

Finding Identity:
Marginalized Teens and Their Allies Creating Alternatives and Possibilities for Educational
Change Through Stories and Art as Pedagogic Actions

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Abstract

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In this Master's thesis, I looked at an alternative program as part of a Montreal inner-city high school, and explored through the use of narratives, both textual and visual, the participant's situations as disenfranchised students, teachers and administrators. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, a total of six participants, including myself collectively became active agents of social change by employing reflexive approaches to this research in order to foster a sense of advocacy.

In so doing, I gained a researcher a new and better understanding of alternative programming in the public educational system, and the role of the arts within it. Finally, in using letter writing as creative form, I engaged participants to think critically about their identities as students, teachers, and researchers, thus democratizing the notion of pedagogy and public curriculum.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family, Maurice, Christine, Cyrille and Maité, and Julia for providing me unconditional support throughout this incredible journey. I love you all so very much.

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I wish to thank my supervisor Anita Sinner for her guidance, words of wisdom and for always reminding me to trust the process. In the making, you have helped me to find my own voice, and I am truly thankful for your support. Anita, you are the truest and finest definition of a mentor. I wish to thank MJ, and Richard, for your support and continuous encouragement. I would like to thank Julia for your love, kindness and support throughout this research continues to echo within my heart. I would like to extend my gratitude to Lynne and Pierre, for trusting and supporting me, to Phil, for always being there for me, and, to my WOTP colleagues, Mr. Tonin and Mr. Kazamias, for showing me how to teach with heart. Lastly, I wish to thank all of the students in the WOTP program, for without you, I would not be the person I am today. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Self, Allies and Pedagogy

The purpose of this research is to investigate the scope of learning dynamics taking place in a Montreal inner-city high school and to reflect on students, teachers and administrators' stories and art as pedagogic actions. Primarily, John F. Kennedy High School's specialized program, the Work Oriented Training Pathways, hereafter referred to the WOTP, is home to students with diverse learning disabilities. My research study seeks to investigate the learning and educational discourses of the students and their allies based on their experiences of partaking in such program. The WOTP program has created many opportunities for its learning community, and I seek to inquire into the stories of students, teachers and administrators with specific attention on their personal art experiences with and during their participation in the program in the fall of 2016, and finally, how being in this art program has benefited their learning, should this be the case.

This research project stems from my personal interest in working with marginalized populations, but most specifically high school adolescents in the public educational context. In this thesis, I will explicate in detail the motives for examining this learning setting by bringing forth the literature that underpins this inquiry, mapping the methodology employed, elaborating on the research findings before finally suggesting the educational significance of having conducted such adventurous scholarly endeavour.

To begin, this study mirrors an ever-growing passion of mine. I continuously seek ways to help marginalized teens discover or redefine their potential in the arts as well as to encourage their well being through the construction and reinforcement of their identities as artists and committed social individuals. Having done extensive work in previous years with the students of the WOTP program at John F. Kennedy High School, I have come to understand that the

learning and teaching dynamics that occur in this particular setting are quite different than most 'regular' school programming. As such, this research will aim to unveil the teacher-student interrelationships and uncover how the role of the educational ally takes shape. Working alongside a variety of participants, this research will enable me to build advocacy in education by investigating how students, teachers and administrators of the WOTP view how their identities as artists and individuals, and how these identities are shaped and developed in relation to each other in this setting. Furthermore, this inquiry will bring forth an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences through stories as art and pedagogic actions. To address this area of inquiry, I will survey the teaching praxes and paradigms embedded in the WOTP program by asking teachers, students and administrators to share their recollections and memories of the program as it development to provide the historical context. This will allow for educational and critical reflexivity upon the mechanics of teaching visuals arts with a disenfranchised population of a Montreal inner-city high school.

During my time as a teacher at JKF, the WOTP students and I explored a multitude of art projects using a wide array of art techniques and conceptual frameworks. In conducting such artistic endeavours, I embedded into the activities strong project-based social constructivist pedagogy by exploring letter-writing as a literary art form. In turn, the actual learning by my students was evidenced in the powerful letters as stories that speak of their creative and conceptual aptitudes. This thesis project seeks to examine and interrogate the scope of learning dynamics that induce WOTP learners into meaningful, project-based learning through art practice. I am guided by three core questions: 1) *How does having a project-based pedagogical approach in art programs for disenfranchised teens affect the students' abilities to build on their identities?* 2) *What becomes of the educator in project-based pedagogy in special programs for*

marginalized teens? And 3), how does participation in a project-based art program help define their emerging identities as artists?

It is important to note that the questions presented above reflect an interrogation of the teaching and learning dynamics that have surfaced through the employment of project-based pedagogical approaches from my experiences working with the students of the WOTP. I understood that every learner in the particular program was facing learning challenges; some being more pronounced than others and therefore the educational philosophy, teaching styles and pedagogical praxes had to be developed in such a way that students would feel the program and the guiding educational discourse is specifically tethered to their individualistic learning needs in hopes to better their meaningful, and critical learning opportunities.

Reflections on my educational path: Finding my own identity

The many experiences I have lived created opportunities for self-reflection of my identity as an artist and teacher-researcher. Today I understand that my upbringing has been a unique journey, in part because of movement across multiple geographies. I was born in France, where I resided in the city of Lyon with my parents, brother and sister. My parents worked while my siblings and I went to school and experienced France's educational system. I did not perform well in school. I was always a mediocre student that was merely 'getting by.' My childhood experiences in France regarding pedagogy were discouraging and limited. During these years, France's educational system made it so all of my classes were teacher-centered, providing a stage for the educators to dictate the learning that occurs in the classroom. Except in art. I recall quite vividly my art classes, and the various projects we took on as students because of the

engaging, collaborative and constructive nature that took place in the art classroom. I remember specific projects, places and people that were part of my learning of the arts at a very young age.

Today I look back at my experiences in art education when I was in France, and reflect deeply on the teaching styles that were employed by the school educators. From the way that the desks were setup to the delivery of teaching, I chose to be mindful of all the factors that constitute a de/constructive pedagogical praxis for teaching adolescents and all population and in fact, for my own teaching practice. These experiences have greatly shaped my interests in critical pedagogy and curriculum studies (Aoki, 1978; 1983; 2004) for which I continuously seek to explore and research to further investigate the mechanics of teaching.

When my family left France and migrated to the United States in a small city called Allentown, Pennsylvania, to be precise, a dramatic turning point took place in my youth for a multitude of reasons for which I will explicate in depth. I must note that the lived experiences of my youth became an incremental tool for interpreting critical pedagogy today as I seek to unfold the many and complex forms that art education took in my life. When we arrived in Pennsylvania, I for the first time experienced a true culture shock. The United States (US) was unlike anything I ever encountered; it was meant to be a true opportunity for learning, growth and self-development. From the moment I arrived, I was sure to make the most of my experiences in this foreign country.

My eagerness to explore and learn in this new land was largely self-motivated to overcome any obstacles that could come my way. One of these obstacles was the fact that I did not understand English, leaving me to be literally on my own when I started my education at the middle school level. As well, this was only scratching the surface; the way that the school implemented the curriculum was quite different. From a change of classroom hours and schedule to a drastically

different ethos and culture. I quickly felt the presence of my identity at this school diminish over the months. Moreover, I had much difficulty keeping up with my academics, since understandably, I was preoccupied learning the English language. During my relatively brief stay in middle school, I began to experience discrimination and bullying which pushed me to seclude myself from the rest. These were difficult times in my youth. I desperately sought to belong to a social group where I would have friends and acquaintances, but this proved extremely difficult, as I was often the outcast from most groups because of inabilities to express myself.

This series of events repeated often and I became truly alienated from productive and bright learning opportunities in the middle school I attended. I felt awful, utterly self-conscious and most of all, I imagined myself never amounting to anything in life. This private educational institution I was privileged to attend nurtured elite students and helped them succeed through intensive teacher-centered education. As a result, I often felt as if I was forgotten about by my teachers, and eventually I fell through the cracks of the educational system. I could not keep up with the assignments and tests, and in time, I was expelled from the school for my poor academic performance.

When I was forced to leave this institution, I entered a local public school where much of my art practice started blossoming as a form of self-expression. At this point in time, I was part of the public school system, where this educational institution provided me with opportunities such as clubs, and music groups, where I could finally befriend other teenagers, who like me, sought to find themselves within society. As such, we bonded over visual arts, in all of its complexities. The school I attended, albeit different from the French educational system, felt as it would provide more possibilities for my academic career than the previous middle school I had attended. These possibilities took shape as the classes were broader, with more diverse students

in classes, and more classes offered across curricular subjects and in some ways, this setting provided a more realistic account for creating a tangible future through meaningful schooling. Henceforth, I grew to belong within the educational institution. My classmates became close friends and through them, I was able to find support in developing my penchant for the visual arts.

This time became pivotal for me as an adolescent; I connected to visual culture, and specifically to tattoo art. I remember my peers and me sketching after school, constantly seeking ways to refine and redefine our interest in tattoo culture and its many forms of designs. My appreciation for this particular art was deeply encouraged by my friends. Tattoo art was not specifically discussed within school, and especially not as part of the curriculum. It was clear to me that the lack of conversation, and consideration for such an art form drove my curiosity to practicing, professional tattoo artists, and one in particular was keen on sharing this realm with me. Our conversations of tattoo art made me feel I was connected with the community, and in the process, I learned about a creative outlet that inspired me to draw more and redefine my artistic abilities further.

Several months later, I learned that my family and I had to relocate to Canada. After hearing this, I was devastated since it had taken much time and hardship to finally become engaged and part of my school community. This became a difficult time again, where I knew so little of Canadian culture. By the end of the summer, my family and I were now residing in Montreal, Quebec, where I felt as if I was a complete stranger to this city, despite the French language. I had to quickly adapt to a new educational system, curriculum and indeed culture that was unfamiliar to me. Upon the start of my schooling, I had one year to study before enrolling to college, which seemed to be the path everyone chose even though I did not have a clue as to

what it really was or why I wanted to go there. As such, I felt again as a stranger aimlessly going through the mechanics of high school.

Barely a year later, I graduated from high school in Montreal and I was now pursuing my studies in college. I was now enrolled in a social studies program, where I eventually dropped out because of my lack of interest in the specific program. I felt as if I never had any points of entry into the program, and thus could never engage with the course load. Understandably, college is meant to be a space where students can excel and start their academic careers in the field of their choice, acting as responsible young individuals.

During this stage in my life, I was discovering the city of Montreal, getting around to meet people and building a network of friends, and education became irrelevant. However, I gradually gained interest in a program offered in a private college, which combined art with technology. It was clear to me that enrolling in such program would allow for my interests and abilities in the arts to resurface and manifest themselves once again. I returned to art once more. While taking a drawing course during my studies, my views on what art education meant suddenly changed when I learned from Laurent: an educator, who was a passionate, practicing and incredibly skilled artist, that this area of study was broadly based and all-encompassing of interests. His demeanour, knowledge and artistic interests were remarkable and kept me engaged throughout the course. To this day, I am convinced, and truly grateful for this artist-teacher who invited me to advance my artistic practice, and in the process, develop my initial ideas on teaching praxes.

Laurent has left a great impression on my understanding of good art pedagogy. He was able to display the professionalism it takes to be a successful artist, while helping his pupils comprehend the significance in conceptual creativity and instilling in his learners the desire to

acquire art techniques and methods. Using a student-centered pedagogical approach, he was able to help me find myself further as an artist and encouraged me to pursue my career in the arts.

Several months later, I had then decided to apply to a university institution where I could learn the arts more extensively, and in time, graduating with post-secondary degrees in Art education, and an collegial degree in special effects for video games. I have always enjoyed learning, but it seemed that schools in my youth made it a difficult task to undertake. The greatest disappointment was, in my opinion, the lack of involvement from the administration and teachers who unjustly disassociated me from meaningful and critical learning opportunities others were provided.

It was in this context that I realised my ability to succeed was in part due to those I call allies to my educational path. The individual artists and teachers who have gone above and beyond what was surely expected of their duties, and their sense of public service as pedagogues, administrators and mentors. I firmly believe that they have contributed immensely not only to my development as a student, but also to my sense of belonging in a time of culture shock and undeniable vulnerability. These allies have invited me to think critically about the educational implications of my academic pathway, and helped me to criticize educational normalization (McLaren, 2016) that I believe does a disservice to many young individuals in today's society through conformity and standardization of education.

Embracing the artist-teacher: Becoming allies for newer generations

Today I work for a non-profit organization that aims to counter Quebec's student dropout rate, and I am employed as an Art Project Coordinator, given the task to design the curriculum taking into consideration a multitude of art projects that 'at-risk' students may connect with, and

thus become encouraged to pursue an academic path. Through my work, I have been able to observe and understand the various dynamics that take place in the school system and thus realize that as art educators, we could implement new initiatives to help marginalized teens succeed in our schools.

As the WOTP's Art Project Coordinator, I teach the students on a weekly basis a wide array of artistic projects that aim to help forge their identities and become engaged and contributing members of our learning community. In my teaching praxis, I employ social constructivist approaches where I believe that "...individuals seek to understand of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). In my practice, social constructivism can be defined as "...individuals that seek that develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). I maintain a profound interest in working with youths and helping them to work collaboratively, with a goal of creating a community of inquiry (Kay, 2000; Carey & Sutton, 2004) and to challenge them to expand their technical and conceptual knowledge of art.

With this said, my personal academic journey has informed me that education, may at times render students passive and disengaged with the curriculum (Freire, 2005; McLaren, 2007, 2016; Kincheloe, 2012). Educators have the ability to create significant changes in students, administrators and parents' perception of pedagogy, and it becomes imperative that we, as a learning community of teachers, shift the educational paradigms that have been overshadowed by capitalistic school systems (McLaren, 2007; Kincheloe, 2012). In working for various organizations and learning art education at the university level, I believe I have come to appreciate the mechanics of teaching art in a Canadian educational system.

For me, allies offer an allegiance to belong, and in the process create significant differences. They are the indisputable partners of learning. Gibson (2014) provided a grounding

definition of the term ‘ally’ claiming that “Allies are members of dominant social groups [...] working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based upon their social group membership” (p. 200). From my recollections, allies have the ability to foster the learning of many youths, and especially those deemed ‘at risk,’ by creating an inclusive learning community whereby all students can develop a critical understanding of their visual literacy. Furthermore, allies open alternate learning avenues and opportunities for students, and we must recognize and embrace the educational potential that they supply youths. Allies are not only teachers. I understand many of my colleagues, who may not directly teach for a profession, to be active and engaged cultural educators that have the well-being of students in mind by continuously providing learning opportunities.

At the WOTP for instance, the teachers and myself have taken on a wide array of art-based projects leading up for several art exhibitions, including one that took place in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (2015). In so doing, our learning community progressively grew in breadth and depth, where we met educational officers as even more allies that expanded our understanding of the arts and sponsored our various artistic endeavours. Not only did they help and better our disposition and general knowledge of arts in diverse ways, but they, as allies, became truly familiar with what mattered in the lives of our learners and understood the WOTP program ethos, thus providing the WOTP learning community extensive, in-depth field expertise and shared great compassion on our forays helping us to redefine our concept of community.

