel in order to reproduce their letter legibly and then executing the design. Once the project was finished students who were willing and had a signed consent form were interviewed about their experience throughout the project. Aside from the focus group interview with the students there were also post-project interviews conducted with the artist and the principal

3.3 Data Organization

The data collected in this study was mostly in the form of field notes which were taken during the observations of the one hour periods. These notes were filed weekly in order for quick and easy comparison to take place. The school decided they would like to document the entire experience with photographs which were taken by a parent volunteer. This was done so that at the end of the project an edited version of the

process in the form of a DVD could be shown at the art gala as documentation of the entire process.

Once the project had been completed an interview was conducted with all the student participants in a focus group setting. This interview was recorded and the tape was transcribed for interview data. The adults were then interviewed individually, in a setting in which the student participants were not present. Additional findings were collected during the art gala, at which point parents who were willing commented on their child's experience in the project as well as any personal reflections they may have had regarding themselves or the art form.

Given that the non-participant observations taken were the primary source of collected data, the bulk of the research relied on these observations being well-documented and accurately assessed. The focus group interview done with the students was largely based on my reflection of these observations as many questions were conceptualized while listening to the students while they interacted with one another. Their responses contextualized both their personal experiences within the project as well as within their development and understanding of the graffiti culture.

It was challenging to build a rapport with these students as this was non-participant research, however since they had built an excellent rapport with the artist this allowed for a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom upon first arrival. Also, the school community of teachers, daycare staff, parents and administration were very welcoming to having this research conducted. The students' uneasy reactions towards being observed but not interacted with during the project became more apparent during the final focus group in that the students seemed, at first, slightly hesitant to voice their opinions with

regards to the questions. There was a level of uncertainty surrounding the fact that although they had been introduced to me as the researcher as well as to the idea of being the subjects of research they were unclear and curious as to what was being written and why it was being documented. Some of the first questions I was asked by three girls on my first day were “Are you going to interview us all at the end of this project?” “What are you going to ask?” “Why are you going to just watch us?” That being expressed, perhaps a participant observer role would have made the students feel more at ease and would have allowed them to understand my knowledge, interest and experience within the realm of graffiti and education more clearly and earlier on.

That being expressed, selecting the focus group as a manner of interview was most likely the simplest way to ease the participants into answering questions directed at them by a partial stranger. In the definition given by Krueger (1994) as quoted in Ngubane he states that “a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (p.34). This was important to attempt to achieve given the ages of those participating, particularly with regards to their level of comfort with unknown adults.

The principal stayed in the room for the focus group along with the parent who had documented the project. This seemed to help the students feel more at ease which was visibly noticeable as early on in the interview several of the students directed their answers to the principal and not towards myself. Given this observation conducting this interview in a focus group was indeed a good way of easing the pressure on the students as, in this particular case, they all felt comfortable with each other and the adults present.

The focus group was audio recorded with the use of a video camera. This allowed for the interview to be conducted uninterrupted, not needing to change tape or worry about the functioning of the machine as I had tested it prior to the interview. It was important to consider that the disadvantages Terre, Blanche and Durrheim (1999) pointed out; being that some participants could withhold some of the information or 'play for the tape'. This was particularly noted during the focus group as certain students seemed to pick up on the comments made by other students and rephrased them, making me question whether these were the student's own feelings or simply a comment made as they were encouraged to participate. While it is impossible to know whether they had thought of these ideas before the other student, the most relevant comments became the ones which were original in thought and creation.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

As noted by Ngubane (2005), Sifunda (2001) stated that the presence of the researcher as a facilitator in focus groups and the fact that the researcher's interests drive the focus groups can contaminate data. This was important for me to keep in mind given that I had already created my own perceptions of the project while observing the students. It was imperative that the questions I asked them were open-ended and allowed them to relive the project through their own words and experiences.

Having the participant's parents sign consent forms eliminated the ethical issues regarding working with minors. In order to ensure the confidentiality as promised in the consent forms pseudonyms are used in this document with regards to the comments made by students in the focus group. Encouraging the students to answer but not forcing them

to speak if they did not choose to do so was my way of ethically ensuring that my research was being carried out in a way which was morally acceptable to both the participants as well as myself.

3.5 Limitations

The field notes which were collected through group observations done in the school yard was done by dividing the time of the project by the number of groups which was the only logical way to cover the amount of ground and number of students. This could have been improved upon if I had a partner with whom I could have worked in order to closely observe more groups for longer periods of time. It remained a personal concern that useful observations were being missed while I was devoted to one group at a time. Also, I felt limited in my understanding of what had taken place in the two weeks prior to being able to begin observing. This seemed to have been a very important introduction for these students.

As previously mentioned, one limitation was that in not building a previous rapport with the students it was difficult to solicit answers from them early on in the focus group. Another limitation was that given the specific social status held by the majority of these students, the findings would not be generalizable to schools whose population may not react the same way to the autonomous learning which took place while they painted. Given this, further research would need to be done about the potential of modifying certain aspects of the project.

3.6 Observations of the Project

This project was observed without any interaction throughout a five week period. Each of the time blocks were one hour and fifteen minutes long after the school day was finished. This project had only two adults, the daycare worker and the artist, responsible for the actual supervision of the 35 participants. What follows is a summary of the observations made throughout the duration of the project.

Week One: The Computer Lab

The first set of observations I made were not of the students' initial encounter with the artist. The first time the students met the artist he went into all the cycle three classrooms (grades five and six) to do an introductory exercise about graffiti as an introductory exercise to the project several weeks before the project got underway. When the project actually began the students who had signed up had already been meeting with the artist for two weeks before these observations began.

In the first two weeks of the project taking place in which I was not present, the students put themselves into groups which they felt would be the most effective and enjoyable group to work with throughout the experience. Each group was initially assigned two letters and told these were the letters which they would be painting on the outdoor panels of the school. In these first weeks of the project the artist met with these students and had long and elaborate discussions with them concerning graffiti and urban art, as well as their impressions of it. This continued to be an on-going discussion, sometimes as a group and sometimes individually with the artist throughout the rest of the project. It is important to note that the first interaction with the artist would have

been an extremely valuable experience to document for this research as this is where the introduction to urban art as both a positive outlet as well as an illegal activity took place and demonstrated the student's base of knowledge concerning this topic.

The first week of observation took place in the computer lab where the students had already congregated before our arrival. The students seemed very comfortable and familiar within this setting and were working on individual drawings on the computer. In the previous weeks several students had taken the initiative to do some research about graffiti culture on the internet. They discovered the program **Graffiti Creator** (www.graffiticreator.net) as a way to help them visually distinguish different stylistic aspects of graffiti art as well as helping them to reproduce these styles on paper. Whereby in the past graffiti writers would spend time sketching in the black books, observing the graffiti around the city and apprenticing with older writers (Austin, 2001), these students had found a way to basically bypass these rites of passage and be responsible for their own education.

The entire project was run in a manner which always allowed the students to circulate freely and observe the work of their peers. It was clear that these students felt comfortable with each other. From the first day of observation they would interrogate the other students on their own work as well as the work of the others. Questions such as "Does this letter look good" and "What does this look like? Can you read it" were called out from group to group freely and feedback was often taken into consideration when making adjustments to the letter in question. While the artist circulated between each of the groups, the students often seemed more concerned with peer review than with his comments.