This long and sometimes gruelling learning journey has brought me to my research intent, and provided me with a rationale that matters, with a project and questions solidly rooted in the lives of students.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Perspectives

“As long as we can formulate visions, possibility persists” (Kincheloe, 2012)

In this chapter, I will bring forth a host of perspectives in literature that underpin this inquiry, and unpack the texts that have greatly contributed to my praxis as teacher-researcher, which in turn, informs this research study. By examining such texts, I will deliberate on the objectives, ideals and criticisms that relate to notions of critical pedagogy by taking up key concepts of the banking system, liberatory pedagogy, social and educational innovation in an effort to make my case. I believe it is imperative that we, as a community of educators, thoroughly understand the teaching-learning dynamics occurring in our schools. It becomes our obligation to act as critical social agents of the educational system and to develop our praxes to better our students’ perception of education. Through my experiences in working with the WOTP program, it is evident that new and cutting-edge teaching approaches can and should be implemented in our schools and community sites to address the diverse learning needs of all students, including a discourse of practicality, which for me means to include a teaching and learning agenda that is applicable to the real-world. The latter can be described as learning contexts that are very much intended to benefit the student’s well-being and foster the student’s ability to think critically while providing learning opportunities that are applicable to real-life situations, and tether such provocative notions to a curriculum that breaks the normalization of disengagement for ‘at-risk’ youths.

The term ‘at-risk’ has a wide array of meanings and can be difficult to grasp because of its loosely defined characteristics, and thus such terminology is never neutral. For this research endeavour, I sought to unpack the term ‘at risk’ in the context of my research site, and for the purpose of this study I define ‘at risk’ as “those who have not found a way to integrate into the

general educational system. Sometimes school isolates them” (O’Thearling & Bickley-Green, 1996, p. 20).

My lived experiences have without question impacted my teaching philosophy as well as my understanding of working with a community of learners, and so it is especially important to me to continue to highlight that as a result, many of these talented individuals are often seen as being ‘troubled’ and therefore immediately stigmatized, much as Stinson (2009) suggests. My program of study is rooted in the works of many scholars that have notably contributed to a rich body of knowledge of social change in Western culture. From a social constructivist, critical pedagogy and post-structuralist perspective, these critical and curriculum studies theory writers, including Freire (1972, 2005); Foucault (1997b); hooks (1994, 2005); Aoki, (1978/80, 1983); McLaren (2007, 2016); Giroux (2009) and Kincheloe (2012), whom I present here are central to this research endeavour by raising attention and pressing the social imperative of teaching and learning.

Scrutinizing the banking system

To begin, I turn to Freire (1972/2005) and notions of the pedagogy of the oppressed, where learning occurs as students become co-participants of the action of studying and learning along with the teachers. In his text, Freire highlights philosophical and practical concepts that aim to examine further the notion of critical pedagogy. As such, he deliberates the concept of the banking system that is oppositional to liberatory pedagogy, which in the latter, he keenly advocates for a greater and more critical take on education. In critiquing a banking system that can still be found in today’s schools, Freire noted:

In reality, we do not have children who drop out of school for no reason at all, as if they just decide not to stay. What we do have are conditions in schools that prevent

them from coming to school, or prevent them from staying in school (Freire, 2005, p. 10).

Freire opens a conversation regarding the vital role of reflexivity as a method of interrogating the learning and teaching dynamics that takes shape in our schools. As such, my experiences working in a Canadian secondary high-school setting have in fact enabled me to see the realities of today's educators, their teaching praxes and the effects that various instructional strategies have on the students in current times. To further interrogate such context, Freire's notion of the banking system (1972/2005) criticizes the teacher-student dynamics occurring in the classroom where knowledge is passed down from the teacher to the students in a hierarchal fashion. In other words, "[b]anking education is monological, problem-solving and constituted by teachers' views of the world" (Beckett, 2013, p. 50). Today, this teaching model is still very much employed in our schools and it is imperative for educators to become reflexive of their teaching praxes while renegotiating a new space for learning in the classroom, through the use of newer, and cutting-edge instructional strategies such as letter writing (Sameshima, 2008) to better engage the students in critical learning.

This is especially important as today's school often still employ teacher-centered pedagogical approaches that may often alienate those who do not conform well to hierarchical models of delivery, or learn best from alternate methods including visual or sensory learning. Furthermore, this didactic approach causes students to withdraw from the educational discourse. Freire (2005) noted, "we must remember that there is a dynamic movement between, thought, language, and reality, that if well understood, results in greater creative capacity" (p. 3). When discussing hierarchies in the educational context

that are rooted in the banking system, Kincheloe (2012) laments the inefficacy of poor teaching and most importantly the inexcusable effects that unquestionable, top-down context of education has on our youths whereby students become actively disengaged. Kincheloe (2012) claimed, "...studies suggest that once top-down technical standards are imposed, students become progressively disengaged from the process of learning" (p. 6).

It is important to note that this teacher-centered mode of education is arguably a fundamental deskilling of teachers by creating an overemphasis on the standardization of pedagogy. As well, such an imposition on practice effectively violates the pedagogical principle that educational experience should be logically tied to the degree of social investments with, and in the learners (Kincheloe, 2012, p. 7). Throughout my time teaching at John F. Kennedy's WOTP program, I began to understand the nature of the learning equation by familiarize myself with the ways students were learning that were different than traditional classroom experiences. When I began teaching, it was evident that there was a special 'type' of learners whereby a student who falls under this type, would automatically be sent to the WOTP. By investigating further, I was informed by my colleagues that many of the students enrolled in the WOTP are those who act out in the regular program and become highly problematic for educators to teach. Therefore, teachers of the regular program send many students who are coded (and fall under a problematic category) to the WOTP wherein the sometimes unorthodox teacher-learner dynamics offer an alternative to the hegemonic banking model still in practice in the school.

This in turn guides my theoretical perspectives and places the political agenda of learning at the forefront to break from a banking system model that can still be found in education today. My goal is to create a dialogue amongst all educators, administrators

and policy makers to critically examine the cause and effect of this approach that so directly affect our youths' willingness and ability to stay in schools.

A call for critical, liberatory pedagogy

By breaking away from Freire's (1972/2005) notion of the banking system, we can instead assess a call for action which many scholars have fervently taken up in their works. Liberatory pedagogy is best described as being "dialogical, problem-posing and constituted by students' views of the world" (Beckett, 2013, p. 51). Liberatory pedagogy can also be understood as a result of the oppressive educational constraints imposed not only onto the students, but the educators as well. In practice, liberatory pedagogy demands for greater action in liberating students and teachers alike from oppression through active education. Furthermore Beckett (2013) notes that Freirian liberatory pedagogy aims to "awaken both the teachers and the learners' critical consciousness as subjects and reflect critically upon the realities of the world, before taking transformative actions to change those realities for the better" (p. 182). As such, the notion of liberatory pedagogy as critical pedagogy is foundational to those who dare to redefine the boundaries of the educational process, and shift the teacher-centered paradigms Freire coined as the banking system in order to create alternatives for better and more constructive instructional praxes. From Freire, (2005) I apply a liberatory pedagogy to my research, and in this study, I investigate how this approach is being manifested through the learners' ability to own and make sense of their stories and lived experiences.

Extending from a libertarian pedagogical approach, Giroux (2009) discusses a critical perspective on how society is rendering youths passive, marginalized and even

victimized members of society. Giroux (2009) heavily scrutinizes the unwarranted effects of the social system in which we live at this day and age. His work deplores injustices and calls for action in the societal liberation of our youths. Giroux argues that society has abandoned and victimizes our youths actively and passively in the education system, and marginalizes minority and lower class populations. Giroux argues that neoliberalism is largely to blame for the rendering of our youths' futures as being expendable. From politics to pop culture, Giroux deplores the system that shamelessly does a disservice to the marginal and empowers those who have authority. To further argue, Giroux stated:

Over the last decade, [the] misrepresentation of young people has been repeated in a series of Hollywood movies such as *Thirteen*, *Hard Candy*, *Alpha Dogs*, and *American Teen*, which routinely represent youth as dangerous, unstable, or simply without merit. When not portrayed as a threat to the social order, youth are often rendered as mindless, self-absorbed, and incapable of long standing commitments (Giroux, 2009, p. 15).

The WOTP program has in turn offered much to 'at risk' students. Opposing the way that the regular program and curriculum is constructed and taught, the WOTP provides the learners with fruitful opportunities to explore and learn about a plethora of subject areas in ways that relate to the differing learning needs of students and in ways that the students find pertinent to their own academic pathway. At the WOTP it is evident that the students are the vital components to a revisited, and unorthodox pedagogic learning model, such as Sameshima's (2008) letter writing. In my view, they truly hold the keys to their academic journeys while being supported by teachers and administrators who

demonstrated a passion for their service and to help their students become greater than what our society expects of them.

The WOTP is a program where ‘problematic’ students are often sent when they cannot succeed in regular classrooms. So the question remains: What is wrong with education today, and why are youths so often and easily alienated from our educational ideals through systems of oppression? To interrogate the latter, we must question the notion of curriculum that McLaren (2007) claimed is the “... configuration of particular interests and experiences [that] also forms a battleground where different versions of authority, history, the present and the future struggle to prevail” (p. 192). As such, the curriculum is intrinsically instilled within our schools, thus enabling a space for tension; one that is often created to aid and benefit the teachers and administrators in an authoritarian divide wherein the students are seen as lesser, and whose voices and identities all too often become silenced and suppressed. As an educational theorist, McLaren (2007) argues for a revolutionary critical pedagogy that “...eschews any approach to pedagogy that would reduce it to the teaching of narrow-thinking skills in isolation from the contentious debates in which such skills are employed” (p. 31). He develops his ideas by deliberating on the negative effects of politics in the classroom, and the “businessification and privatization of education” (p. 33). In tandem with Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, McLaren thus advocates for radical, and critical transformation of the obsolete pedagogical system driven by capitalist frameworks. An ardent Marxist, McLaren facilitates change through critical education reforms by exposing the issues encountered with western capitalist pedagogical institutions.

Extending Freire's notion of liberatory pedagogy, McLaren (2016) defines 'empowerment' as "the process through which students learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions" (p. 53). His portrayal of empowerment serves as a foundational tool for the democratization of learning at the heart of this research project and in my efforts to invite the participants and the researcher to employ reflexivity and become liberated through the process of learning in dialogical fashion.

Social and educational innovation

In relationship to Freire's notion of the banking system, Aoki (1978/80, 1983) brings forward a critical perspective regarding curriculum design as well as the teacher-student dynamics that has shaped education historically in ways that still define education today. Yet I ask myself, as educators, how could we change the ways in which we teach our students to facilitate meaningful learning while continuously adapting to the students' needs? Aoki (1983) believes that as educators, we must be concerned with the loss of individualism and abandon a teaching approach that will honour a "producer-consumer" (p. 13) paradigm in education. This praxis as instrumental action is one that while emphasizing individual inclusivity can alienate both the students as well as the educators from meaningful learning.

Aoki (1983) proclaims the problematic areas of concern regarding the implementation of a curriculum that contributes to the dehumanization of pedagogy begins with the devaluing of the humanistic, social values inherent of critical education. Aoki

noted that “[w]hat is damaging in this interpretation of reality is the fact that emphasis on it effectively submerges the ideology of sociocultural values, leaving in its wake the ‘neutral’ standards of purposive rational action and instrumental reason” (Aoki, 1983, p. 7).

As such, Aoki (1983) further suggests that curriculum implementation operates as “instrumental actions” (p. 7), that are largely being a product of positivistic thought (p. 7) that reduces the overall quality of educational paradigms by limiting the valuable social characteristics of critical, meaningful education to mere management strategies. Adding to this conversation of reconceptualising curriculum, Kincheloe (2012) further argues for radical changes in the current educational system, lamenting the teaching methods and curriculum instilled in our classes that create passivity from all parties involved.

Kincheloe (2012) noted that “[t]his democratic reconceptualization of education embraces a vision which takes seriously notions of social justice, racial, gender, and class equality, and alternative ways of seeing the world borrowed from people who have traditionally been ignored (p. 2). In practice, Kincheloe’s aim was to inspire and rescue struggling educators who become hostages of the educational system by providing critical alternative thoughts, for we, as a community of learners, teachers and administrators, may build upon and develop new ideologies and possibilities for the field of education. In building a Visual arts program for the WOTP at John F Kennedy High School, I was able to recognize the effectiveness of delivering alternate instructional strategies that are student-oriented in the ways Freire, Giroux, McLaren, Aoki and Kincheloe suggest. From the moment I realized that teaching was purely an act of mutual learning, it became critical for me, as researcher to investigate these teacher-student interrelationship while examining the learning dynamics that took place. As I look today at the program’s accomplishments, I advocate

for educators to create changes within their methods of instruction, and critically reflect upon the paradigms that operated in the educational system that could be altered through the use of social and educational innovation.

hooks (2005) emphasizes social change and educational reform for the marginalized and this positionality is reflected in my study as I believe employing newer teaching models for social innovation in the public educational sector has become a critical and pressing matter. Further, teaching praxes mirroring today's educational demands should seek to construct student identities and help all students develop as critical beings, thus having creative agency in the educational system. This may be an idealistic position, but I believe teachers and students can become co-teachers/learners in education, thus opening spaces for tangible, and democratic learning and changing dispositions of hierarchy. hooks militantly advocates for change in our society as our social construction is historically rooted in systems that segregate the various social and cultural classes, as evidenced within my study. Taking up the Freire's notion of liberatory pedagogy, hooks's philosophy is substantially grounded in developing equal opportunities for the learners, despite all differences in race, gender and socioeconomic classes. As a social justice activist, she also informs us from and about holistic approaches to teaching and learning, and how this concept extends beyond the student body and encompasses broader spectrums of learning as a form of social innovation. A holistic disposition thus extends to become an act of liberation for all involved in the educational process of learning. As such, hooks (1994) noted:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower

students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teacher grow, and are empowered by the process. (p. 21)

Greene (1978, 1995, 1998) depicts the importance of the arts in the classroom, and how students potentially understand and experience the arts differently. Art is part of the greater social context when students and arguably teachers are able to situate themselves in the works created or viewed with help from the educator. As such, students are more likely to foster an imaginative mindset, which helps them perceive the everyday life in new ways.

Additionally, perspectives that incorporate an artistic agenda in working with marginalized communities have greatly influenced my research practice. For instance, Conrad, Smyth and Kendall (2015) explain their “Uncensored” project as exemplary of social innovation in the Canadian context (p. 22) where a significant learning curve took place for the youths that may improve their quality of life by engaging them to become collaborators and co-researchers by investigating their own experiences and finally looking for solutions.