The activity which had been planned for the week was each group was given a paper (see Appendix 3, p. 96) which had the appropriate dimensions of the panel they would eventually paint. The groups were meant to design and figure out how their letter could be made to fit the panel in a way which was legible and they felt represented them best.

When circulating through the groups their discussions were mainly concerning how to incorporate the school colours, as well as the mascot, in order to represent the school properly. As students sketched many comments were made in a more or less constructive manner, working as a group rather than concentrating on individual goals or desires. Comments such as; “No not like that, it has to look good” and “You can’t USE red, it has to be blue or yellow. Everyone is going to see this” were constant reminders of the desired outcome.

Week Two: Inside the Auditorium

One of the most important aspects of the urban art project was the discussion and awareness that was raised among the students concerning their feelings about graffiti, their conceptions about the art form, of what impact it had on the students as well as the community and how to make this impact a positive one. The artist would facilitate these discussions with the students, asking them open ended questions in order to allow for an education through personal experience to take place. This week, in particular, a discussion was first started concerning any graffiti students had noticed throughout the week and why it stood out to them. The second part of the discussion became whether they thought the graffiti to be either legally done, or illegally done, which is another way

to broaden the student's conceptual understanding of property rights as well as why artists would want to express themselves in that area, risking potential consequences if illegal.

The students who spoke up were very direct in their answers. One student in particular mentioned a piece he and his friends had seen when they had taken a field trip to see the symphony orchestra, at a theatre in the downtown area of the city. "I'm pretty sure it was illegal. We couldn't recognize the letters at all. We went far and close, but the letters looked all scribbled". This type of observation allowed the discussion to center on the topic of representation, and how they wanted their mural to look when representing the school, as well as themselves, to passers by. The students all agreed without debate when the artist asked them which way they think would be best in writing the school's logo, everything should be written clearly. When the artist asked them why they wanted this to be the outcome one answer seemed to represent the feelings had by the entire group of students which was "We want all the other kids to know what we wrote".

Traditionally, graffiti writers made a challenge of creating a wild style for themselves and their tags, in which contorting the letter to the point of illegibility was the goal (Austin, 2001). The concept of mass legibility was not a concern because the stylized message spoke to the community of other writers who would appreciate the skill involved in doing so through their own practice. The similarity between the graffiti writers and these students is that the students wanted others in their respective community to appreciate their work based on the communal understanding and practice of literacy and legibility which has been taught in school and would be recognized by

those in a similar surrounding. In order to facilitate an environment with mutual respect and appreciation there must be a common ground where all the school's community would be able to meet. In order to facilitate an environment based on mutual respect and understanding, with regards to the ownership graffiti writers have been shown to take over their work and spaces, the writing had to be displayed in a way that the community could also feel ownership over the space through accurate representation.

The last point of discussion before the students began their drawings was about the execution of the large graffiti pieces which students had noticed around the city. One in particular was a birthday cake approximately 10 meters in height, painted on the side of the highway. The artist asked the students to try and figure out how this was created, and how the students would be able to use these strategies in their own work. One student suggested "Did they have a plan like we do?" in reference to the smaller papers they had practiced on the week earlier. A brief discussion about how to divide a large space into quadrants was had and the students seemed excited to try different methods in designing their panels.

As the groups began their work on the butcher paper which was the exact size of the panel they would be painting outdoors, different discussions and difficulties arose. As to be expected, some groups were less engaged in the actual work and spent time discussing their day at school or other things. While they sometimes needed to be reminded by the adults present of the time limitation for the day, all the groups managed to finish what they had set out to do at the beginning of the session. There was no need for discipline and the groups were mostly their own monitors in terms of accomplishing their goal.

Weeks Three, Four and Five: Painting Outdoors

During this time period the students went outside in the junior yard of the school to paint their designated panels. The students brought their sketches made on the butcher paper, which they had drawn in the gym, and had to use the same logistics, ingenuity and drive to complete their task. While the students had all sketched out two letters indoors, because of the time constraint they were only able to accomplish one outdoors. This left the senior yard panels to be painted by the artist, which was done on the night of the art gala using spray paint.

During the outdoor sessions the principal would often come and help direct the groups along with the two other adults, and the parent who was photographing the project would often engage with the groups and their questions or concerns. The groups were mostly self-directed and relied on themselves for critique and time management. The students were respectful of their own limitations as far as working and paying attention were concerned and would individually take breaks as needed. In this way they took responsibility for their actions as well their role in the environment which surrounded them. They would often look at what others were doing in order to help gauge their own performance. Comments such as; “Look how much they have gotten done. We need to work more or we aren’t going to finish” and “I want this to look good. I want to do something that no one else is doing” were indicative of the students focus and awareness of the time limitations and group management strategies.

The weather was perfect for an outdoor project and this allowed the students to work comfortably. Because of the accommodating weather the children from daycare were also out playing in the school yard while the students painted and this added to the

ownership the students vocally took over their work. As the first session outdoors went on groups of approximately two or three children from the younger grades would come over to watch what the groups were painting, attempting to figure out what they were writing and why it would be on the walls of the school. The younger children would whisper to each other comments such as “What does that say?” and eventually they began asking the groups “What are you doing?” Several of the groups responded to this form of audience by asking the younger children if they thought it looked good and if they liked it. The number of these interactions began to increase and by the second outdoor session one group member actually stopped painting and explained the project to one of the on-lookers. The explanation; “We are painting Bee Creative on the school for everyone to see so it can look good. We are working really hard. It’s going to be great when it’s finished. Do you like it?” The younger students immediately agreed it looked good and walked away talking to each other about what they thought of this.

This was a new experience for the entire school’s community but particularly for these cycle three students as they had never before been given the responsibility and challenge to represent themselves and their peers in a public setting; this while also respecting the space shared by all the school’s students while allowing themselves the freedom to choose the way they want to be represented. Placing freedom and responsibility in the same category of expected behaviour, the students developed in their awareness as active members of the community since their actions were directly and visibly affecting those around them.

The second week of the outdoor sessions was harder for the students in being able to see an end in sight and to feel accomplished in what they were working towards. They were proud of the concept but the actual reproduction of the art was beginning to become a difficult task for some students. "I can't do that. You do it." Often calling the artist over to try and convince him to do something which they judged as too difficult. "I don't know how to make it look like that (pointing at their sketches). Can't you just do it for me?" These remarks were in contrast to the pride with which they would talk about their art to the other students in the school yard. This also reflected their lack of experience both with the stylistic creation of graffiti writing as well as mural painting.

The second week also began in a rather disorganized manner which did not help the students with their own organizational abilities. The third week ran much smoother as, for example, all the paint has already been poured when the students arrived outside and immediately they were able to begin working instead of waiting in order to be able to begin their work. These details can be linked to classroom organization and group management based on specific age limitations, which were concepts mostly unfamiliar to the artist before this project actually took place. The principal noted that one of the main challenges with the project was organization and coordination, particularly given that this was a new project being developed. Aspects such as post-project clean-up and beginning the project on time could be taken into further consideration in order to ensure the project would run smoothly.

In the last outdoor session one of the most interesting initiatives was taken by every single group participating in the project. Without previous discussion each group decided to identify themselves by writing their names, or initials, on their panels next to

their work. This was particularly fascinating as it indicated the pride and ownership the students associated with their work and their spaces and this was done without suggestion or consultation with the artist, but rather within the groups.

Most group members decided to write their initials in a large format and some decided to circle them to make it more apparent. However, one group who followed the graffiti style chosen from the graffiti creator program more closely than any other group, had a lengthy discussion before anyone wrote their names. An excerpt from this discussion; “Don’t paint our names so big. It looks geeky. Everyone else did that and it looks bad. Let’s do it at the bottom, smaller. Then it won’t look like kids did it. Well I mean we did it but still” indicated that the students wanted to give a certain perception of the people behind the work, and that there was something negative associated with being assumed to be a ‘kid’ particularly in contrast to the graffiti culture. Imaging being thought of as geeky would be contrary to the feelings of self-confidence which seemed to have grown out of being associated with graffiti and its subculture as well as having been the recipients of an exclusive form of knowledge which is only privy to those who were seeking it. Picking up on this suggestion to represent the group members in the way they wished to be imagined, another group member volunteered to get a sharpie (marker), instead of using their paint brushes and their final product closely resembled the graffiti which can be seen in photos and throughout the city.

Another group took an entirely different approach to this deciding the importance of marking their names was not to in creating an image for themselves, but in their representation and contribution to the project at a certain point in history. “Guys this is going to be here in like ten years from now. We’re going to be like in college and then

people will come look at it and know the year we did it and that we were in grade six (aside from their names they also wrote the year and grade 6).”

Through the entire project the concepts of representation, importance of shared space, respect for those in a surrounding environment as well as taking pride in the work done developed both naturally as well as with guidance from the artist amongst the participants. Students had a distinct sense of awareness for urban art as they discussed and practiced themselves and grew within their ability to understand and define it through their own experiences. They would often come to the project showing the artist sketches they had made during the week, and also some of these drawings were displayed inside the walls of the school, which were hung up by the teachers. These were indications that the students and school community were internalizing the discussions and events which took place during the project and were integrating urban art into their school community as a positive practice for youth development as associated to the interest the students were showing.

Art Gala

The night of the art gala was important to this project and its participants for several reasons. It was the official unveiling of the students’ painting to the entire school community as the parents of all the children in the school were invited to come to the event. The mural had one panel which was painted by the principal in support of the students work. Her panel was the topic of much discussion amongst the students who were proud to know that she had contributed to their art project and represented the school in a way that the students could relate to. “Look, Miss (principal’s name) did

graffiti!” one of the students called out to her friends, but loud enough for everyone to hear. One of the groups approached me in order to be certain I was aware of this contribution. “Do you know who painted that one?” I was asked. When I said I was not sure I was answered “Miss (principal’s name) did. Doesn’t it look good? See how she did all the bees for (name of school)?”

Throughout the night of the art gala the artist who had run the project did a live painting (using spray paint) as part of the event. The event welcomed the guests in through the senior yard where he was painting, then all of the children’s artwork (every child in the school had one piece in the show) was on display in the gym and refreshments were served in the junior yard where the urban art project was officially being presented to the school community. There was also a video being shown indoors of all the photos which had been taken throughout the eight weeks documenting the different stages of the project and the progression.

The artist attracted as much attention while painting from parents watching as from the students. The crowd which had gathered around him throughout most of the evening were vocal about the fact that watching this take place was a first time experience for the majority of them. Students seemed to be in awe of the process, parents were curious and both remained fascinated by the skill involved in creating a piece of art which had remained a mystery to them until this project. “This is sick. This is unbelievable. We are so lucky. I have never seen anything like this” one student remarked to his friend. Several students who were too young to participate in the project but had been aware of it unfolding in the junior yard immediately noticed what was happening and made the link between his art and what had been done in the other yard.

“Oh cool mommy look, its spray painting! Awesome, huh? Like what the older kids did on the other side.”

Observing the interaction between the students and the parents was intriguing as the parents, for the most part, while interested in the art knew much less about it than their children did. Current popular youth culture has made a link with graffiti as a representational tool (visually recognized on television, in advertisements, on album art etc.) which would explain the connection and interest had by the students with respect to what the artist was doing versus that of the parents while watching him paint. Graffiti was not a popular icon for the majority of youth when these parents would have been growing up and this has created a gap in a generational and cultural understanding. However, by engaging with this art in a school setting it allowed for a change in the dynamic of understanding and broadened the students' knowledge, which in turn affected their parents as well. The education allowed members of society to go beyond the social construction of what graffiti is understood to be and allowed the art to evolve in its capacity to aid social progression and expression.

One parent, who was very enthusiastic about her daughter's involvement with the project, explained her commitment to discovering and supporting her daughter's interests. She stated that the project had left such an impression on her daughter and her friends that she has decided to let them design a section of fence in her backyard in urban art style and paint it the same way they had done at the school. In a simple act such as this, graffiti was able to become a tool for positive representation and ownership of space. Just as the students were devoted to properly representing themselves on the walls of the school, where others would also look, these girls will have the responsibility of creating

something they will want to look at everyday at home, and knowing that parents and neighbours will also be affected by its presence. Aside from this it also demonstrated the parents willingness to listen to what their children were discussing, as well as their ability to open up to new concepts as taught through school. In a school setting discussing graffiti became a more meaningful and in-depth experience for both children and parents as compared to discussion and learning from informal settings such as the media or social gatherings.

As the artist was painting, he stopped often to engage with the parents and students who were standing around him. While the students asked questions about the painting he was doing “How do you make the line so straight?” “Why did you bring a mask if you aren’t going to use it?” parents were discussing their early impressions of graffiti, before the project took place at the school. The artist was able to further the understanding of urban art and graffiti with the parents in the same way that he had done with the students in the context of this project. “It’s my responsibility to talk to these parents and help them understand what we are doing here. This is interesting because the education is happening on a different level now, the students are teaching the parents about graffiti through what we did in the project.”

The discussion between the parents and the artist centered on the positive impact of being involved with the project had had on the students in the program, in that they are all extremely engaged with the art and graffiti culture and talk about it constantly. “He used the graffiti stencils to sketch with at home and was really excited about what was happening at school” one parent told the artist after shaking his hand and thanking him for the experience. The event became another layer of the education about graffiti which

took place at the school and demonstrated further how graffiti can be used as a medium to effect positive social change and broaden cultural understandings, and on this night particularly between generations.

3.7 Interviews

The interview done with the students in the focus group style was an interesting chance to engage with the students and allow them to reflect on the experience they had. The project was considered to be a great success by the school's administration, teachers, parents and students and was considered a unique learning experience. During the focus group the one comment which was made by the principal was "I had a parent come up to me when you were about half way finished, you had started the painting but you hadn't finished yet. And a parent came up to me and said this is the best project that (name of school) has ever done. So you should be proud of yourselves."