The term *social innovation* was striking for me; I was immediately drawn to its definition as stated by Conrad, Smyth and Kendall: “... Responding to challenges that are not being addressed through conventional approaches and often requiring new forms of collaboration...including ‘co-creation’ and ‘co-production’ among citizens and institutional actors” (p. 22). In turn my research creates a different learning experience for the students based on these concepts, forging alliances within the educational institution as they participate and become fully engaged in the research process. My research program, underpinned by the literature mentioned above, helps students to discover a broader spectrum of the arts through narrative inquiry, a method of practice I will discuss in the

next chapter, by reflecting upon their life stories and experiences of the role of the arts in the educational system and how they perceive the specialized program to contribute to identity development. Conrad, Smyth and Kendall (2015) stated that the “characteristics of successful arts program include arts instruction, disciplined effort, extended periods of engagements, complementary program components, ties with the community organizations, youth mentorship opportunities and an emphasis on performance/presentation” (p. 30). Aligning with this perspective, Gibb (2012) further adds to the conversation regarding social, and educational innovative initiatives and described an arts-program titled *Room 13* as defiant to the standardization of arts pedagogy through “ongoing collaboration[s] between adults and young people and a thriving culture of philosophical enquiry driven by a motivation to think and to learn” (p. 237). This case study investigated the art and pedagogic components of *Room 13* while displaying an understanding that such new pedagogic initiatives aim to reform an obsolete, and undervalued curriculum that marginalizes many young people through the normalization of education. Gibb (2012) further argued:

Room 13 defies this culture by encouraging individuals to discover their unique potential and provides an arena in which fulfillment and achievement do not lie in the future, as the reward for years of successful studying and passing of exams. (p. 240)

Gibb deliberates the growing concerns of standardized arts curriculum which does a disservice to the young populations and teachers alike. Furthermore, Gibb (2012) raises a problematic issue in that teachers’ qualities and passion of, and for their pedagogic praxes are slowly being eroded by universal pressures to standardize educational curriculum and experiences. However, while Gibb focuses on the movement of the *Room 13* initiatives as

a mean of helping youth become artists-professional in their own rights, she makes it evident in her text that we, as a community of educators, must seek to change the ways we idealize productive art pedagogy in hopes to address a more tangible and realistic account for our students learning demands for real-life successes. As well, Gibb (2012) noted that “an increasingly diluted curriculum stifles those who are capable of excelling academically, while the monotony of plodding through workbooks and enduring endless tests does nothing to inspire a passion for education among students (p. 240). Extending from Gibb’s aforementioned claim, Snowber (2005) provides artful pedagogic actions as she discusses the notion of deep listening as a vital attribute to creating meaningful artworks and research. Snowber emphasises the pertinence of deep listening as part of situational praxis as articulated by Aoki (1983). She strongly advocates the action of deep listening as integral to developing a meaningful teaching praxis, and that is a perspective I wholeheartedly adopt in my teaching. She further argued that “deep listening to self, other, art, and the natural world infuse both mentoring and art-making” (Snowber, 2005, p. 346), which is largely derived from Freire’s suggestion that dialogue is at the root of critical, and liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1992). A liberatory pedagogy suggests that work undertaken by learners can significantly shape their perceptions of art education whereby reflexivity becomes a critical component to their creativity and agency. Gibb (2012) argued, “in the process of studying, making, considering and defending the validity of their expressive work, the young artist is developing a base of analytical skills and constructing an intellectual framework that will influence their approach to other areas of learning” (p. 240). Gibb clearly defines Room 13 as a platform for which students are empowered

through creative and managerial agency, whereby students are encouraged to raise their own level of aspiration (p. 240).

I strongly believe that to undertake the creation of artwork situates the WOTP students in practice, and when supported with strong theoretical frameworks, help the teens make connections to the wider community, and wider ideas that may help them advance academically. In this way, the learners become active and engaged co-researchers rather than participants in my project. In this research, I facilitate the student body to develop a democratic and critical voice in the making of art by engaging and drawing on their stories of art education seen from their critical perspectives. Greene (1995) confirmed that such “participatory involvement with the many forms of art does enable us, at the very least, to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits and conventions have obscured” (p. 379).

As an art educator, I feel strongly the educational system is slowly collapsing upon many “at-risk” youths, who become a kind of educational victim of the injustices in the educational praxes that I believe have long been outdated, and that is unfairly built to promote the academic elites, which as a graduate student, I am also a member. In light of Snowber’s case study, I chose to make connections in my research to the use of narrative inquiry as an arts-based project, and the ideology of renegotiating the teacher-student interpersonal dynamic by creating an inclusive space for research into our identity formation through the use of stories. When reconceptualising the purposes and uses of scholarly research, Snowber (2005) mentioned that “research is not only an outward endeavour, but it travels in the realm of re-searching our own lives, knowledge, passions and practice” (p. 346). As such the students, teachers and administrators that are partaking in this research endeavour are invited to interrogate and examine their lived

experiences of art education, as well as recollections of their contribution artistic and/or administrative to the WOTP program at John F. Kennedy High School.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This project integrated narrative inquiry as the primary methodology and life stories as method, and as the researcher, I give an account of aspects of the lives of participants relating to self-in-society and how this is articulated in art education. By collecting stories, including my own, and collaboratively writing narratives of individual experiences (Creswell, 2015), this study is an effort to elevate my understandings of student thinking, and to map how they may become critical agents of socialization for their artistic and educational community.

The John F. Kennedy High School WOTP program is situated in the Saint-Michel borough of Montreal. Since I worked with some of the school's students in the past, I approached the current principal who is the school's 'gatekeeper,' to borrow an ethnographic term, to provide me with a letter of support allowing me to conduct my field research, which took place from September until December 2016. As well, I contacted the school teacher, who had agreed to help me recruit the student participants through purposeful selection (Creswell, 2014, p. 189) for this study. As such, a letter of recruitment explicating the research project was sent out to the students' parents or legal guardians for their consent after participants showed interest in the project, and only once this study was cleared with Concordia University's ethics committee.

For this qualitative, narrative inquiry project (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I employed life stories as the method of inquiry and mode to render research in order to focus on ways of sustaining advocacy for students Romeo, Mario, and Anthony, and teachers like Mr. Tonin, and administrators like Mr. V , in this alternate art program. The purposeful selection (Creswell,

2015) of three students from the WOTP art program, the school teacher and the school principal, and myself, examined the variety of the rich situation of the art program while providing an array of stories from different standpoints. I have decided to use narrative inquiry as methodology and life stories as a method because I knew, having previously worked and taught in the school, that this approach was appropriate to provide a different rendering, or even serve as an opportunity for the students to view and realize the act of studying, reading and writing, (Freire, 2005) as an immersive, dynamic and pedagogic action, as well as a tool for transferring creativity. This practice opposed a teacher-centered paradigm that includes Freire's notion of the banking system, as discussed in the previous chapter. Pertaining to my study, students, teachers and administrators along with myself (participants), had a valid role in the co-construction of knowledge by sharing their stories of learning in an effort to expand understandings of their artistic experience in school.

In this study, we are all co-researchers. This is important to point out, for using stories as a method was especially important in this context. Having previously worked with students, I acknowledge that my past, and rather positive experiences of learning as well as not so positive, operate alongside those of my participants and have enabled me to gain insight, curiosity and to then investigate their lives and situations, hence to embark on a research journey in hopes to engage them in the act of learning and creating as a community of researchers and artists. In my project, I chose to act as scribe for my participants' stories, in part because I became well aware of their learning disabilities prior to the start of the research and felt that facilitating this role would serve as a way to model the protocols of research in ways that are accessible and meaningful to future scholars. In truth, my story shares many of the same pedagogic turning points as I see in my students. In this case, acting as a scribe for their stories not only alleviated

some of the pressure and stress away from the students, but it also ensured them that this research project would not become an onerous task, taking into account challenges with literacy. After all, I conducted this research with a goal to display that research in the arts can also be a fun, visually creative and an inviting endeavour. Thus, as participants in this narrative inquiry, we collectively became active agents of change by engaging in a reflexive, pedagogical research practice that advocates for democratization of curriculum and instruction, and identity construction within the public educational sector. The participants were invited to work collaboratively with me in order to shape and refine our stories as expressions of knowledge. This was in part a participatory practice, where our working together became a platform for social change within the institution and helped empower the students with critical viewpoints of their learning.

Procedures

Starting in September 2016, I entered the field and began my narrative inquiry research project by conducting a series of art workshops whereby students conceived artworks around the theme of *identity* as a simple incubator to the creation process. The activities were two-fold: 1) I introduced the research project in great details and shared my story, and part of our first month was dedicated to writing my story collaboratively with students to model the process; 2) the art workshops took place on a weekly basis, for the duration of four weeks per artwork, amounting to four sessions in total. During the workshops, students were led to create a brainstorming activity, preliminary sketches of their works, and then have open studio time for creating their artworks.

In October 2016, I invited 2 student participants, Mario and Romeo, who are in the WOTP art program, and 1 former WOTP student, Anthony, who is now in JFK adult education and consistently comes back to WOTP to continue making art. These students have all worked with me prior to this research, and had all manifested an interest to partake in this research endeavour. I then setup semi-structured interviews to discuss the impact of the arts program on their artistic and individual identities (see Appendix A for list of interview questions). I was able to meet with each student once, amounting to a total of seven interviews (including my own) conducted during this month. I then transcribed interviews on an ongoing basis and returned to the students as quickly as possible, asking them to confirm the interviews and modify as they wished (add/delete where necessary) making member-checks key to the verification process.

In November and December 2016, I interviewed the teacher, Mr. Tonin and the principal (administrator), whom everyone, along with himself refers to as Mr. V, to obtain their stories as well (see list of questions in Appendix B). Their interviews were also setup to be conducted in two parts for each member of the staff, in order to be sensitive of their schedules, although the school teacher, Mr. Tonin, had requested to do the entire interview in one sitting due, due the little time he had available.

Narrative Inquiry: An evolvment of letters

I have lived my practice every week within John F. Kennedy's WOTP department, where my transparency and forthrightness with my own story was intended to foster engagement with participants and encourage dialogue given the research being conducted in what is considered a natural setting for teachers and students (Creswell, 2014). My work experience with the WOTP program has allowed me to better understand the unique student-teacher

interrelationships that have become prominent forces in the learning journeys of students, teachers and administrators. The stories told by the various participants allow for genuineness and openness to form in the research relationship, where meaning-making was emergent in the course of conducting the study (Creswell, 2014). In this case, the term ‘emergent’ indicates that participants are central to understanding the sources of information (stories as data), opposed to a situation where I, as researcher, resisted traditional practices such as imposing my own views of the research situation. Furthermore, Creswell (2015) noted: “[f]or participants in a study, sharing their stories may make them feel that their stories are important and that they are heard” (p. 504). Building on this perspective, Clandinin (2007) noted that “[p]eople shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories” (p. 22). In conducting narrative research, participants shared their art education memories of the past, discussed the present, and envisioned the role the arts play in their future endeavours (Clandinin, 2006; 2007). In the sections below, I will discuss how this aforementioned process transpired within our research practice through the evolution of the data and interpersonal research dynamics.

A participatory perspective in emergent design

This emergent design (Creswell, 2015) provided a space for reflexivity, drawing on, and developing empathetic understandings between connecting the participants and my own story of becoming an artist. Working under an emergent design with the participants allowed for openness and unforeseen events to surface. Integral to an emergent design, there were many instances throughout the project whereby participants and myself, took the creative nature of this study to heart, and explored unplanned artistic avenues, in collaborative art practices such as collage art, and letter writing, for which I will discuss in detail in the sections below. However,

as I recall, these ‘unplanned artistic avenues’ significantly shifted our research agenda, and became pivotal methods for understanding the various ways in which art, and narratives, can serve as artistic and pedagogic actions and reactions. Although, I must note that the concept of advocacy in critical pedagogy was sure to remain at the forefront of this research by employing key characteristics of a narrative research design, thus illuminating the youths’ involvement in the arts and to further redefine their identities as emerging artists. As Conrad, Smyth and Kendall (2015) suggest, “PR [participatory research] focuses on dialogue, education, consciousness raising, and assisting marginalized groups to address their needs through action”(p. 26).

For this study, I drew key attributes from participatory research and interwove those in my research practice by supporting the participants to determine the times at which we would meet and conduct the interviews, as well as to invite Romeo, a WOTP student, to interview me first. In other words, the participants established the research schedule and agenda and were encouraged to create their artworks in various moments at different stages of the research; at certain points, the study became an interwoven dynamic of interviews, storying, and art making. As a result, openness to the research design created a window whereby Romeo, Anthony and Mario could envision how the research would take shape and supported their decision-making in the process. Also, this practice reflected the differences between our research-oriented art programming, as a foil to the regular JFK teaching models employed at the school, and in this way, provides a means to critique current curriculum. Employing a project-based emergent design helped differ our program from the traditional or ‘regular JFK’ academic model, which I thought was quite a significant shift, if not rupture, in the research plan, adding depth and breadth to the conversations of learning and teaching art..

For instance, when prompted to compare the WOTP program teaching models versus the ‘regular JFK’, Mario claimed that “there [at the regular JFK] they force you to learn, they push you to learn they expect you to learn on the spot. Here, at the WOTP, they take their time, and invest themselves to help you learn and grow as a person.” In the course of this study I engaged with all participants by continually inviting them to reflect on and respond to their own life experiences, and to meticulously examine their stories, their created artworks, as well as the research process altogether through dialogue as central to prolonged engagement. It became clear that the research design was truly emergent, whereby a researcher as key instrumentalist, cannot solidify the initial research stages, as the meanings will surface from within the actual research conducted (Creswell, 2014).

In concert with Creswell’s (2014) elaborations of emergent designs, the “initial plan[s] for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and some or all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data” (p. 186). Employing and emphasizing an emergent design within the study was crucial to realizing the attributes of narrative inquiry. However, given the nature of the site as well as working diligently with narrative inquiry and using stories as method, it is vital to recognize the value in emergent designs for those who seek to inquire into the lives of others whilst taking into account that “questions may change, the forms of data collection may shift and, the individuals studied and the sites visited may be modified” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186).

The work that I decided to take up at the WOTP has been subject to change in its early stages, consistent with emergent research practice. When entering the field and collecting data, it was essential to have flexibility within the research design, as there were changes in contributors to this study. For example, the decision to include a former WOTP student alongside current

students offered the opportunity to integrate a wider spectrum of storied accounts. Many further changes, or adjustments needed to occur. For instance, I quickly realized that the natural setting is one of constant movement. As Romeo best described the program in his interview, he mentioned: “we don’t sit down in a classroom and study all day, we get up and move around” Given the site’s ethos and busy schedule, it made it difficult to find appropriate times with students to conduct interviews, so that I would not divert them from their studies. It seems many students were more focused on the art-making, than to be interviewed by the researcher, something as an art teacher, I did not wish to distract from or discourage.

One change in particular was in the questions that were asked during the interview procedures. Questions needed to be altered slightly and customized, as each participant highlighted different components of the research questions whereby I sensed they wanted to elaborate further if prompted. The questions themselves became different; they changed in direction to sometimes find a link with what the participants aimed to say, rather than being driven and defined by me as the researcher. This resulted in deeper, and more engaged mutual conversations that shed away any pressure to respond with a ‘right or wrong’ answer, and thus made participants really reflect on their statements. This semi-structured interview technique was essential to achieve the necessary level of confidence in contributors and myself that we were reaching the heart of our experiences. Much as Van Den Hoonaard (2015) states, “often, adjustments are necessary to correct for preliminary assumptions that turn out to be incorrect” (p. 20).

Employing reflexivity within a research praxis:

This research study was not easy to conduct. I quickly realized that, regardless of how prepared you may be at the start, important components to the study would always shift, thus

changing the course of actions. Such changes I have learned to embrace and adapt to, as part of my work. The heart of the research was a specific design tailored to examine the notion of a teacher-researcher, engaging all participants in an artistic and research foray that ultimately provided a space for ongoing reflexivity, and so it did. I had observed participants, along with myself, think deeper about their situations, and roles in the WOTP program. This kind of personal reciprocity operated as a pedagogical encounter, fostering an interchange of stories and experiences whereby all participants involved, such as students, teachers, administrators and researcher, open spaces to think critically upon their understandings narrated as a platform for learning.

Furthermore, this project embodies reflexivity among all participants in the co-construction of knowledge by “describing, exploring or discovering” together (Leavy, 2015, p. 22). This part was especially convincing in regards to Anthony’s telling of his own past, including his battle with drug-use while he was “hanging out with the wrong crowds”. What was most intriguing was his ability to not only recall and narrate such harsh moments of his life, but to articulate the implications of his art-making, and constant identity development as an emerging artist. As observed during the interview, he became calm, and I noticed that he seemed to be at peace with himself, as he conversed with me about a portion of his life, as well the effects of the WOTP art program on his journey, a marked change in his demeanour from regular classes.

In working with marginalized youths, the work conducted with the WOTP students on the theme of *identity*, which I thought connected quite well when exploring and reflecting on our past through stories, aimed to “unsettle stereotypes [and] challenge dominant ideologies. Certainly, building empathy [...] is part of that” (Leavy, 2015, p. 25). Hence, the WOTP teachers

and administrators were asked to share their recollections of stories as youths, providing insights to how and why they are part of the WOTP program. The next step involved asking contributors to share their perceptions of the role of the arts when working with disenfranchised populations. In regards to Anthony's past, Mr. Tonin, the WOTP teacher had discussed in great detail the various effects of the program and the many positive impacts this had on Anthony in particular. Having conducted Anthony's interview first, I was made aware of the tough life-choices he had made entering the program. When I interviewed Mr. Tonin, he had chosen to describe a fragment of Anthony's past to illuminate his argument.

He recalled Anthony's story, but then provided interesting relational suggestions, some I had unfortunately assumed he was unable to make at first. I felt in that moment, that I had underestimated Mr. Tonin's visual literacy skills, and his ability to deconstruct visuals. In the interview, Mr. Tonin mentioned: "...there's a reason why [Anthony] creates the pieces in the ways that he does. There's a reason why he takes paints, and he literally creates a mish-mash mix up with it. That's because that's what this kid's life has been, for the longest time." He reflected further, "...they are beautiful works of art, but it also shows the sadness that he's been through. But what I like is that he's starting to think a little bit more when he creates now, which shows that over the last few years, his life is starting to come back together a little bit". In building upon a reflective and reflexive practice throughout this study, my role as a researcher-participant proved to also function as a 'key instrumentalist' who, along with participants, developed an in-depth and critical understanding of their roles as cultural agents for social change, without disrupting the ethos and policies of what Creswell describes as the 'natural setting' (Creswell, 2015). As Sameshima (2008) suggests, "relationality becomes both a private and public

endeavour. We must foster our skills of relationality in ourselves (our living with our teaching), between our lives and our students, and within our students as well” (p. 36).

Centrally, the term *reflexivity*, predominantly borrowed from ethnographic research, “refers to the researcher being aware of and openly discussing his or her role in the study in a way that honours and respects the site and participants” (Creswell, 2015, p. 478). As such, developing researcher reflexivity invites participants to think critically about their respective roles, as students, teachers and administrators, for they became researchers of their own lives and co-creators of knowledge in the course of this study. Creswell (2015) further argues that “[i]ndividuals who have a history and a cultural background themselves [...] realize that their interpretation is only one possibility and that their report does not have any privileged authority over other interpretations made by the readers, participants and other researchers” (p. 478). My aim in this approach was explicit: to break traditional and educational hierarchies by having all participants become active and reflexive members of this research endeavour. In this case, it is central to note that participants greatly engaged with the research work while employing reflexivity as they interviewed me first, in order to better understand the procedural mechanics of the data collection.

Moreover, the participants were able to recognize their own statuses and share their stories from various angles because we collaboratively wrote my story first as an example of how stories could take shape and the discretionary decisions we make when we share our stories with others. Knowing that stories involve self-disclosure from the private to the public world was key in our discussions, as part of the ethics of practice. Mindful that selecting key points, rather than trying to tell the whole story, and to be judicial in what is shared, was at the forefront of our conversations. As a researcher, I did not want students to share anything they may later

reconsider, and I checked-in with participants continually in the writing of this thesis to ensure their consent was still in place, and to ensure there were opportunities to revise stories if they felt it was important to do so. The scope, content and details of each story was determined by the participants. Within the interviews, the participants took me into an extended journey that documented their lives, as youths, students, artists, teachers, and in the process, sought to shed the educational hierarchies as a characteristic of this project by investigating the diverse lived experiences related to art education.

Life Stories: Letters from the passing-present

Phase 1- Using information as structural devices:

Using life stories as methodology enabled us to work cohesively by employing reflexivity, critical thinking and thus foster advocacy of identity. According to Goodson & Gill (2011):

Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people ‘experiences of it (p. 4).

I have chosen to work with life stories as the primary method of inquiry, since the stories are rooted in their recollections of past learning with, in and through art, and then discussing their implications in the program as artists, teachers or administrators, and finally examining where they believe the program could take them in their future after school, or how and if it has affected their decision-making thus far.

An idea occurred to me after I had communicated with Romeo, the student who interviewed me, and I had told him (with much excitement) that I had finished transcribing the interviews, and that we would be looking to find statements he felt were important within the transcripts that could potentially serve as structural devices. At first, Romeo responded to this suggestion with much less enthusiasm that I had anticipated. It became evident that this process involving the students would need to become more exciting, more inviting, and even perhaps more focused on making the protocol and intent more explicit to the students.

From this point, the study grew rapidly and developed into a foray of creativity, whereby decisions of the creative, artistic content shifted as I collected the data. After I transcribed the interviews and following my discussion with Romeo, I recall thinking to myself: How can I render the data livelier and more vibrant, hoping to further engage the students in the process? It was clear to me that not only the content of the interviews seemed rather informative, and told quite passionately from all the study informants, but surely, there needed to be a form in which these potential stories could come to life. Sameshima (2008) claims that:

Living wholeness as a researcher and teacher includes living as an embodied aesthetic being, developing skills for finding meaningful pedagogic relevance between personal experience and the greater public good, and recognizing the processes of learning while the passages of learning are being constructed. (p. 32)

Drawing from this framework, I considered that telling the storied accounts through a form of letter writing, seemed to be a creative idea, one for which the students could engage more significantly with. Sameshima (2008) noted, “[b]y sharing reflexive texts in creative forms (narrative, visual arts-based, and so on), students are given examples of integration and relation” (p. 38). As I focused on the microanalytic picture of the six participants, including

myself (Creswell, 2015), their individual stories created a series of temporal account of their various art education continuities and discontinuities, such as the students' successes and failures from learning the arts in school, including Mr. Tonin's detailed account of his personal brushes with art education as a student. This information shed much light on their personal stories in ways that facilitated the development of a holistic version of art education (Creswell, 2014).

After transcribing all interviews, I began to notice ruptures in the students' experiences with the educational system, and all have spoken unfavourably of the 'regular JFK program', which differs greatly from the way students are taught in the WOTP. Romeo, Mario and Anthony all became very focused when discussing such matters, and I could instantly tell that this would become data that I could certainly incorporate in the stories as part of the structural device. As Mario mentioned in his interview: "Since I enrolled in the WOTP program, I became more mature, and learned many new things I wouldn't have had the chance to do otherwise". Moreover, I immediately felt the need to imprint their passion in the stories, and creating letters became a powerful platform for the students to not only display their thoughts and experiences, but to provide a space for reflexivity and a way to give insights while giving advice to their future selves. In addition, this research method enabled me to find connectivity with my participants, as well as to increase the level of personal engagement (Leavy, 2015).

Phase 2- Dear reflexive self...

As the key instrument of rendering research, stories were collected from the participants through a series of seven interviews (including my own) resulting in just over 40 pages of transcripts in regards to their artistic situations within the WOTP art program. I was able to guide the re-storying of their accounts in collaboration with each individual, and invited them to collaborate in writing my story first, which was based on the interview by Romeo, as a way to

bring research into the art classroom and to encourage youths to take up the practices of research whilst examining settings, characters (or roles) actions, problem, and resolutions inherent in my story (Creswell, 2015, p. 514). This proved to be a successful initiative, as Romeo stated post-interview that such process “helped [him] understand how this works”. The next step was for us to write their stories. The story as evidence aimed to portray the nuances of teaching and learning with disenfranchised students.

My procedure for constructing stories began with looking critically at the transcripts while retaining structural devices, and underlining those within the data. This step was essential to understand the participants’ point of views in regards to their own situations. When the transcripts were finalized, the participants and I looked extensively at the documents, collaboratively deliberating on the important information drawn from the data. In concert with Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo (2009), provoking our own thoughts while exchanging in a dialogical and pedagogical moment, allowed for a literary *métissage* that “highlights the resonances and experiences of the writers [...] and their audience, and it makes possible new ideas and insights as well as new discourse and action” (p. 37). However, such work was not always easy to orchestrate; Anthony’s schedule made it difficult to find the appropriate time and to collectively examine his story. As a result, I had given him my version of his written story, asking him to make the edits/changes at home, as a way to ensure he was satisfied with the work. Furthermore, these stories included verbatim quotes from the participants’ interview. I strove to retain the vernacular of individuals to ensure their voice was heard in the context of research.

In early December, I was able to see how the stories were going to take shape. Looking extensively at ideas of life-writing, and letter-writing (Sameshima, 2007; 2008; Hasebe-Ludt, et al, 2009; McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt, 2014) among arts-based research practices, I was able to

envision how the formulation of my participants' stories would thus emerge from our work. One participant at a time, the letters evolved through clear structural devices (character, setting, climax and denouement) (Creswell, 2014) along with a refined version that I wrote, integrating small transitional sentences for the betterment of the works' structure and legibility while ensuring to retain the participants' vernacular in the process (see appendix C)

For this study, I chose to write my story with the students first, in the form of a letter. This choice was specifically made to better understand how stories as letter writing forms, for this was my very first attempt to create such work. Fundamentally, it was crucial that I explored these steps with my own work first, prior to engaging with the students' stories so that I was able to comprehend how to successfully write a storied letter by going through the process and steps myself. Unlike writing common academic-formatted papers I had written, I felt a letter provided an entry with an aperture for empathy that aimed to display the amalgamation of my artist-teacher-researcher identity. To further emphasize this point, McKerracher & Hasebe-Ludt (2014) claim:

As researchers, we turn to stories as opportunities to expand the domain of art education beyond the visual. We enter a dialogue about how writing and interpreting the stories of our lives has the potential to become a viable conceptual tool for arts-based inquiry work towards an ethos of care and empathy. (p.118)

Stories embedded in a letter-writing practice led me to realize how important it was for my students' voices to shine throughout the letters, since mine became a very personal account of my life from my youth until today. In writing the letter, I then asked myself: "Whom is this actually addressed to? And how could the answer, affect the way in which I compose this textual

document?” At this point, I had the idea of writing this letter to my younger self, seeking to provide comfort, reassurance and empathy for the youth I once was; a true call for hope, and a playful mode of teaching through time, the letter became much more than part of my research work.

In this study, the participants became integral to the development of the project. The students contributed immensely to the building of the letters, as we sought to ensure each would ultimately reflect the students’ situations, but also embody their voices and identities. As such, the students were invited to edit the stories as they wished, as part of a collaborative process. Most students made little to no edits, with the exception of Romeo, who eagerly changed certain aspects of his letter. For instance, I had previously written, as derived from the transcript, that Romeo “pretty much grew up by himself”, to which he felt he needed to include his sisters, and how much they supported him in his youth, which resulted in adding “but my two sisters were always there for me”. Concerning the ideas that came together from writing our stories collaboratively, McKerracher & Hasebe Ludt (2008) suggest that “through the act of composing a story artfully, new ways of experiencing one’s own and others’ lived worlds emerge” (p. 126). As such, I began to question the idea of *whom* these letters would be addressed to and we all expressed mutual likes for the notion of writing the students’ letters to their future selves, while those of us who are a bit older (myself, Mr. Tonin and Mr. V), wrote them to our younger selves. The concept was rather simple: built around the restoried account, we wrote the letters as if we were hoping to inform, and especially remind Anthony, Romeo and Mario’s future selves of their current situations. Concerning the older participants, we wrote letters addressed to our younger selves, in an effort to encourage, motivate and remind our younger selves through a reflexive practice of the good that is yet to come.

At the beginning and/or end of the letters, I took the liberty to write encouraging notes, I felt encompassed the written letters. The content of the stories had allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences, and I hence felt I could add motivational conclusions that served to sum up the participants sense of achievements. For instance, in Romeo's story, we concluded with: "I hope we thrive to be more open about what we can do and possibilities. Remember this, I would say- Art isn't just one thing: it's all about imagination". As protocol, all participants were encouraged to add/delete any information they felt did not represent their stories.

Phase 3- Using Narratives in visual art: 'When Words Collide'

Artworks were at times used as prompts for discussion with participants in regards to work that they have, or are creating, within the WOTP art program. These artworks served as probes "...to follow up and ask individuals to explain their ideas in more details, or to elaborate on what they have said" (Creswell, 2014, p. 194). The artworks were used to help students discuss their implicated role within the WOTP art program as knowledge creators in their own right. In some instances, the visual works became a platform for discussion, as all three students and Mr. Tonin alike, decided to refer back to their created works (see List of Figures). The works have been photographed for the research as a way to contextualize the conversations held with participants. During the interviews, the students were invited to showcase any works they chose to help me better understand the participant's situation. Anthony's interview became a stronghold for how important it was to have the artworks around at the time of the interview. The excerpt below (Transcript, p. 2) demonstrates how looking at the artwork enabled Anthony to respond to the particular question:

Thibault: So let's put it this way, [...], how would you describe [your artwork] to me?

Anthony: ...[...] What do you mean?

Thibault: Let's go get some of your artworks so that we could check them out and see what you do.

[LEFT TO GET ARTWORK]

Thibault: (repeats question)

Anthony: Ah well! (Answers easily) To me it's like what I see in my heart- what I think. But mostly I see which colours would blend good together. You know, there is movement in this one".

As Prosser (2007) noted, "emancipatory and participatory research such as photo voice and photo elicitation can gather valuable input from teachers, pupils, and others who actually inhabit the built environments" (p. 16). It is important to note that these artworks presented were not analyzed for content, but rather informed the researcher. For instance, the students along with the teacher did show me specific artworks, and were able to discuss and narrate the stories behind the visual prompts with what I felt was profound insights. In this case, I then photographed the artworks to explore the intertextual dialogue and relationship of art to learning is explicit and both visual and textual, applying Prosser's method to the conversations we had together.

The research conducted allowed for a multitude of forms in which narratives could be explored. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo (2009) suggest "researchers strategically conduct interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary research that creates and represents knowledge through multi-genre and multi-media texts that meld fact, interpretation and imagination" (p. 35). As a

result of the many discussions, and interviews between the participants and myself, we developed an idea that ultimately served as a hybrid to visual and textual narratives. Essentially, Anthony, Mario and Romeo were asked to contribute to the project with visual art, as a mode to understanding how the students themselves conceive of art using quotes, making narratives an integral component to aesthetics. The results from this were astounding; the students had eagerly engaged with this concept, that they took copies of the transcripts, studied them before adding sentences, quotes, statements and even paragraphs into their visual works (see List of Figures).

Serving as an alternative platform for engaging the students in this creative, research endeavour, the students conceived visual and conceptual works that embodied the notion of identity as intertwined with a series of narratives. Of course, the works proved to be truly unique in their own rights, and the students created works for which they were able to apply and integrate their previously acquired knowledge and expertise of the arts. Mario, who seemed to have a lot of difficulty thinking about how to come up with his visual work, decided to cut sentences from his transcript, and collage them onto his canvas in an explosive arrangement and under which he created a galaxy-like background with spray paints (see List of Figures). Later on, Mario and I discussed the idea of combining my story transcript with his, as part of his work. He immediately responded positively, and this became the work that mirrors a true partnership in

the making, for which we decided to title: “*When Words Collide*”.



(Figure 1. *When Words Collide*, Mario & Thibault, 2017)

Romeo’s piece depicts the notion of identity through his rendering of a self-portrait. The visual work shows Romeo’s face, staring straight at the viewer, with certain words collected from the transcripts that he chose to alter in size and fonts. The words, breezing through his head, show much eclecticism before entering his head, and displaying order, in terms of compositional arrangement as they exit it. Romeo stated the work is about “how society views us, as kids, or as artists. We have ideas too”.