As the students worked towards their goal and the reality of the mural they were creating came to life in the school yard, the word graffiti no longer felt like such a loaded term, whereas in the first week of outdoor painting one parent openly stated to the artist "I always thought graffiti was just that writing you see everywhere and that it was all illegal." While her child was trying to get her to leave she turned and said "Hang on a minute! Mommy is learning she was wrong about graffiti."

Given the socio-economic reality of this neighbourhood, the education which was taking place about graffiti seemed to make the art, subculture, message and strength in its community become much more real to both the students and the adults. In the interview students were very candid about their past perceptions of graffiti and how this has

changed throughout the project. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the student participants.

Peter: “I used to think it was only illegal and people just did it to break the law but now I think some people just do it because they can’t do it legally. Either they don’t have the means of asking or... they just can’t. And I realize that some people just do it because they are expressing themselves.”

Eric: “I liked it a lot because before I had a very bad impression of graffiti. That is was illegal and that only people in gangs did it. But when we did the project I was like wow this is fun and it’s legal too.”

Vanessa: “I think of it differently now. Before I thought that graffiti was just vandalism and stuff. But now I know that it can be more than that. It can be art too.

Norman: I say absolutely because I used to think of graffiti as terrible and disgusting but now I see that it can be beautiful when you put your heart into it and you do it legally.”

Through this growth the students also associated their school as the place which has allowed them and encouraged them to take part in a project like this, as well as giving the mural as a gift to the rest of the school’s community.

Harriett: “I like it cuz some of the younger kids are like oh did you do that? And they see our name there and they are all excited because they know someone who did something for the school.”

Vanessa: “Well I think it will change the feeling of some of the people who were doing the graffiti on the walls, the walls here that was illegal. I think they might think

that we worked hard on this cuz we really did and that they might decide not to do it on our property anymore.”

Nathan: “I found it was fun because we got to get together with our friends and make a letter that really represents the school.”

What also stood out for the students was the idea of being represented and being given a chance to leave a mark at the school for years to come. Taking pride in recognizing the accomplishment of completing the task which they set out to do seemed to fill them with a sense of responsibility to their community and a sense of pride that their school allowed them to represent themselves in a way which they had developed an understanding and appreciation towards.

Peter: “Well I don’t find going to school is any different but when I see what I did and what I helped other people do it’s sort of like huh, cool, I did that. And I sort of feel a little bit proud and that’s its going to stay there long past, well when I go to high school.”

3.8 Summary

Summarizing the observations made during this research it is clear that it was a very successful project for all those who participated. Given that there were no earlier projects with which to compare the experience it was difficult for me to quantify what the students learned. Given the context of how graffiti and graffiti culture is often discussed within the public domain this project was able to achieve some new and different understandings in the school’s community which was one of the most prevalent outcomes of the project. The students reflected on their new understanding of graffiti, as related to their urban art project, as very different from how they originally thought of it. The

concepts of empowerment and community practice and responsibility were also very important to these students as well as the process of identity development. These are all positive aspects of graffiti culture which will be reflected upon in the context of this particular learning experience.

In the following chapter, I present an analysis of the findings taking into consideration the main points discussed and contextualized in the relevant literature both about graffiti as well as education and identity development in youth.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction to the Analysis

This chapter discusses the findings which were outlined in the previous chapter as related to the literature reviewed in the second chapter. This comparison is done within the contextual framework which was provided in chapter three, regarding the school, its population and the student's perceptions with respect to graffiti and graffiti culture both prior to the project as well as after the mural had been completed.

As previously stated the purpose of this research was to investigate the possibility of creating a positive student identity, sense of belonging and ownership within a school community throughout the duration of an art project which used urban art/graffiti culture as a tool to help to achieve this. Using this popular culture phenomenon as a catalyst, dialogue between students about understanding and mutual respect in everyday life was welcomed. One aspect which became increasingly important as the project progressed was encouraging students to understand existing stereotypes concerning graffiti as often discussed in the media and then allowing the students to create their own understandings based on their experiences and conversations which they were able to then discuss in both a school and family setting. These concepts are reviewed with regards to the comments that the students made during observations and interviews. This is placed in comparison to comments made and recorded by well-known graffiti writers, particularly with concern for concepts such as personal image and active citizenry, as well as the process of developing a positive identity within a community.

4.2 Identity

“It had nothing to do with race or age or size or deformity... You *wrote*, you were a part of the culture, and it was beautiful” (LSD OM quoted in Bryan from Austin p. 52).

Graffiti shares common attributes with cultures as defined by Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1975) but it also shares attributes with the concept of a subculture. As described by Hebdige (1979) a subculture is a diversion from normalcy. Subcultures can often be perceived as negative as a result of their deviance from mainstream society. Graffiti when defined as a subculture follows this formula however this definition ignores the many layers of positive possible outcomes related to graffiti as discussed in chapter two. As seen in the opening quote, graffiti culture was built on a communal practice which may have had little to do with a set and accepted societal standard but was none the less based on individual growth by gaining recognition for oneself and representation through community membership.

Representation and pride as linked to participation in a unique experience and culture was prevalent in one student’s comment regarding his feelings on coming to school after the mural had been completed.

Nathan: I think it changes the message that the school gives out. Because when you go there you look at everything and you say ‘wow how beautiful.’ And they say most school’s to be original, but this school is beyond original it’s amazing.

The idea of being different from other schools became a source of pride for these students as linked to the use of urban art. Deviating from the look that most other schools in their neighbourhood use to identify themselves became a valuable experience in being able to create an identity based on chosen representation.

The principal of the school believed that the novelty of being the first elementary school to engage in such an ‘adult’ project was exciting for the students as well as engaging for them. She said “This gave them an opportunity to take something in hand at their own school and make it interesting and funky as it is an art that speaks to a younger generation. We approached them with the project speaking in an adult manner about the parameters of taking part in it. If they were given the skills to do this they would have to use it in a positive way. They took an oath not to tag their school or their community and it worked. We spoke to them in an adult manner and they responded in a like manner.”

When considering the concept of identity in this project the students who participated were pre-adolescent, and thus were beginning to explore their possible selves (Markun & Nurius, 1986) as related to their surrounding environments. This exploration with regards to the project took the students through different experiences with regards to themselves in school and in their personal lives. Through these different experiences and discussions students began to conceptualize an identity and autonomous persona from previous ideas and actions particularly with regards to graffiti. The postmodern conception of social identity is understood to be continuously evolving, never static but an on-going process (Gosine, 2008; presents Hall, 1996, 2000; Hebert, 2001), which in the case of these students will continue to become more complex as they identify with different social status groups throughout the course of their adolescent and adult lives. As will be discussed later in this case study, the early stages of identity creation have often resulted in certain social classes and races giving more authority to the voices of those in the dominant group. Through the early use of this type of project students, many from a ‘marginalized’ group, were given the chance to have a voice and as they said

several times in the focus group, to leave their mark for others to see and acknowledge their existence. Given the social class status of the majority of the participating students the marginalized portion of this population is based on student involvement and inclusion within the rest of the student body.

Alongside the recognized ability of giving the marginalized students at this school a voice, one unexpected outcome of this particular project was being able to promote awareness of other marginalized groups (based on recognized economic and social class standings) through the use of graffiti as a common interest amongst the age groups. Quantifying the experience at this particular school was different from projects done by the artist at other schools in less economically advantaged areas as he explains “The most important thing about this project became offering them (this particular group of students) a chance to look at a different part of society by taking something they think is cool and using it to show them a part of society they may have never thought about. Taking these kids and putting them into graffiti culture gives them the opportunity and challenge to create their own identity with no privilege.”

4.3 Positive Youth Development

As quoted in chapter two, graffiti writers SMITH and SANE clearly stated that had their art been accepted rather than labelled as an act of criminality then it most likely would have remained contained to where it was respected and appreciated. By turning this art movement into an act of criminality this solidified graffiti’s subculture status in a very negative sense and SMITH and SANE presented the idea of revenging their lost art works in retaliation with regards to the city wide power-struggle. Having no dialogue

between the two parties resulted in a lost opportunity for both sides to work towards creating a stronger community by including everyone.

In this particular case study in addressing both the positive and negative aspects of graffiti, and giving the students a chance to engage in a mural creation, the dialogue which ensued allowed for students and adults to feel respected and equally responsible for the environment and their learning. As Halverson (2010) outlined in her research the concept of positive youth development is built on the primary understanding that “when given adequate resources young people acquire and put to use constructive capacities that allow them to make a positive contribution to the civic realm” (Youniss & Hart, 2005, p. 73). While it is impossible to know with certainty whether SMITH and SANE’s predictions would have come true, using Yousniss and Hart’s logic and with regards to this research the outcome of this case study confirms such reasoning.

Further findings from this case study developed the possibility that the students grew with the new-found responsibility when contributing to their environment as active participants. With regards to other school property one unexpected outcome of the project was graffiti which had previously been spotted regularly in the boys’ bathroom disappeared after the project began. The principal was not sure which student, or students, were responsible for it, however once the artist was introduced to the students and these conversations were started, the bathroom markings stopped and did not start again. This aspect, which remained unknown to the artist until project completion, was proof of a desired outcome with regards to accountability and respect for shared space. The artist explained “I think they were being taught how to make comparisons, how to make responsible and educated decisions of what possible consequences could be. It was

important for them to be accountable for their actions throughout the project this way they were able to analyze and compare their experiences.”

4.4 Student Groupings and Positive Youth Development

Hebdige (1979) determined that the members of subcultures have similar mind-sets which are often based on being social outcasts or a marginalized portion of the population. Social outcast students have been recognized as feeling alienated from their academic institution. Alienation due to a lack of connection to the institution has been recognized as a problem with regards to student behaviour at all levels of education. “Strong social bonds to conventional settings, such as school, are seen as making delinquency less likely, whereas weak social bonds make delinquency more likely” (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984, p. 3).

The purpose of this project was not to combat alienation as a recognized problem in this school in particular, however some of the resulting factors can be linked to encouraging group work and tolerance amongst peers. Students, recognized by the adults as mostly on the outskirts of the popular students, seemed to enjoy this opportunity to spend time together socially while painting and were encouraged to contribute their ideas and to cooperate in this group dynamic, which supported an environment based on respect amongst the participants. Allowing the students to pick their own groups was a key factor in facilitating this positive experience. “Watching the kids in grades five and six, and letting them choose their own groups was interesting because they had cross-grade friends, particularly with some girls and the boys who didn’t fit in with the others in the group” the principal explained.

For marginalized or alienated students creating an identity and feeling of connection to an institution where this marginalization has occurred can be a serious and overwhelming challenge. As Halverson notes some arts-based organizations offer programs which are specifically aimed towards developing a positive youth identity take place separately from the academic institution and are the most successful. Putting this into context with this particular case study, this project took place in an after-school program which was outside of the actual curriculum and was able to exist as an arts-based, extra-curricular program. This offered students an opportunity to develop an awareness of their role as active participants in the community and to ensure that all other community members would be reminded of their presence and identity regardless of their status as compared to others, socially, physically, racially or economically. This was able to happen without facing the challenges of classroom management and discipline.

The ability of graffiti to connect its writers as a community was drawn upon in the second chapter and was articulated by the artist in that students from a multitude of backgrounds were able to benefit from participating in the project as it brought the students together. “Graffiti crews are made up of people who share a common interest and treat each other as equals. Within the crew everyone has their own responsibilities to get to the collective to the goal. The process and interaction is a positive experience. This is what took place with this group of students and it didn’t matter who did what amount of work in the group because they all got to claim ownership as a collective in the end.”

4.5 Stereotypes and Learning Through Practice

Graffiti was becoming serious. It had brought together all these nationalities, all these backgrounds. I wanted to let it be understood that you have a force here. It was bigger than cat-and-mouse chase. It was power. It's for us to have a say-so in what happens and what gets out to the public. We didn't have to go through channels.

(WARP, quoted in Wimsatt, 1994, p. 76)

In a good portion of the literature discussed in chapter two, for decades the media's choice of representation of the graffiti community depicted writers as delinquents, vandals, unruly and dangerous. The fact that these writers were members of the community who desired the responsibility to take part in the larger community was not often discussed and continues to be ignored presently. The actions of graffiti writers are not seen as their attempt to take part in society but rather are seen as a method of excluding themselves from society.

The students were candid about their past perceptions of graffiti which aligned with the overall negative stereotypes and they were able to contrast it with the current way they came to understand graffiti through their own practice as well as through their association with the artist.

Jeffery: I used to think it was a lot easier but now that we did it I know that it's actually really hard.

Harriett: I think of it differently now. Before I thought that graffiti was just vandalism and stuff. But now I know that it can be more than that. It can be art too.

Dustin: Well before I used to think that graffiti was illegal, kind of like something that only bad people would do. But now that some people are urban artists they actually do it legally without having to be arrested by the cops.

Anthony: I look at it differently now, I don't know if it will always be like this but while we were doing the project and we went downtown and stuff instead of being like oh it's just graffiti I'd say wow that's good.

Geraldine: I look at the bad stuff, like the stuff that is just black writing and I just don't like it as much as the detailed stuff. And I kind of feel bad for the people who do it in a nice way that they don't have permission yet to do it legally.

The stereotypes the students had developed prior to beginning the project were put into direct opposition through their individual experiences and discussions. The tools which they were offered throughout this experience were not only in the actual artistic development of the mural but then also in their cognitive awareness of an art movement which was able to be redefined in their daily lives.

“Out of 120 kids, one quarter signed up for this project. We reached a quarter of the cycle three students who have now been engaged in a positive way with urban art and in which to make decisions. When they go to high school and when they are making decisions in their community and their world they can use this experience as an early learning tool” explained the principal.

Erickson (2002) defined culture as identity created through shared (group) experiences. These students were able to develop within their own personal identities through the creation of something which occurred in a group setting and connected them to an existing culture as well as connected them to their own school community in a

positive way. These shared experiences were all a part of the process of creating greater understandings and tolerance which is a positive aspect of identity development.

The artist compared this experience with the experiences he had at several other schools, in less economically advantaged neighbourhoods. The identities which were developed by these students through their experiences were different from others, yet equally as important. “These students have more access to all kinds of experiences. This was something else for them to try whereas in the other schools the students seem to need it more because there wasn’t really anything else for them. No other way for them to express themselves. But what they learned is just as important, and that as a product of their environment they got the chance to open their ideals about other environments through graffiti.”