(Figure 2. *Untitled*, Romeo, 2017)

Meanwhile, Anthony who had a much different take on his piece, decided it would be a good idea to incorporate newspapers and prints into his visual piece, along with some of his own words from the transcripts. In all, Anthony chose 4 paragraphs from his transcripts that narrate (in sum), 1) The impact painting has had on his life; 2) His past experiences with drug-use; 3) Memory of a certain artwork that he painted; and 4) How he perceived the role of an artist when he was growing up. His artwork, including a wide array of colours, incorporated the narratives alongside the bold paint strokes, and spoke of his creative, painterly aptitudes and conceptual

abilities.



(Figure 3. *Identities*, Anthony, 2017)

Verification of research stories as letters

After all interviews were concluded, I spent the remainder of December analyzing my data. I employed key steps to verify my findings in order to ensure the accuracy of my narrative account, employing validity strategies that follow (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). These strategies were put into practice, and, participants were asked throughout the research project if they wish to modify their story upon reflection. According to Creswell (2014), verification includes:

1) *Clarifying research bias* by being transparent with my story from the outset, and by introducing the research to the group on the first day, I fulfilled what Creswell (2014) stated, that “this self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with the readers”

(p. 202). As such, my past experiences with the WOTP department were clearly stated to the readers from the onset of this study (see Chapter 1), whereby my interpretation of the work and its finding are shaped by multiple factors such as my past experiences with the students, teachers and administrators of the program, as a visual art teacher, researcher and student.

2) *Peer review debriefing* by asking for a debrief to review and interrogate the qualitative study, I apply what Creswell (2014) notes, “this process involves locating a person who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with the people other than the researcher” (p. 202). In this case, Mr. Tonin served as a peer debriefer (Creswell, 2014) while at John F. Kennedy High school, who ensured my research progress in sequential steps. His expertise allowed me to inquire when in doubt, but most importantly, to report the interpretations from the study conducted in order to add validity to my account as key instrumentalist.

3) *Prolonged engagement* was a way to convey details about the research and participants that lends credibility to the narrative account. According to Creswell (2014), “the more experience that a researcher has with the participants in their settings, the more accurate or valid will be the findings” (p. 202). Having known and done previous work with my research participants had allowed for openness and genuineness in the accounts provided. My work with them in previous years established a mutual rapport with the participants, and served me to gain a deeper understanding of my participants’ situations within the WOTP.

4) *Rich, thick description* was employed to utilized to “transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences” (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). In so doing, the readers are able to gain a profound understanding of the WOTP program and its population in using the participants’ vernacular. Rich thick descriptions emerged in the transcript-based

stories, and then in the resulting letters which were carefully crafted together. In addition, I kept detailed reflective notes in my journal about the research process, and this too came to bear on my considerations, especially in my analysis of the information.

5) Consistent *member-checking* was conducted with participants and encouraged self-reflection as an ongoing learning practice, instilling research methods in the classroom. By restorying art experiences through the lens of teaching and learning, we verified together that the “dialogue reflects the culture of participants, their language, and a sensitivity to their culture or ethnicity, and the interweaving of words from participants and the author’s interpretations” (Creswell, 2014, p. 204). Member-checking strategies were integrated within our research practice when I had asked all study informants to critically analyze the restored accounts and letters to ensure this truly reflected what they wanted to express. Romeo, for instance, made several changes to his letter, by circling and commenting in red-pen, certain words or sentences he felt needed to be altered. This ensured the research process was fluid, responsive and dynamic.

Data collection

There are two primary techniques for data collection in this study: 1) interviews; 2) art making. The interviews were held in semi-structured fashion (see Appendix A for list of questions). Data collection involved open-ended questions that were few in number and but intended to elicit important events related to art education from the participants’ lives (Creswell, 2014, p. 190). Sample questions included:

1. Can you describe in your own words, the place which you grew up in?
2. What was your involvement in the arts throughout your youth?
3. How has your involvement in the WOTP contributed to your current art practice?

Two sets of questions were asked: one that was developed for the students, while the other for the teacher, administrator and myself. Questions for the students focused on discussions about their involvement as students within the WOTP, while administration and teachers questions sought to interrogate the pedagogical components to the program. As such, questions for the administrators are sampled as follows:

1. In what ways has the students been impacted by the arts programming at the WOTP?
2. What kinds of art projects or events have been conceived in the past
3. How do you think the art [students] make impact the student's self-esteem?

I was able to gather substantial information from the participants with sensitivity to their stories and to the dialogue taking place within the interviews, enabling us to work together through the interweaving of knowledge and experiences for reflexivity. At first students seemed a bit uncomfortable when being interviewed. It was evident in the ways that they would answer the questions, by stuttering and biting their fingernails, so I strove to make the process as casual of a conversation as I could, while keeping on track with the questions. After a few answers, students became much more comfortable, to the point where we continued with our interview, instead of breaking them up in two sessions, as was the original plan.

Anthony, Mario and Romeo were all very pensive. They seemed to have much more to say when differentiating the WOTP and the regular JFK program. Hence, I continued the conversations with them, adhering to the semi-structured protocol, and probed for more answers, as they eagerly shared their thoughts. From my perspective, the interviews went very well; the students' interviewing me first seemed to be of relief to them, so that they could situate me as a youth, a student, and teacher-researcher.

Mr. Tonin answered very thoroughly. Because of the difficulty in scheduling interviews with him due to his incredibly busy agenda, we conducted the interview at a much later date than

expected. His duties as a school teacher came first, which was something I honoured and respected. A very disciplined person, and a mentor to me, Mr. Tonin elaborated extensively during his interviews, and provided me with eleven pages of transcripts. It seemed the interview process was especially important to him, as he would get visibly annoyed when interruptions occurred, such as receiving calls from the front office. Mr. Tonin, deliberately narrated his responses to me, as if he was telling a story. He searched deep into his past, and at times provided information that was off-topic, and I then felt we needed to revert back to the original questions. As such, I gently suggested we continue on course, and he would reply with “I’ll get to that in a minute”. I sensed that our interviews became a time where Mr. Tonin could allow himself to discuss and share stories of his life, with much commitment to providing a detailed, accurate account, which I greatly appreciated.

By using a digital recording device to interview participants, I was able to capture the essence of the moment, similar to “in vivo terms” (Creswell, 2014, p. 198) without being intrusive while striving to avoid discomfort for the participants during the interviews.

Artworks were a part of this study, playing an unexpected major role as data. Over the course of the research project, the students have been greatly involved in art making that contributes to the theme of identity. During the interviews, students and the teacher referred to certain artworks the students had made, hence I chose to document the works that were attributed to teaching and learning, in an effort to provide a holistic account of this narrative inquiry. With respect to Creswell’s (2015) notion of reflexivity, he reminds us “the author’s conclusions are always tentative or inconclusive, leading to new questions to answer” (p. 478). In so doing, the project interrogates the nature of the arts program within the WOTP by situating the program within the participants’ lives, and interrogating the potential possibilities for future artistic

endeavours. In other words, the emic data (Creswell, 2015) collected provide the readers with accurate testaments of the participants' own reflexive experiences to envision and call for a critical change within the educational institution.

Stories

Wednesday, November 24th, 2016

Dear Romeo,

I am writing you hoping to remind you of the person you were at the age of 16. To give you a little more details as to who you once were, this letter will bring up some important points that have affected you while you were a student at John F. Kennedy High School.

Growing up in Montreal, I lived in a very welcoming house; Dad was always at work, and so was Mom. In a way, I learned how to be on my own, but my two sisters were always there for me, and I did had lots of friends. Dad: he was a culinary chef, so we always loved to cook. In our house, I remember we had more sculptures of women's faces than anything else; Mom loved that stuff- she loved sculptures. We also had typical paintings in our house, flowers, meadows, and things like that. Our house wasn't all about paintings, photos and such; it was the culinary arts that were important. We were always experimenting with cool things related to food, Grandmother taught me how to cook along with Dad and Mom, it was just our house, and that's how I remember it.

My grandmother, she was a very open to her family. We would often go to her house. Well we lived there for a little bit. I remember she would grab pens and markers, and ask me to draw, or teach me how to sew. It was very welcoming place, she was such a nice woman, she passed away last year; this was difficult to bear and I only wish we were closer.

I loved where I used to live, but then things started to go downhill from there. Mom and Dad eventually got divorced, and I had to move around a lot. The place that I used to live in changed, and I had to get used to new places. Now that I think more about it, I really moved around a lot, changed a lot of schools. It wasn't always easy.

But when I think of it, I remember being in grade 2- we were doing this Halloween art project, and mine looked liked a ribcage and I showed my teacher the work I

made. I said: "Mrs., Mrs.! Look at this!" and she replied, "Wow, one day you're going to be a doctor!" I said. Wow! So that was one of the cool moments that always stuck with me, I mean, wouldn't it something to be a doctor?

What I found from this though, is that people always have their mind set on a certain thing that everyone thinks is awesome, but I find we should break free from that. As artists, we should use our art and create many different things. Also, I loved adding cool meanings to my art; there were always these things in the back of my head, but I was without the chance to say them out in the open- can't we just be who we are?

I think my past had a big impact on the person I am today and it also impacted my art. Like most, I had a good childhood, certain parts were good, certain parts were rockier. I found we were always confined to do one thing- like males should do male things, females should do female things, but we liked to do both. It's tough to explain, but it was about breaking away from the gender roles, like do what you want and be who you want to be. You don't always have to be one certain thing in life and stick with it forever.

I must admit, the first time I came to the WOTP, was because I had a really rough time in school. The atmosphere of being in a classroom all the time wasn't really my thing. I would always hear other people talk about how WOTP people are stupid. This was crushing, and I felt terrible for quite awhile. In the JFK regular program- you're always confined to doing certain things that you might not like. For instance, when I would go to art class, we didn't really do much work- we learned different colors but that was pretty much it, as far as I recall. The problem is that you don't really use all of your imagination; you can't just go in the art room during lunch, grab some paint and go crazy with it.

The truth is that despite what others would say about WOTP students, I was already making friends the day I arrived. It just clicked, it's awesome here and when Mr. Tonin said, "well, we do this here, and we don't sit down in a classroom and study all day, we get up and move around"- I immediately thought: "why haven't been here all the time? This is what I loved to do."

Then I came here and met Mr. Tonin, Mr. Kazamias, and then I was like wow, we do cooler stuff than the regular school, we don't sit around all day, we get up, we grab things, we move, we do what we like to do and have fun doing it, we're not confined, we do regular school stuff that's because we need to, and we need that in life, but what they teach us here, is about getting a job, learning trades and what you need to succeed in the real world. Not sitting in a classroom, doing nothing but listening to your teacher talk. It's more hands on. We're very open, we're never just doing one thing at a time. We're not always sitting in a room, so our artworks are never plain and boring, it's always very big, it's more fun here, and on some days, yeah we slow it down, but sometimes that's just the way life is- that's what our artworks reflects.

At first, I briefly saw the artworks here, and then when I heard about the MMFA, I said to myself: “we have a museum in Montreal?” I never really knew about this, so when we were there, I saw everyone started to pour in, and heard many say: “they did that?” I would hear parents repeatedly say, “This is awesome, my son did this, my daughter did that, students made this?” In truth, just being there was an eye opener. I knew I had to try to be better or try to be the best I can be, at the very least. The paintings weren’t all the same; they were all so different. You walked past the art and could appreciate all the efforts that went into them.

If you remember this, you’ll know this was my first year- I didn’t really have artworks because it was previously made from last year. So I would walk around and think: “this is really cool, I’ve never done this type of art in my entire life” I saw these cool artworks and thought: “wow” that’s something I’m going to do? I would hear people say, “This is great work, I can’t believe students made this!” The students’ works are in the museum, and for that reason, I imagine parents were extremely proud of their kids, so I was truly excited; I wanted to do that, and we had a chance to do that as a group, which was an unforgettable experience.

Later on, we went to the Leonardo Da Vinci center to showcase our works. My sister’s friends came; they listened and looked around. One of her friends really loves art, so she took a good look at the artworks and said to me: “this is cool, I wish I would have done this”. The artwork I showed that night was about what beauty is. For instance, I tried to show the idea of beauty as being multiple things. But unfortunately, what we see in society today (hoping things will have progressed for when you read this) is that there’s only one sort of thing we’re supposed to find beautiful. To describe it, my artwork has hands that are holding a brain which is meant to represent how society functions. The brain is ours, while the hands are trying to show what beauty is, telling us we should be, or act this way, or another way, Well actually I think you can do whatever you want, and you don’t have to look like that. That’s what my artwork aims to show. The artwork I made was about society’s hands and they are grasping what you should think. What you find beautiful is up to you to decide. I mean, at your age today, ask yourself: “what do you think is beautiful?” It’s all about how you feel and think as an individual that’s beautiful. It’s just a matter of perception.

These days, what I like most is to experiment with art. There are many different types of art, and that’s what I like most about it. It’s very open, you can use your imagination, your skills, whatever you have, and if you’re a bad drawer, it doesn’t really matter, since everyone has a different way of perceiving art.

Art in my life now still plays a pretty big role, like I still love doing art, and I hope you enjoy it as much as you once did. It’s very relaxing, it gets to take things off your mind, and you can use your imagination to think critically. At this point, I think I can do certain work now and be open about it. At the end, I do what I want, be open, use my imagination and relax afterwards. Why do I love art so

much, you might ask. Well, I love doing it because it's just fun and I get to finally use my imagination to do something that's really cool and not just sit in my bed and dream of things. Here, at the WOTP art program, you can put your imagination to use. I remember Thibault would come in, and tell us we have artworks to do, and their going to be showcased in the museum or displayed, here at Concordia. We would sit down altogether and say "ok, this is the topic, and brainstorm with the team as to what we should do". That's when everything goes off. I was finally able to use everything in my brain and let it all out. That's how I felt when I made artworks then. And I was aware I wasn't the greatest artist in the world, but I had ideas., and that's what I thrived on. That's what I used.

After all, I remember new students would come in and we would invite them to make art by saying: "here, we have this entire room of supplies, go crazy-make art" If I could tell these new students anything, I would tell them not to be shy, and to not be confined like in a regular art class where you have to hand in your work at this specific time, and it has to be with done with clay. Here, we give you an idea, or a topic and we go crazy with it- that's what we do. I hope we thrive to be more open about what we can do and possibilities. Remember this, I would say- Art isn't just one thing: it's all about imagination.

Sincerely,

Romeo.

Monday, November 16th, 2016

Dear Mario,

I hope that time has been kind to you, and that you are doing well. Please accept this letter that you wrote when you were 16 years old, as a reminder of the person that you were at the time. Perhaps when you will read this, the written information below will provide you with a different aperture for how you once saw your place in the world, along with how you made sense of things within it.

Remember how I lived in a duplex on top of our grandparent's house? I used to go up and down to visit them, it's the Italian life style- always found myself spending time there, so I had been doing that for almost 14 years, until Mom and Dad separated. It was hectic, because sometimes they would fight a lot, but other than that, things were all right.

When I was younger, I don't recall making art and I had never done anything like that. My room was pretty bland looking; Plain, blue walls, and that was it- never had any art, but maybe a few pictures of others and myself on my dresser and that's how as far as it went. I'm sure you'll recall this, but Mom and Dad were never really artsy. Perhaps this is why the arts were never really important to me when I grew up. Our grandparents had pictures of Italy. Do you remember this? Pictures they took, and they also had this picture of Paris, I remember. It was all green; much like a penny after it's been rained on- it was pretty cool.

Our aunt from Ottawa would always bring me those crayons, a coloring book, and she would say, "don't color outside the line, be neat, color inside the lines, be creative and use different colors, do what you think is right" In small efforts, she would be the only one who would encourage me to be creative. However, do you remember our art instructor at the WOTP program? I'd have to say that since he came into the program, art became more influential: it was about creativity, experience, and exploring with what you think you like, and how you think you could make art from it all. But before that, there was really no art when I was growing up, and this was very unfortunate.

When I was younger, I wasn't able to do many things. For instance, I couldn't go outside because my parents were afraid they'd lose me, or fear I'd get in trouble. So in ways, I felt as if I was confined to my house and I couldn't really do much outside of it, but then, when I was around 16, I would take advantage of any opportunities to live life, because I was a bit older, and Mom had much more trust in me. From this point on, she would let me go out and experience new things that I may have missed out when I was younger. For this reason, I seek to view the world in a multitude of ways. I take pictures of stuff I think is good, so photography is important to me. If I see something really pulls my eye, and really

catches me, I'd take a picture and try to the best of my abilities to capture the moment, you know?

Come to think of it- that's what I think photography is. It's catching moments. In the moment, you can have the perfect lighting. It's very spontaneous. If it's natural, and it's just there, - It's calming and it's a lot nicer than things you have to plan and prepare, like naturalistic things are much more interesting to me. I hope they still are for you.

But above all, I think it's all about creativity- you're experiencing, trying different things, and more about exploring what you haven't learned. In regards to my photography practice, it's calming and relaxing. It's less stressful for me because when you're drawing, you can procrastinate, you think about what you're going to draw, or you may go through all these sketches before anything surfaces and for me, it's sort of imperfect. But as you may already know, I'm a perfectionist and I love everything that's always perfect, so if I draw a line that's imperfect, I'm going to crumble it up and throw it away. I don't want to go through that process every time, because it can be discouraging. Taking a picture is a lot less stressful in my opinion. If it doesn't work out, you take another one. For that, my practice evolved a lot. I've taken many pictures so far and at the WOTP, I get to document and do basically the filming of whatever we do to showcase to other people so they know what we do here. It is quite magical to be behind the scenes. Here, I've taken a lot of pictures of other people, portrait shots, you could call it; some wanted to be behind the green screen, while others in front of the WOTP logo, located at our front doors. I've also started my art there, my pictures. I remember the one I've taken of Ram- It made me feel good, my art being there, and then showcased in a community center and that people were looking at it.

I remember my friend Kim's artworks. She had a portrait of herself, her sister, and I think with a baby as well. It was a colourful picture of them- what they represented as family- so it was also like a portrait, but using different media - it was pretty nice! They had vibrant colors as far as I know and I really liked it. The colors popped. I think I really enjoyed watching other people look at the arts the WOTP made and hear all the compliments during the art shows. I was proud of Anthony when he got a scholarship from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. I was proud when he came and they offered him a scholarship. I think everybody had a good time. People didn't even see us as kids-they saw us as artists. They treated us like artists, they didn't say: 'oh these kids, you know they're just creative for the time being" and they didn't judge us poorly. They treated us like artists- like we actually did this art; they congratulated us, and did all that. It felt good. In other words, it felt like we did better than we were meant to do, or what was expected of us, at the very least. It felt really good being treated well and being seen mostly.

Art now is about perception. I view things differently now than I used to. When I was younger and less mature than I am now, I used to think that everything was just plain- like these are just regular colors, and they weren't really interesting- nothing special about them, but now that I've been introduced to art, I see things pretty differently: colours can blend in, and change and all that, and that changes aspects to what and how I see today.

But it all started here, at the WOTP. It's the way they teach you. They make learning a lot more exciting; they make it a lot more interesting. They make it so you can be more encouraged with what you want to do. In regular JFK, it gets very discouraging. You're not learning real-life things that you learn here, you sit at a desk for 75 minutes day on end, and you're just there learning how to read a book, which is nothing interesting. Maybe you'll learn a math question that perhaps, you will need in the future, but essentially at the WOTP, they teach you real world things, like what you actually need. JFK Regular teaches you all the things people think you should know. And they don't teach you the things you'll actually need. Like they send you out there in the real world with information you didn't need, and they just send you out there hoping you get a job, or that you find some sort of success. Here, at the WOTP, they teach you everything to their best abilities, they teach you as much as they can of the real-world things; things that matter.

It affected me greatly actually. Since I enrolled in the WOTP program, I became more mature, and learned many new things I wouldn't have had the chance to do otherwise- like for instance, construction- I wouldn't have learned that in JFK Regular. Working with my hands, I wouldn't have learned that over there. I would just be a pencil pusher just doing what they would tell me to do, here you can do what you can but within the parameters. Over there, you can't really do much. There they force you to learn, they push you to learn they expect you to learn on the spot. Here, at the WOTP, they take their time, and invest themselves to help you learn and grow as a person. I think the program is truly fantastic. I really hope it continues to succeed as it does now and throughout the future, I hope it gets bigger and more people see us that we continue to have more vernissages and maybe get something else at the museum- that would be pretty cool again. Go big or go home.

On this note, I have to go, but I hope you are proud today of all obstacles you have overcome in your past. Please don't forget to say hello to everyone, and don't forget where you are from!

Yours truly,

Mario

Monday, November 17, 2016

To Anthony,

My parents would have never expected me to do this now, but here I go:

I'm from Montreal. Growing up, I was mostly with my grandmother because my father was always working and my mother was still in university at the time. Today, I consider my grandmother a second mother to me. She really took care of me. I remember seeing my parents on the weekend; the bus would pick me up from my grandmother's house.

When I was younger though- the arts weren't really big. To me, the way teachers described it when I was in school was that being an artist is about drawing landscapes, and details, and I couldn't draw. I never felt like a drawing artist; I tried, but it didn't work. So that's why I think the arts were never really important to me while growing up. Back then, I felt that my father only ever cared about my grades, which was good but he never expected me to do what I do today. I know he's proud of me, but I don't think he expected that, because I honestly was never really big on art when growing up. Neither did I think I would come so far.

To put things into perspective, I remember once, it was mothers' day and the teacher at my old school basically gave us red hearts, pink hearts and a few red stickers asking us to glue them together. We were to give them to our mother and write "happy mothers' day" on it. I remember that because mom would put it on the fridge for like 5-6 years or more, and that's why I would remember it- I would always see it.

At first, my father wasn't really interested in my creative side; maybe he was, but he didn't really show it. My mom would encourage me, or push to continue for she saw I had something in it, she really wanted me to keep working at it. Everyone that would see my work eventually would say: "you're good- continue!" my teachers would tell me I'm good, and that support itself was motivating.

To be honest, I don't think my past had an affect on me today; growing up, I would always think that to be an artist is to be a good at drawing. Yet when I was young, I never had a spatula and different tools to create and recreate my thoughts through art, so that changes things too.

But just a few years ago, I was on a rough path, if I'm going to be honest here- I was hanging with the wrong crowds and smoking drugs. I was later enrolled in the WOTP at JFK, and their program started me, you know. If I didn't come here, I probably would have been a criminal today, or a delinquent. I would still be

doing drugs; I probably would have been selling drugs. WOTP saved me and started me in a sense. But one thing you are to remember about WOTP is that it's not like regular high school. They teach you things they normally wouldn't teach you in a regular high school. In a sense, you're treated more like an adult, and not a kid. You know, you're treated with more respect, you learn to respect more, and if you ever do wrong, you're not just given trouble- you're told why, once you did it, and what caused it afterwards.

Even when I got here in the beginning I still thought the arts were bullshit. I thought the arts were going to do nothing for my life. I figured I was just going to focus on academics you know, but without disrespect- I want to tell you the truth: even when I got here, I was still in a rough patch and doing a bit of drugs, but one day I went out and did drugs, smoked- did what I had to do, and came back to class, stoned. Thibault presented Gerhard Richter. During that time I wasn't even really paying attention and stuff- I was stoned and I didn't hear anything. Then we had to get up, and do work with the spatula. I didn't even know what I was doing but I took two random colours, and I just did it, that's what I remember.

The theme was *Heart*. To refresh your memory, I had to do a painting that described heart and stuff like that. One day after class, Thibault told me: "this is the theme, let's see what you can do right now, on the spot". So I took this giant sheet of paper, I took a whole bunch of colours, and I created. I blended them all. One side was black, with still some bright colours, on the other side it was all bright colours, yellow, blue, orange, red, and in the middle- I tried to draw this heart. A red heart, and inside was pinkish, with a little bit of black I think. And later Thibault came to me and said "wow, what does this represent to you?" And I said: "well, it's *heart*, so and there's good and there's bad" Not everybody is good, and not everybody is bad. I feel this work really captured all that I was feeling and going through at the time.

I do art today so I could be proud of myself, so that I could say, "ok this guy's a lawyer and he's good at what he does" Well, I want to tell people that I'm good at what I did and that I could show something for it too. At least I did something good, and that felt great. I never thought I could get somewhere with my paintings, and once they were showcased at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, I told myself, it could happen. You don't have to be a good drawer; you could do other types of art too. My cousin who draws well said to me "what you do is the new thing, what I do is old", so you should be proud, and I hope you remember that".

In general, I was shocked we showcased at the museum- I was also surprised. To begin, I didn't think many people would come; I didn't think anybody would appreciate my work and my paintings in particular. When my family members came, at first I figured they weren't going to like my works and that they're just going to say they liked it to make me happy, but I thought they'd be lying. But I know they really liked my art, and it their reactions were honest- you could

simply tell. This became an unforgettable moment for me- to see my family take pride in my paintings. So many people took pictures, I thought “wow, I’m that good?” And then I got more interested at that time, more into it. You know, I was happy.

Looking at all of this today, I see the world in a different view. The arts are more important now; they have become a big part of my life and created a big impact on it, I think it’s safe to say the arts impacted me to do good, more good than bad, in a sense, They helped me to calm down a bit sometimes, when I feel I need to slow things down- the arts have helped a lot, they really did become a big part of my life.

But to be honest, the people I care who see my art the most, is mainly my family, if other people see it, it’s great, they meet me that one time and show their appreciation you know, but I really care about my family seeing it. Painting has kept busy. This is all so unreal; I remember once I was painting, and Thibault said to me “you’ve found your talent” At first, I didn’t really quite believe it, but as we got more into it, I’m like, he could be right, and he was right.

I guess I’ll leave it on that note, but I think it would be good for you to read this later in life. Keep out of trouble, and if you’re ever down, just think back at all the possibilities you never thought could be.

Sincerely,

A. Villela.

To Anthony Tonin,

Anthony! Here I am, doing this research project with the 'Bolt-man'. You'll get to meet him eventually. Actually, the reason I am writing you today, is because of him. He's asked me if I wanted to be part of his research project, and I agreed. So here it goes. Writing this letter is definitely an interesting process, but I can imagine it will help you understand a bit of who you are becoming, and a few examples of what I do today. Rest assured: you are a teaching, just as I always wanted. Remember the original plan? I always wanted to be an elementary school teacher, actually.

Let me tell you a bit about how it all happened. After I graduated from McGill with a degree in Education, I was approached by somebody who worked in a special needs high school. This person told me about their school, told me there was a spot available, and that they would like to have me, and that's how I ended up in the English Montreal School Board, where you will remain for over twelve years, so far. After three years of teaching students in the behavioural modification program, I had the opportunity to come and run what was then known as the 16+ program. So my program is now at JFK and I inherited that program. But the government changed the name of programs and it became the WOTP, Work Oriented training pathways. I am now one of the teachers of the WOTP still at JFK, so this is my 12th consecutive year running our Work-study Program. So that's the history.

You may remember this, but it was clear that I had no traditional artistic talent as a child. Meaning, I couldn't draw- because that's basically what we did. I ended up hating the arts because in elementary school, it was often: "make a drawing of this, make a drawing of that". We didn't have much art in our elementary school, we were a pretty poor school. So we didn't have much resources. So when I made art, I would get made fun of because of course, the teacher back then didn't have the same sensitivity that they have now. But I did learn to not take it necessarily as an insult. This really taught me to be self-critical, and those skills transfer over to what I do today. So once elementary school was over, art was not compulsory, so when I say avoided it at all cost- I took no art classes after that, because again, there were only drawing or painting classes, so I avoided those like the plague. At the time, my concentration was now on other things. So it's strange that I grew up as somebody that hated anything that had the concept of art attached to it, and it's weird how I ended up having to teach art. So that's an interesting thing, which I'll get to explain in a minute.

With all this said, I always had a lot of good ideas- I had the ideas; I didn't have the execution. There were other forms of art that I was really good in. I was a good actor; a performance art type of guy. Even though I had no raw, traditional artistic talent, the teachers went it came down to creativity, would always point me out as somebody that was able to generate ideas. It showed that what they did when they were laughing at me, because of my art was just a lack of training and sensitivity back then, but my teachers were very good to me- which is why I eventually wanted to become a teacher.

Fast forward to the present, at least the year 2016. You're teaching in the WOTP- that's the crew. Let me tell you about the WOTP program and its students. I think it's important for you to know. The WOTP it's for students between 15 and up to 21 yrs old who are not seeing any success in

regular high school, they probably want to drop out, or are a high candidate for becoming a drop out. Unfortunately, they're not likely to ever graduate from high school, but it doesn't mean that it's impossible. These students are being given the chance to get caught up on basic academics. And at the same time, get a taste for education from a different perspective- and that's where you come in. Also, they have different courses than everybody else and they have stages, and so the students take part in a stage program, one or two days a week. So that gives them a different perspective on life. A lot of them aren't interested in school. We run things as project-based learning. So we're not in the traditional class, where we're in books all the time, sitting at a desk- we learn by doing activities and by partaking in various projects within the school, and I think that's how we can get the most out of them.

Now, why did I pick art to be in this program if I hate it so much? And why would I teach something that I hate, and then again, how would I even be able to teach something that I hate? So at first, art was brought in, simply because it was gonna be done for credit. Naturally, having somebody who's not comfortable with art wouldn't have made that experience that good for the students. You're an animated teacher, you bring in a lot of personality, you have a lot of energy. I'm sure I would have found something that they would have liked, but there's no way I was able to fake skills at something I was not skilled in, and having never taught art before, I didn't know how vast the realm of arts was. Let's face it: I was in a lot of trouble, and I wasn't sure how things would eventually go down.

Then, here's where everything turned around.

The school had some money to work with a community organization Youth Fusion, and said they were going to send an "artist" to help us make a mural and this could be included in as part of our art class. From that point, everything art related in the WOTP changed. He came in, and he brought a totally different mindset, and really put things into perspective. He brought a different form of energy into the room, and showed us that you don't need a lot of natural raw artistic talent to be able to produce beautiful art. And that's especially what he taught the kids. He did the opposite of what I thought was going to happen. At that point, the art that started coming out of the students was so different and so vast, that we didn't work here by a set sort of lesson type of design art, where everybody was like: "ok- today we're all making a painting with acrylic, or today we are all making a collage, or today, we are all free-style drawing". That's not how it worked here. Students were shown different forms of art, different techniques, different medium, and using different art material. From there, everyone got to try it, but nobody was forced to roll with it after they've had the chance to try it.

It was almost an individual plan or project for each student except for when they were collaborating. It was so unique to each kid, and that's what made things magical over here, it's not that we were all doing the same thing unlike a regular class because students there, are forced to do all the same thing.

So the idea of trying, and choosing and then rolling with your choice was really cool because it got the most out of them. From this, we were teaching them the fundamentals of what a strong artist is able to do, and that's make personal connections between their work and anything else that becomes their lives and being able to communicate and express those connections to their

audience, classmates or viewers, and being able to do that, made them much more powerful artists

And that's what made art special.

The kids expressed themselves through their work. I now think of one student in particular. You'll eventually get to teach him. But in regards to his art, there's a reason why he creates the pieces that he does. There's a reason why he takes paints, and literally creates a mish-mash mixup with it. That's because that's what this kid's life had been, for the longest time. And it was only then that there was some sort of semblance, direction and order coming together with him. When I look at his art, it reminds me of somebody who's grown up, living that way. Now, they are beautiful works of art, but they display the sadness that he had been through, but what I like, is that he started to think a little bit more when he created, which showed that his life was starting to come back together a little bit. And I think if we look at his first works, and fast forward to now, we can see more order and more thought in his process.

he's more grounded than he used to be, he's more confident in himself, he feels better about himself, and he's had the chance to get his life back in order. So I think that his work tells a story.