The transformative curriculum as defined by Banks (1991) engages students in critical thinking, which encourages students to make their own decisions based on their experiences. This can also be connected to Freire’s (1970) theory of praxis as connected to a liberation education. “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it.” (Freire, 1970, p. 56) While Freire’s work centered on the education of marginalized adults the theory of praxis and liberation is still applicable in this situation as through action and reflection concerning graffiti, the stereotypical representation and associations made concerning the culture and art changed throughout the course of the project. These students were liberated from the societal stereotypes and boundaries they had subconsciously developed. With this new knowledge they were able to further their growth in understanding, tolerance and development within their own communities.

Jeffery: Well when I drive by on the highway my parents always used to be like, well just drive by. But now like they're like oh look graffiti, you have taken part in that at your school. It's like yeah that's cool.

Antoine: My parents don't really look at the illegal stuff that they see but when they come here like after my classes they say oh can I see your letter and they say oh that's great. They are really proud.

Caroline: My mom was really interested in it through the whole project. And when my dad finally saw it they made me take pictures with it which was kind of annoying but it showed that he was interested in it

Working with an artist who is considered to be an expert in this field by way of experience and reputation was instrumental in facilitating student understanding and building on the positive aspects of graffiti culture rather than simply appropriating a trendy art form. This was able to take place mostly due to the artist's true devotion to the graffiti community to which he belongs as well as to the students whom he has a responsibility towards. In this way the students were able to make the connections between what they saw in their socio-cultural surroundings and what they experienced throughout the project.

His approach to this project was to let the group dynamic lead him towards any social goals which the project would tackle and to use with his knowledge of graffiti and youth culture to work towards accomplishing these goals. Filling the role of the change agent as described by Rowlands (1997) the artist was able to use his expertise to engage the students in praxis and to empower them with these new experiences.

4.6 Empowerment

Empowerment theory, as Mohajer and Earnest (2009) discussed Wallerstein's definition, broadly stated one version of empowerment as seen on page 9. While these students were a bit young to be able to vocalize their own desired goals, the process followed by the artist required him to wait and meet the group before deciding what the goals for the project should be. This enabled the experience to be relevant for the students with respect to their own social and cultural contexts. A finished artistic product was one outcome, but as Rowlands (1997) stated, empowerment is a process rather than a product, thus the process in which the artist journeyed through with the students was far more relevant to their individual learning experiences and ability to reflect on these experiences.

It has been noted by Tengland (2008) that the effects of empowerment are often difficult to measure, as they are emotional rather than factual. Rowlands (1997) named the core qualities of empowerment to be increases in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and of self in a wider context, and a sense of dignidad (being worthy of and having a right to respect from others) (p. 130) and in this case study the method used to attempt to measure and demonstrate these attributes was through reflection in the focus group.

In terms of increases in self-confidence and self-esteem there were many comments made about how the students felt very proud of themselves for the work they did and the accomplishment of finishing their task and improving their environment.

Peter: I would feel disappointed that people after seeing the work that we have put into it would still paint over it but I think that most people they would go with the

intention of putting graffiti and then be like wow these people did lots of work and they really tried to cover up everything else that didn't look good.

Lucy: Well I think it will change the feeling of some of the people who were doing the graffiti on the walls, the walls here that was illegal. I think they might think that we worked hard on this cuz we really did and that they might decide not to do it on our property anymore

Tess: Well my mom and my dad they were really proud of me when they saw what letter that me and (other student) did. And they were really proud of me they gave me a big pat on the back and they were really proud. And I was proud of myself.

Nathan: The artist, I found that he was really nice and encouraging and it seemed like he enjoyed watching us and his encouragement made me work the best that I could.

In terms of realizing themselves as a part of a greater context, the students seemed to become very aware that the art they were creating was affecting others in their environment, particularly younger students. Alongside this was the idea that they were beautifying the school and therefore felt this act should be noticed, appreciated and respected by others. This is understood within the context of their art being noticed by others as well as the possibility of being vandalized by others.

Dustin: I would feel really mad and disappointed because if they spray painted all over the school, well how would they like it if someone spray painted on their house? They wouldn't like it very much. So then why should they do it to other people?

Jordan: I like it cuz some of the younger kids are like oh did you do that? And they see our name there and they are all excited because they know someone who did something for the school.

This also tied into the idea of being worthy of respect from others, as the students pride in their work in their minds resulted in the right to being respected by those who had vandalized the walls to begin with. The effort they had all put in, and the reflection on their work led them to agree that their art and identities were worthy of respect.

Antoine: You know if they do paint over it, I would be angry yes but I would try to repaint and paint over it so that look: they painted over it but we're painting back over it and fix it up. You know if they come and paint over it again, then we will fix it up again and again until they stop.

Harriett: I would feel really bad because with all the work that we did it wouldn't feel nice to have someone paint over something that we tried to do.

Nathan: I would be sort of confused because who in their right mind would cover something up that we put weeks into doing?

Melanie: I would just think people have no respect. It's a beautiful art, why paint over it?

The students participating in this project thus began to think about positive versus negative change in their environment and reflect about how having their art and property vandalized would make them feel disrespected because they had inevitably taken ownership over their work. As they head into their teenage years, a time for a greater discovery of conflicting messages and emotions, this experience is one which they will be able bring to memory as an example of positively contributing to their community and still feeling represented. The informal education these students received was directly linked to expanding their understandings as related to their social situations as well as to the discovery of the greater social implications of graffiti.

4.7 Summary

The research participants in this project, namely the students, the artist and the principal, were all enthusiastic about being involved in this project and were open to being observed and interviewed about their participation. As the research questions discussed the concept of positive student identity in creating a link between their socio-cultural reality and their academic lives as well as ownership, representation and pride within the community and finally the ability to change preconceived notions through education, the use of graffiti culture and urban art seemed a useful tool in exploring these concepts. The possibility of a cross-generational education was present but far less prevalent than it could have been had the classroom teachers been further involved.

The challenges in this project were mostly related to logistical issues in terms of project organization and group and time management. There could have been further possibility to reflect on the students experiences had there been time for them to keep a journal. There also would have been further possibility for other educational concepts such as literacy and mathematics to be explored through the use of graffiti had the teachers been further involved. While there was no resistance from the teachers about discussing the project with the students who would ask them, there was no effort made to incorporate these new cultural dimensions into the classroom. This could have served as a further education for those not involved in the project not only about graffiti but also about the different geographical surroundings of the city.

The key findings in this research, as related to education theory and the graffiti culture were that empowerment and positive student development is possible in a project incorporating the positive aspects of graffiti culture with the help and guidance from an

expert in the field. Through the use of praxis the students were able to begin to have a clearer concept of this aspect of youth and popular culture, particularly as how it can broaden their understandings of cultures which were based on preconceived notions and stereotypes rather than personal experience.

While this art form may not have been classically defined as representational of these students socio-economic upbringing, the project was able to eliminate certain boundaries and bridge gaps in this understanding. As it was developed in an after-school setting the curriculum was able to be altered, depending on the needs of the students, which made the experience more beneficial and unique to this group. Being able to conduct this research was both fascinating and exciting as it was a learning experience for all who were involved and was based on the concept of making a positive social change. The concluding chapter discusses suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter I focus on the main findings of this study and suggest recommendations for the implementation of this program in an after school setting and for improvement based on the limitations of this project. Suggestions for further research and project development are then proposed.

5.1 Main Findings

In both the observations and the interviews with the students it was very evident that they were vocal and open about the pride they took in their work, and the importance they placed on the image portrayed through their mural which represented them both as individuals as well as members of the community. In learning about graffiti, which is an art form they recognized from their physical surroundings as well as the commercial spaces around them, they were able to access a different version of themselves, as connected to their daily lives in school.

Another aspect which became very important to the project was the exclusive form of knowledge which these students received and how they were able to reflect on the changes in their perceptions of graffiti culture as the project went on. This element was heightened by the organized discussions in which they were able to reflect on their actions by engaging in a dialogue about their experiences and to further consider their reactions.

Given this was the artist's first experience working with this age group of students he realized quickly that he was able to capitalize on the fact that this was the first contact these students were having with graffiti creation as well as graffiti culture. This enabled him to help them develop tools that could be used in the future as building blocks towards identity development within themselves and the community.

The main findings with regards to the adults can be summarized as understanding the ability graffiti culture could have as a tool for positive youth development and the relevance that urban art has for these students. The adults such as the parents, the teachers and even the principal to a certain degree, were able to learn this in an unobtrusive manner as observers to the project. The reactions by both the students involved as well as the adults confirmed the notion that the positive aspects of graffiti culture were able to be used to empower students in their daily academic surroundings as well as to promote the idea of respect within and outside of the school community.

5.2 Recommendations for Implementation

After observing this project develop through all the stages, it would seem that the most effective way to implement it would be to continue offering it in an after school setting. While it remains to be seen how this program would succeed in the classroom, there are several reasons upon which I base this recommendation.

Halverson (2010), notes that in order for positive youth development to have the best chances for success, programs are best implemented outside of the classroom. While her reasons for stating this pertain specifically to her research there is an important factor to consider as pertaining to graffiti culture with regards to this recommendation. Graffiti

has remained on the outskirts of normalized art because of its illegal nature and to institutionalize it in a way which would eliminate all the spontaneity, excitement, passion and dedication would be doing a disservice to some of the most notable aspects of this art form. Students should be motivated to participate in an art project of this style and if students are not inclined towards this then forcing them may only perpetuate negative stereotypes or feelings towards it. Through discussion a group who is willing may be able to begin changing in their understanding; however this can only take place when the students are ready to take part.

While it would be unfair to judge that this could not be able to take place if incorporated into the curriculum aside from this aspect, the most important factor to consider is who would be leading the activity. As previously discussed the role of the change agent is of the utmost importance in this project given the sensitive nature of the topic of graffiti. The person delivering this program must not only understand the dynamic of a classroom and have respect for an academic setting, but must also act as an ambassador for graffiti art and culture, as this introduction to the culture is instrumental when attempting to create new understandings, eliminate existing stereotypes and be a credible source for information through experience. Someone who has never done graffiti and has had no contact with its community would have a difficult time understanding the intricacies and complicated nature of the art as well as the relationships between those who write.

More specifically the nature of the questions which were asked by the students to the artist often had as much to do with the realization of their artwork as with the realities of actually being a graffiti writer. That is to say how writers are able to execute their

pieces, what certain pieces said if they were unable to make out the lettering and most importantly did the artist know the people behind the tags and pieces they often saw. Without the knowledge, experience and credibility to answer these questions the students may be less inclined to take the ideals behind the project seriously.

That being said, if this change agent was able to take this knowledge and experience into the classroom perhaps the context of classroom learning would be able to altered enough in order to respect the dynamic nature of the graffiti culture as well as respecting the nature of the academic environment. Also, it is important to remember that given the social realities of this particular school, an after school setting worked well as the students were capable of being left to work alone in their groups with no need for disciplinary action or increased supervision. If the students were facing difficulties in terms of their behaviour or other issues, a classroom setting may be more conducive to keeping the project contained and well monitored. For this reason it is impossible to create any generalizations based on the findings of this research, however with regards to implementation it is best to be able to alter the circumstances in a case by case scenario.

5.3 Suggestions for Improvement

Since this project was a first time experience for the students, the principal, the school community as well as the artist there is a lot which can be learned from this undertaking. Despite the fact, that as previously mentioned, this research would not be capable of creating generalizable findings, there are some adjustments which could be made regardless of the context which could improve the overall experience.

A first recommendation would be to follow the initial plans of having the students keep a record of their thoughts and feelings throughout the project. In order to improve the potential for praxis, it would be ideal to have concrete ideas and memories recorded. In order for this to be a possibility the time block dedicated for the project would need to be either extended or the length in weeks be extended in order to give adequate time for everything to be accomplished. It would be particularly interesting to encourage students to keep sketch books where they would be able to draw and write throughout the week as well, to get a different perspective on the ways in which they chose to represent and record their experiences independently from their groups. Following this line of thought it would be interesting to offer the project more than once a week, in order to heighten the intensity of the possible outcomes.

Another recommendation would be to involve the classroom teachers more, in order to make the project more accessible to those who are unable to participate in the painting aspect. While there was some involvement in this school, it may be useful to encourage a dialogue in the classroom between students in order to share and discuss the knowledge which comes along with the experience. In this way, students participating in the painting aspect would also be able to bring their knowledge into the classroom and teach their peers, potentially increasing their sense of self and agency in the greater context of their classroom, and this is one of the outcomes of empowerment programs as discussed by Rowlands (1997). Also the concept of being worthy of respect would become increasingly prevalent if taken into a classroom context, in which the sense of belonging and pride as was discussed by the students in the interview, could be furthered

in the way of encouraging a discussion lead by the students and addressing their particular interests and needs.

Furthering the possibility of including the project with greater importance in the classroom, teachers may also see an improved relationship between themselves and their students when making the attempt to understand and respect this aspect of youth culture. As mentioned in the first chapter, Iziarry's (2009) research concerned incorporating elements of the hip hop culture into the classroom as a successful way of creating a meaningful connection between students and their teachers. This seems to be potentially relevant in this context, yet the teachers would have had to take it upon themselves to educate themselves about graffiti culture in order to find ways of appropriately incorporating it into the classroom. Since this did not take place in this project it seems like this could be a method of improving the outcome in the way that it becomes all encompassing for the school's community and can potentially help build a bridge between two different generational realities. In what was demonstrated in this project the generation gap which exists, particularly with relation to graffiti art and culture, is wide. It could be a very positive experience and outcome to begin creating an understanding in that way.

As far as the organization of the project is concerned something which could be vastly improved upon would be the logistical aspect of setting up and then cleaning up the materials used. Particularly, given the age range of the children participating in this project, when the students are waiting around for things to be prepared they quickly lose focus and interest in what they were meant to be doing. This is not an indication of their dedication to the project, but rather of their age and concentration ability in this context.