Eventually, we ended up showcasing our artworks at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as a group. Can you believe it? But you know, it was all about the students- they felt like they were red carpet VIPs for a night, and in essence they were- and you could see a real appreciation for their work but also an appreciation of their part for what was being done for them, and an appreciation of the fact that they were being appreciated. You could see just by the way the students showed up with their friends and their families, there was such a great amount of pride there. It was truly an unforgettable event. Just hearing people pay homage to them and their work was a unique experience. Hopefully, it's something that they'll experience again, but for a lot of them it, it'll be something that they'll remember for the rest of their lives.

I tell you, Anthony- I felt in awe that night. It was really a surreal. There was such an overwhelming feeling of gratitude. All the partners came together to make this happen for these kids, and sometimes it's hard to believe how much it means to them. My deepest emotions all have to do with knowing how important this was for the kids. It had opened up a new realm of personal creativity that the kids could express that wasn't in our program when the art started. In the past, we were much more 'working in the box' before art came, and this introduction to our program has enabled us to allow the students to start working outside of the box. There was very little room for personal creativity, personal expression within the classes we were able to have here. Earlier in this letter, I stated how much I had little to no experience as an art teacher, let alone an artist. Yet, the fact that I embraced it and even though it was outside of my comfort zone, I gave it a chance, let it happen and it led to so much more than what I had imagined. It had built up the students' self-confidence so much. It built up their abilities to communicate their feelings, to communicate through artworks, to show emotions and it also allowed them to socialize with each other, to work more collaboratively, in physical tasks, which is a team building exercise that you can't put a price tag on . So it allowed for partnerships to be built. Now it has much less to do with a raw talent, and more with ideas, creativity, and the ability to collaborate.

What I've learned from this, is that as a teacher, you're still a student and you're constantly learning. And art brought an unknown tool that I could use with my students, to get them to become more productive, global students than what they used to be. Also, the introduction of art presented me with sort of an epiphany; it was sitting there the whole time that I've been a teacher and I would have never thought to use it. And believe this, Anthony, all it took for me to sort of overcoming my past with art and say "no" forget about that, and let's take this because these kids like it. And it's hard to coach kids, into taking risks You have to find a way that makes them feel, not-judged, and not under the microscope and allowed to make mistakes. This transfers into other academics where before it was just pen and paper, and it was right with a blue check-mark, or wrong with a red-x. And art allowed them to do that because there's no blue pens—and no red pens. There's no checks and no X's

Looking at it now, we were able to go further with our learning because of what art brought in to us, and that has made me a better teacher. One of the great things about art is that you can tie it in to anything. If you use your creativity, (and never forget that is part of our jobs, as teacher) you can find connections between the subjects. Our next plan over here: we're tying art into math, we're tying it to entrepreneurship, and to creating a business; this years' goal is to create our own art gallery at the school, so that the students can their work up permanently, and that we can have a physical space for their works to be appreciated by all the school, and the school community.

We've discovered how important it is to the kids, and how much value they get out of knowing that their work is going to be out there for other people to see. Because of this, they're probably thinking: "I want to step it up! I want to make sure I do my best possible work here, that I am as meticulous as possible". These are all skills that transfer; And not only to other subjects in the school, but that are going stay with them for the rest of their lives- it's teaching them to get there, and that's another cross curricular value that we're getting to them, and again, it's not just a school education career- it's a life skill that we're bringing to them. And that's bigtime- think an academic class that allows you to prepare that way. It's one thing to prepare to take a test, but that doesn't give you the same pressure, because there's nobody outside of the class other than the teacher who's going be looking at that test.

What we've done here- it's something I'm always going to keep with me, and keep transferring to every project that we do. As a teacher, sometimes we tend to be too hands-on, and do too much. One thing is to be perfect in a way, but we tend to think we always know better than the kids, and we don't have enough confidence in them to let them explore, and I think we have to let go of that sometimes. At least, I know you will.

Until then,

Anthony Tonin.

To Joe V,

It has been awhile. I apologize for not getting in touch with you sooner. As you can imagine, things have been quite busy on my end, and for that reason, I wish to take a moment, and reconnect with you in order to reconcile my past with how I run my school today. I would also like to take the time to inform you of a special alternative program that is growing at John F. Kennedy High School. But first, let me tell you about who I am, where I'm from, and what I do today.

I went to public school in Montreal. Graduated from Pearson: where I'm the principal now. As a youth, I was very much involved. Art was always my favorite subject as a kid, and my aunt was very much into art. She studied art history, so we were always exposed to art within my family. I always took on different projects with her, and then that's something that I kept up with even later in life. She really got us into it, you know? She exposed us to different things: painting, sculpting, you name it, we'd do it with her, and I think those are some of my most vivid memories of my youth; exploring the arts through the projects that we'd work on together with my aunt.

The thing about her was that she used to just let us express ourselves the way we wanted with the arts- like I remember doing watercolors with her, and I know she still has the works up in her house...she has a scrapbook with all of our stuff in it, and it's all still there. Can you believe it? She kept it all. It doesn't look very nice, but you'll come to understand how things don't always have to look nice to have a powerful impact.

In school, we'd have art maybe once a week, and I used to look forward to that- I used to like to do art in class, because it didn't happen every day, it was something I that I couldn't always do at home, you know? The teacher would always have exciting projects that I wasn't exposed to at home. Come to think of it, this is even before kindergarten. I remember grade one, grade two, waiting for Art because we'd work with clay, and I never used clay at home, while in school, we used different types of medium that way.

As you may have already guessed, I am now a school principal, and there is this alternative program that I must tell you about. It has done some amazing things recently; I am thrilled to share it with you. It's called the WOTP. So basically the WOTP program is an alternative program that's offered in this school. We're one of the only regular high schools that have this program offered to the students. It's for students that are working at a level that is behind the rest of their peers. These are the types of students that probably would not graduate and probably drop out, so they are "at-risk" student. These are kids that used to be in trouble at the office, and I was the VP before I was the Principal, and with them, it was constant truancy, not coming to school, leaving early, and not telling anyone about it.

To counter this, the WOTP program is a place where they're able to feel success at their pace because the teachers work very closely with the students- it's a small group, it's only about 12 students- and basically the students work at their pace and maybe catch up, some students rejoin the regular program, but most of the students will eventually go to work,

and part of the WOTP is to go to a stage, three days a week. So basically it is a “high-risk” population and it’s a lot of “hands-on” work in the classroom of the WOTP, a lot of moving around, if they don’t get in the regular classroom, and it keeps them motivated.

Understandably, the teaching strategies are very different than the rest of the school, because of the level that the kids have. It’s more like a one on one, one on small groups. The teachers are very creative in the way that they handle the students in the classroom, and they’ll work with students on different and specific subjects, a lot of moving around, and a lot of getting kids to do different things that they feel comfortable with so that they feel the success that perhaps they didn’t feel in their other classes. So it’s very unconventional teaching. The teachers have to be creative, and motivated and they have to show they care for the kids. The kids have to feel safe in their environment, and that is so important for you to remember, as a school principal.

Having seen how they work on their projects, it truly fits the “hands-on” approach. It allows them to be creative- they’re able to express themselves in a way that maybe they weren’t able to before; the fact that they’re working on projects together, I think unites the class as well, even though they have their individual projects. Although, bigger projects actually bring the group together, yet more importantly, I think it shows the love of their own works once it’s done, and it gives them a sense of pride that they’ve never had before, and I saw it myself with the two vernissages that we had and the kids were super excited.

In the WOTP, they really make non-traditional art, would be how I would describe it- almost abstract. Very different. This has had a very positive effect on their self-esteem, I mean they’re not limited in terms of what they’re able to do with their art projects; I think they’ve been given a blank canvas with guidance, so they’re not restricted and they’re really able to go at their own ideas, and really produce something that they’re comfortable with. They’ve produced amazing work, and the pride is there- you see it when you visit, the kids- they’re super happy. And the best part is that now the kids are in school and they’re loving it, and it’s these projects, like these various art projects that keep them hooked.

We’ve had official, formal vernissages that allow the students to put their work out for public display. There’s also been in-house vernissages as well, just some exhibits that have been set up that we visited, that was open to the students and I came up to see them with some of the staff members. I remember the kids made body parts, and put together an exhibition called “the heart for art”, amongst varied type of other art projects that included painting, murals, and sculptures.

As a principal, the first thing I need to say is that their art programming and vernissage events were a great success, I mean there was always a huge turnout, I mean, families came out, faculties came out, students came out, and I think that for them, it was their pride that night. To see how proud everybody was of them- it was very successful, very organized, it had class. It brought the community together, and remember, these are the kids you would least expect this from, so to see them on the vernissage night, especially, when we did the second vernissage at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, that evening there was, high end stuff, we were super proud and it kept them motivated to want to do more afterwards.

To be honest, it was a very touching evening for me as person, I mean forget that I'm the principal, but to see these kids with a smile on their face and a glow in their eyes, talking about their artwork, and everybody left that evening touched, and proud and happy. I truly think that it has kept them interested in school it's given them a purpose. Yet, the arts there motivated them to do the academics as well. I know that arts can be very interdisciplinary, so the arts were brought in to different subject areas, so it was cross curricular. In the WOTP, they would do academics two days a week and go off to stage three days a week. So now that they have the art incorporated into it, it brought everything together, whereas it wasn't just work and school, it was work, school and then expressing yourself through having fun which I find very important. It's a very well balanced sense of environment in think.

Today, I still paint, when I have time- usually in the summer. I explored different types of art, it's always been there, but with different roles that you take on, you have less time to be able to do it, but I think it's helped me to be able to express myself, keep creative, and it also takes you away from the reality, when you're involved in it so much, and I think that's how it impacted me now- it's a way to kind of escape. I was doing a lot of landscapes, I stopped when I started teaching because I didn't have time, and then recently, for about four years, I've done a painting here and there. More on request from people, but I like it.

Where will you take the WOTP program, I often ask myself. I also remember that it's only been growing since it's been there, so I think it's going far with you. I think that the exposure that they've in the last few years has gotten everybody excited, not only the students, the teachers, and the school itself. These are not your kids that teachers necessarily wanted in their classes, they had their heads down, they were often not in school, they were basically the students that had nothing else to do than to cause trouble because they couldn't keep up because the material was above their heads, I think they surprised a lot of the staff members at the school in their talent, and I think it's changed the perspectives of how they are now viewed by the staff members that had trouble with them. So the exposure not only built their self-esteem, but painted a positive picture of what these kids can do, and it's changed the views of the people that they exposed to because that wasn't the view they ever had of them, so having come to the vernissage, they were a lot of staff members there, you could tell they were like "omg, you did this?!" So I think they had like a hidden talent that no one ever knew about, and I guess it made a different relationship to the teacher that they had, and kind of smoothed over any, let's say 'bad blood' that they might have had for any trouble that they caused in the past, so it almost gave them a fresh start. Like a blank canvas. But a blank canvas, is usually where it all begins.

Take good care of yourself,

Joe.

Dear Thibault,

I hope this letter finds you well. I know we haven't spoken in awhile, and believe me, quite a lot has happened since we last talked. I am writing you today because I wanted you to know that although things may be difficult for you in the future, everything is going to be all right, so please rest assured. I am writing you this letter as a testament of my life of which you may already be experiencing. In this text, I take into account where I come from, what I do today, and most importantly, why I do it. Please find enclosed stories and artworks from your future colleagues, which may be of help, as you will get to know them a little better. Their lives are quite extraordinary, I might add, and something tells me you will really enjoy working with them, when the time comes.

In the meantime, you may already know this- but I wanted to remind you that after I grew up in a bunch of places all over the world, such as the city of Lyon, up until I was 11 years old. If anything, that was the place that was home to me up until I lived in the states, in a little place called Allentown Pennsylvania. I eventually realized that, to me, the idea of home is like not one place that is fixed, it was more like different places, and thus, I don't know where I could call home today.

When growing up, there were a lot of arts in the house and I think Mom and Dad always had a general interest in the arts. As such, the arts were a part of my life in ways that were more hidden, or subtle; for instance, I remember Mom took framing lessons but I could definitely say that in my household, we supported the arts. Personally, I always preferred drawing and painting, but a particular project spoke to me for some odd reason; I remember in France making a paper mosaic. I forgot at what age, but I was much younger. I had a postcard, of a house and I remember tracing the outlines of the house, and we ripped out different coloured pieces of paper from magazines then we'd put the pieces of paper on the walls, and it made a really nice looking mosaic of the house there. So that was one the artworks I remember the most I think.

Eventually, things took a turn for the worst. When I moved from France and went to the states, I was lost. I remember not being to speak English, and consequentially, I was bullied in school. I had a really hard time expressing myself and when kids picked at me, I wasn't really able to fight back. Surely, these were very difficult moments in my youth.

At that time, I would seclude myself and go in the basement and sketch and draw designs and that's when art became really important for me; it was almost like a coping mechanism. I hope it works for you too. I remember tattoo art, and tattoo designs being something that really uplifted my spirit- and drawing designs was a way for me to keep productive and apply myself at something I felt I was good at. Doing this helped me get through my High school days while living in the states. My friends- also helped me, in ways, they were the ones approving the type of

work that I was doing, which created a nice little community of learners and artists. I must admit they'll play an important role in your life for that reason.

Fast-forward a few years later, I ended up living in Canada where I now remember one of my teachers- he was really skilled and a great artist. I remember he was helping me to draw more tattoo-oriented designs and that he really helped me out a lot on the more technical side. Yet before that, I had very few people that I think helped me to be creative to the point at which I am today.

As a practicing artist today, the idea of painting large scale to me is fascinating and serves as a source of motivation for all I do. When I see artworks being created, it's all about that creativity behind what a painting is that's especially interesting. In many ways, painting is freeing- it liberates me, it makes me feel like I'm really in charge of my own creative freedom and nothing else matters to me. In fact, I think it's another form of writing, or communicating with people. The process of refining a painting makes me feel like I'm good at something. I'm proudest to this day that the little bit of curiosity that I had when I was younger, at around your age, developed as an art practice. It keeps me grounded, and for me, it's a way to keep it real in this world.

Usually, I like to do figurative works that are more with a contemporary twist and for awhile I was painting a lot of portraits.

Now that I am in graduate school, it's very tough to paint because I don't have so much time and that's something I really regret right now. Today, I teach, and I get a lot of ideas from the students, and to me that's very interesting and we explore together more than anything else, we explore techniques and ideas, and imagine possibilities as a group.

I see my students at JFK coming up with some awesome things and then it inspires me to create something for myself; it's a nice balance.

I never thought my road would lead to teaching art to students your age, but at the end of the day, I feel grateful for that opportunity. Even though you will face many obstacles throughout your journey that will appear to be preventing you to do the things you want, remember this: do your best, and forget the rest. Tell everyone I said hello, that I love them all dearly, and please, do take care of yourself and those around you.

Yours truly,

Thibault

Chapter 5: We did better than we were meant to do.

After having the transcripts and stories member-checked by all participants in this research study, I proceeded to analyze the data in order to make greater sense of the findings that can be interpreted from my participants' texts. As part of this narrative inquiry, I was deeply engaged in writing the participants' stories as well as my own, which in turn, opened my eyes to Anthony, Mario, Romeo, Mr. Tonin and Mr. V's lived experiences, but I also experienced new understandings embedded in their stories. Those insights were developed through constant work with the data before and after the data collection. This began with my prolonged engagement in the field which attuned my dispositions to the themes that had emerged within the stories collected.