Being outdoors in the schoolyard, when the sun was shining, there was a lot of energy circulating which quickly lead to some difficulties in group management. Therefore being prepared to begin right away, and having an adult keep track of time in order to be sure they will be able to clean up after themselves would be a suggested improvement.

One final suggestion, which can be linked to the organization of the project, would be to have more than one artist circulating between the groups. Finding another graffiti writer to go around and help the students as well as discuss their questions or concerns would surely be appreciated by the students, who many times would be waiting between fifteen to twenty minutes to ask the artist a question. Because their questions were a large part of their educational experience concerning graffiti culture, the more they have a chance to discuss and reflect, the greater the outcomes of this experience will be.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Given that this project was an early development in this form of research there are many aspects to these ideas which can be built upon and further developed. The possibility of attempting this project within the classroom setting would be the next step in developing this project and researching what true possibilities there are to expand these concepts and ideas. This would require quite a bit more preparation and focus as far as both the artist and teachers are concerned. There would have to be a more closely followed plan for action and outcome, as well as options for the students who found themselves disengaged with the topic.

In order to further research the possibility of incorporating this project into a classroom it would also be imperative for a researcher to be in the classroom when the teacher is alone with the students attempting to either discuss graffiti or implement an activity. In this way it would be possible to see what options teachers have in terms of facilitating without being an expert on the topic.

Other possible avenues for research would be to attempt this project in a school within a different socioeconomic standing. There is an entirely different perspective which may exist given the students and their community and their perceptions towards graffiti as well as themselves. There is also the possibility of painting inside the school, and to determine what different reactions there would be regarding a large graffiti mural inside the school walls, which are inescapable. These are all possibilities which could build on the foundation which was created throughout this project with positive identity development and respect at the forefront of this educational experience.

As we move forward in attempts to encourage students to explore their world and create their own meanings out of important experiences, being able to bring this vibrant art and subculture into a school context demonstrated the possibility of creating new understandings and approaching new topics within an academic setting. In being able to move past what messages the media generates students had a unique opportunity to see and experience the realities of the graffiti culture as well as the possible outcomes of using any tool they may be presented with in the future in a positive and constructive manner. As positive potential outcomes related to graffiti culture were the main objective for both the artist as well as the administration, this project could be considered a success

and there are now many ways this project can be implemented and researched further as a valuable experience and relevant learning opportunity for students of all ages.

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APPENDIX 1

2010 Press Release

For Immediate Release

Montreal, QC- July 2010

The (Name) Graffiti Convention 2010 True School

When old school meets new school generations can thrive off the experience, ingenuity and knowledge of those who have come before. Educate yourself at the 15th annual (name) graffiti convention.

Celebrating the 15th edition of the **(name) Graffiti Festival**, convention organizers persevere to inform the general public about the ever-growing phenomenon of graffiti in their city and to further the education process reaching out to those younger generations showing interest and seeking knowledge. Drawing in thousands of international spectators and artists each year, all are invited to witness the vision that is North America's largest graffiti festival. For those who have worked towards this evolution and bringing up the new generation, there is a profound belief in the ability of this art form to elevate youth to a higher standard of acceptance, self-awareness, mutual respect and recognition. The power of graffiti then lies not in a stencil or a can of spray paint but in those who possess the experience and knowledge of years past and trains painted to pass on the ethics, wisdom and community values held in this particular form.

After some major in-house restructuring, this year has marked a unique struggle for (name)'s infamous summertime weekend. Luckily, this has pushed event organizers towards new goals - taking a tight crew of dedicated people with these goals in mind: building integrity and developing education. Festival organizers have been forced to re-think, re-structure and re-involve the community with the event, focusing on the concept of respect for shared spaces, empowerment and ownership for everyone involved. "We are trying to figure out how to make the festival relevant to the younger generation who will help carry it through the next decade" says festival co-founder (name), "we feel we can reach that market if we create new initiatives."

(Name) has decided to take his knowledge and dedication towards positive social change one step further this year in collaborating in the creation of a school-based curriculum in

which students at both the primary and secondary levels are introduced to graffiti and urban art as a means of identity discovery, creation and valorization with respect to the shared space of a school community. Through discussion and painting (name) has the rare and unique opportunity to address issues of social justice, legal legitimization, identity and respect, all issues which will be continued to be addressed at this year's edition of the festival. All who have the opportunity to participate in these programs become the recipients of an exclusive form of knowledge and education which relates not only to the current youth culture but also to a form of expression which has grown in its validity and recognition through the generations who have come up through it.

In years past the main objective was aimed towards educating the public and city officials on the subject of graffiti, while showing young people that Montreal is not simply about repressing the art form. After working hard towards building solid relationships with the city, (name) has been able to act as the bridge between those who write and appreciate graffiti and those who are disengaged from the entire culture. Taking on this important responsibility (name) was able to successfully organize the artistic processes of the Bombe sur La Main event, which took place in May 2010 and was aimed towards raising public awareness of graffiti as urban art, as well as claiming an important space in the city for increased visibility of an art form which continues to grow in its potential as a voice for those who remain anonymous yet outspoken. These types of initiatives also serve as a voice of support and recognition for (name), as the festival has the been the strongest movement in creating positive recognition and respect for the graffiti culture in(name of city).

As we strive towards positive change and influence on the community at large many boundaries must be crossed and a new lens must be developed with which to understand the message that comes from the painted walls. As the 15th year of (name) speaks to the importance of creating new alliances and the strength and impact of an educated community, all are invited to enrol in the TRUE SCHOOL this year and build a foundation with which to understand and appreciate the art that we are all surrounded by.

APPENDIX 2

Family seeks answers in teen's mysterious death

Updated: Mon Nov. 30 2009 4:08:08 PM

ctvmontreal.ca

The family of a 19-year-old man whose body was pulled from the St. Lawrence River is seeking answers.

Brian Kachur had dinner with his mother on Nov. 14. A graffiti artist, he then went out to do some tagging, and was never seen alive by his family again.

The next morning, his body washed up on shore, a few kilometres from his home in Verdun.

With no suspects, Kachur's family is hoping someone will come forward to help solve the crime.

"My baby brother... I don't know how I'm going to survive without him. I just don't know," said his sister, Laurie Ann Kachur.

The police haven't revealed too much information on the young man's case, other than that they know his death was criminal.

"The autopsy revealed the man had been murdered and there were traces of violence on the body," said Montreal police Const. Daniel Lacoursiere.

The only clue, they say, is an unfinished graffiti tag a few hundred metres from the shoreline.

"Brian always finishes his graffitis. Always," said his sister.

Blood was also found near the scene, but police so far haven't confirmed to whom it belongs.

Kachur's family said the teenager was a regular marijuana smoker. Also, despite being prescribed Ritalin to treat his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, he refused to take it. He seemed at a crossroad, said Laurie Ann.

"He was trying to find a job he would like. He was sketching, he was trying to find if he wanted to go as a cook, or an artist or as a singer. He didn't know," she said.

For now, Kachur's family simply wants justice.

"Brian's biggest fear was to go to prison and all I want for the murderer is to go to prison and rot there," said Laurie-Ann.

Brian Kachur's family is asking anyone with information to call Info-Crime at 514-393-1133

APPENDIX 3