By interrogating the participants' stories as well as my own, I had collected well over twenty pages of data that needed to be categorized for content analysis. As such, I developed and used a thematic matrix that displayed the themes and subthemes emergent from the stories to render my analysis accurate, and thus to visualize my findings in an organized fashion. I recognized from the very start that conducting this analysis in hand coding was no easy task (Creswell, 2014). As a matter of fact, I began to trust the process as Van Den Hoonaard (2015) suggested, and "...had faith that there are more important themes in [my] data that [I] had the insight and skill to tie together in meaningful ways" (p. 155). The process became increasingly exciting because of the open-ended approach taken. In this way the stories began to come alive, and at several moments in the process, research was then intrinsically emergent from the participants' voices, as they told and retold moments. It was then I began to see thematic strands and attend to potentialities in the data set. Collectively the participants told me about the learning

and making of art that mattered to them. Aspects of process that had awakened them. Lived moments that had hurt them. What they had experienced in learning situations that led to personal discoveries. And, most significantly from a pedagogic perspective, the sense of caring that gave them hope and that had changed them. And in so doing, they told me what I needed to hear as a researcher, regardless of what my preconceived ideas may have been, it was my ethical duty to follow their lead. Such preconceived ideas surrounded the notion that students' implication in this research project would be limited due to the fact that some experience difficulty with the act of reading, writing and studying in general. After studying the stories extensively, I had 'winnowed' the data, which is a process where "the researcher focuses in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it" (Creswell, 2014. p 195) in order to aggregate the data into small number of themes that summarize my findings.

Throughout the data analysis stage of my research project, I kept reminding myself that my goal in this was not to only answer my driving questions for this narrative inquiry, but that I aimed to interrogate the salient points, and the experiences that developed within the participants' stories. Essentially, Van Den Hoonaard (2015) reminds us that:

A primary goal of qualitative research is to understand the participant's situation from his or her point of view. Because the participant is an expert is the expert on his or her own life, you can understand the data only if you know what the data mean to each participant (p. 162).

I applied a constant-comparison approach to the stories which allowed for the core themes and subthemes to become more prominent in my interpretations of the data. At this point in my analysis, I quickly realized where the data was taking me since the categories, or subthemes, exposed themselves throughout the process of studying the written stories.

On the margins of printed page, I classified themes by, “segmenting sentences [...] into categories, and labeling those categories with a term [that was often] based in the actual language of the participants, called in vivo term” (Creswell, 2014, p. 198). This procedure allowed me to gain further insights into the participants’ lives, as well as my own while retaining the salient parts of their stories. In so doing, categories emerged as subthemes, which in turn, constructed major themes. Then I verified by drawing on supporting, verbatim quotes in the thematic matrix (see Appendix D) to support those findings, thus making connections between the results from the study and my interpretation of the data gathered in this study.

In essence, the process of conducting data analysis for this research project proved to be quite challenging at times. I often found that the data was somewhat ambiguous, resulting in a challenging scenario wherein the same data and quotes could be organized under different categories. I then realized how interpretative the task of analyzing the data can be. As such, I noted a few overarching themes and subthemes, but I ensured that those that were retained and emphasized supported integral parts of the participants’ stories. This enabled me to develop understandings that the stories held many rich and diverse ways of interpreting the data, and another researcher may take up this data set and generate a different set of findings. Moreover, this diversity and plurality also demonstrates the complexities of each participants’ situations, as they narrated their stories from multiple perspectives (past self and future self) with various emphases. As an example, Romeo, Anthony and Mario’s stories highlight very different “plots, settings, activities, climaxes and denouements” (Creswell, 2014, p. 196) than Mr. V, Mr. Tonin’s and my own narrative account, suggesting that present life stages are definitive in the stories we share and how

we assess our compelling points of view that do shift over the course of one's life. Simply, a decade from now we will all recall the research project with different understandings and from diverse points of view. This reminds us that we are all always evolving in our ways of being in the world and that stories are representations of who we are in a given place and time. Given these conditions, the final themes and the subthemes are as follows:

1. **Pedagogies** – subthemes: WOTP teaching methods; regular JFK recollections; program outcomes;
2. **Belonging** – subthemes: Community support; family; lack of support;
3. **Identities** – subthemes: Artist identity; teacher-training and identity; pride.

My research interpretations aim to open spaces where inquiry can lead to more questioning and curiosity associated to the WOTP program and/or other alternative education programs for disenfranchised teens. The hope that dwells deep within me wishes that artists, researchers and educators may draw from this analysis and realize that new sets of questions need to be asked in relation to such programs for the betterment of the educational system. My advocacy for marginalized learners remains at the forefront of my interpretations, and this is evident in the themes that have emerged as a result. These questions may be raised from my interpretation of the data and analysis presented below, that I, as the key instrumentalist, did not foresee, or anticipated earlier in this study (Creswell, 2014).

Thematic Interpretations

Theme: **Pedagogies**

The definition of “pedagogy” (derived from “pedagogies”) is: “the art, science, or profession of teaching” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Such a broad definition reflected the scope of discussion in this study, where inevitably all participants stated this was of central importance and each spoken from different standpoints. From my interpretation and within the context of this research, I choose to define this term as the various modes in which education took form in the participants’ lives. Students were very vocal in regards to how they were taught within the WOTP program, but they also chose to elaborate on how this particular program affected them personally; how the program differed from the regular JFK program; and how being a part of this special program has in fact changed their outlook on the school system and pedagogy. The pedagogies witnessed in the WOTP program have shown me as a researcher, that education extends beyond traditional classroom teachings. As such, it was evident that critical modes of pedagogy were then employed as part of the WOTP program to help empower students as social individuals, but also as a connected, community of learners wherein teachers are learn alike.

Subtheme: WOTP teaching methods

Assessing more specifically the participants’ learning experiences has allowed me to gain a -deeper understanding of how the WOTP program functions. Most interestingly, the participants offered evaluation on the benefits and limitations on how the learning occurs in this alternative program from the perspective of student and teacher. It was no surprise that the students, along with Mr. Tonin and Mr. V, discussed extensively on how learning occurred, but also how the teaching, or use of instructional strategies within the

WOTP program distinctly differed from the ‘regular JFK program’, a term that each participant in my study referred to on several occasions.

Overall the term ‘teaching method’ refers to modes and approaches in which the WOTP teachers share their knowledge with their learners. . In my analysis, I concluded that the depictions of the WOTP program’s various student-centered teaching methods were evident in the participants’ stories. McCabe & O’Connor (2014) suggest that “a student-centred approach encompasses four fundamental features: active responsibility for learning, proactive management of learning experience, independent knowledge construction and teachers as facilitators “ (p. 351). These specific features were especially portrayed in the participants’ letters. Their stories portrayed how the teaching methods employed in the program are being meaningful accommodations to the student learning, and in ways that are in contrast to the regular program. The student-centered pedagogy instilled in the WOTP echoed in the participants’ stories, through a series of narrated depictions of the program. They display that such instructional approach are “tend to be considered pedagogically superior to the surface delivery commonly associated with a teacher- centred approach” (McCabe & O’Connor, 2014, p. 351) that can be found in the regular JFK program.

In my review of Mr. Tonin’s story, I was able to describe the pedagogy employed in the program:

they [the students] have different courses than everybody else and they have stages, and so the students take part in a stage program, one or two days a week. So that gives them a different perspective on life. A lot of them aren’t interested in school. We run things as project-based learning.

In all of my experiences with education, I have seldom seen a school teacher who has come to understand his/her students' situations so well, and that has been able to reform his/her teaching praxis in order to accommodate the students' learning. When Mr. Tonin was prompted further to speak about the student learning and the teaching that occurred in the program that he oversees, he stated, "...it was almost an individual plan or project for each student except for when they were collaborating. It was so unique to each kid, and that's what made things magical over here." I personally believe Mr. Tonin's reference to pedagogy as something 'magical' reflects the caring and nurturing aspects of this program. This truly encapsulated the love he has for the program, and the care he bestows upon his students. Mr. Tonin, a seasoned teacher with over twelve years of experience, refused to be jaded by the heavy workload generally associated to teachers with disenfranchised teens. In his story, he chose to discuss and elaborate the art programming that has become essential to the WOTP. Yet, a true teacher and student at heart, he noted that the learning from his end occurred while integrating an art programming. He referred back to his teaching praxis, stating that prior to the arts in the WOTP, they were working much more 'in the box', while "the introduction [of art] to our program, has enabled us to allow the students to start working outside the box." Art was a simple but revolutionary shift in orientation that has continued to be strengthened and to strengthen the program as a whole.

Meanwhile, Mr. V, the school principal who is a great supporter and ally of the WOTP program, has reinforced the claims made by the aforementioned participants in regards to the diverse and creative teaching methods employed in the WOTP program. Mr. V noted that "it's very unconventional teaching. The teachers have to be creative, and motivated and they have to show they care for the kids. The kids have to feel safe in their

environment.” As a researcher, this statement beautifully ties in the notion that the WOTP has created and opened space for meaningful teaching, through arguably unconventional, but pertinent teaching methods that have invited students to feel welcomed as pupils of a real-world educational agenda, in contrast to regular classes and traditional teaching methods. For example, students had eagerly addressed how the WOTP program teaches them about ‘real-world’ skills for which education then extends beyond the walls of the school. The WOTP’s stage program invites learners to apply their learning to a real-world context, one for which students are able to connect with members of their community.

Romeo, who spoke very fondly of the learning that consistently takes place in the WOTP stated:

it’s awesome here and when Mr. Tonin said, ‘well, we do this here, and we don’t sit down in a classroom and study all day, we get up and move around,’ I immediately thought, ‘why haven’t I been here all the time? This is what I loved to do

From this discussion, I immediately became aware of how important it was for the students to feel as if they are not just sitting down in a typical classroom, where teachers dictate knowledge, transcending this from a top-down approach (which I refer to in Chapter 2). It was student-centered learning and flexibility in the curriculum that allowed WOTP to open learning spaces for their students. The teachers have been deeply and actively invested in the program which in turn created a significant difference in the students’ sense of, and desire to engage in learning. This deep appreciation for the WOTP faculty and pedagogy implemented was quintessentially found within the students’ stories.

Mario added that “here at the WOTP, they teach you real world things, like things you’ll actually need.” He then ventured further, when prompted to speak more about the

program, that “at the WOTP, they [teachers] teach you everything to their best abilities, they teach you as much as they can of the real-world things; Things that matter”. I often remind myself, as a teacher-researcher, how vital this context was to the opportunity of learning, and when this emerged across the student and teacher stories, I realised that this was at the heart of the program’s success. Students have this capacity to inform us, as artists, teachers and researchers, so concretely and with absolute forthrightness on what actually matters to them. I believe our job as teachers is to then take up those comments and revise our curriculum. I then subsequently deliberated with myself, on how we are able to silence the voices of youths by automatically thinking that we always know what is best for them. In this way, I recognized that new cooperative relationships that are “...central to the philosophy of [student-centred learning] which sees learning as taking place in a constructive interaction between the two groups” (McCable & O’Connor, 2014, p. 351) need to be re-established to provide student advocacy for meaningful learning.

Mario also mentioned in his letter how the WOTP program teaches students about the real-world things. He emphasised this repeatedly when describing the program: “...what they teach us here is about getting a job, learning trades and what you need to succeed in the real world. Not sitting in a classroom, doing nothing but listening to your teacher talk. It’s more hands on.” This was significant to me because I had noticed a pattern in the stories that involved associating the category of ‘real-world education’ within the pedagogical framework the WOTP offers its students. Anthony, who had shown much gratitude for the program and how it had personally impacted him, described WOTP teaching methods as key to his continued learning:

WOTP is that it's not like regular high school. They teach you things they normally wouldn't teach you in a regular high school. In a sense, you're treated more like an adult, and not a kid. You know, you're treated with more respect, you learn to respect more, and if you ever do wrong, you're not just given trouble- you're told why, once you did it, and what caused it afterwards.

To explain the impact that such alternate teaching methods had on the students, there was a point in my interview where Anthony described with great honesty, how the program's unconventional teaching methods had affected him personally. In his own words, Anthony claimed that "[i]f I didn't come here, I probably would have been a criminal today, or a delinquent. I would still be doing drugs; I probably would have been selling drugs. WOTP saved me and started me in a sense." As a researcher, I immediately knew this was the essence of vital testimony of the program's engaging teaching methods, and in truth, because this was also a potential I recognised in my story, as well as the stories of other participants. This recognition in myself as an insider who is empathetic and relates closely to the lives of the students is both a benefit and a limitation. This came to a benefit as I attended to the fine nuances of the participants and the data although my personal history as a troubled youth myself, skewed my interpretation of the data. In other words, one who would have experienced a different youth, or upbringing could have looked at this data in very a very different way. At the same time, to achieve this level of frankness among participants demonstrates the trustworthiness of the data, the validity that underscored our conversations, and how I then applied stories as a means to triangulate and verify findings.

Subtheme: Regular school recollections

In this study, recollections, or experiences about the regular John F. Kennedy school program, proved to be a key topic for participants. Recollections in this particular context were events or memories associated to the participants' past. For this subtheme, these specific recollections pertained to the students' past experiences in the regular JFK program, which differs from the WOTP program in pedagogy. To paint a broad picture of the regular JFK program, it is essentially a school program where the curriculum is implemented in a teacher-centered fashion, opposing a WOTP pedagogical approach.

From my personal experiences, which are documented as part of this research work (see Chapter 1), I had a terrible time in regular public high school, albeit in another country. My story evoked parts of my life which I had suppressed for many years. In the narrative, I contemplated and remembered that in high school, "I was lost. I remember not being to speak English, and consequentially, I was bullied in school. I had a really hard time expressing myself and when kids picked at me, I wasn't really able to fight back ...these were very difficult moments in my youth." During the course of this study, I felt on numerous occasions that if I were among the students today, I would be enrolled in this particular program for it resonates fully with my recollections.

Romeo had much to say about his stay in the JFK regular high school program. He recalled a time when he felt other students judged WOTP-enrolled students, and stigmatized them as 'lesser than' for being in the program. Romeo mentioned, "I would always hear other people talk about how WOTP people are stupid. This was crushing, and I felt terrible for quite a while." I have always considered Romeo to be a brilliant mind, a student with exceptional potential who could advance well if he had the opportunity to apply his intellect in ways that bring out the best in him. I have always seen him as a

student, who had much to teach me. In many ways, Romeo has consistently proven to be a very analytical and critical thinker for his age. Romeo further explained that "...in the JFK regular program, you're always confined to doing certain things that you might not like..." thus acknowledging the idea that there are tensions in the forms of stigmas for those who attend the WOTP.

Extending from this, Mario reinforces the tension between WOTP and the regular programming by stating:

In regular JFK, it gets very discouraging. You're not learning real-life things that you learn here, you sit at a desk for 75 minutes a day on end, and you're just there learning how to read a book, which is nothing interesting.

As a teacher-researcher, I have always sought ways in which I engage youths more fully as individuals than what is offered in general in our school system. Although not all teachers in the regular system fail students like Mario, it seemed from this comment that Mario had a clear distaste for traditional education within the regular JFK program. In this case much emphasis was placed on the fact that education needs to be applicable to real-world situations. It needs to be meaningful in the context of their lives, present, past and for the future. This demonstrates the values and beliefs that students hold of themselves, teachers, institutions of learning, and the relational quality of exchange that is always underway in our classrooms. Mario, who had experienced both programs, recalled a lack of commitment from the regular program in helping find their students' success. Extending from this, Mario claimed:

JFK Regular teaches you all the things people think you should know. And they don't teach you the things you'll actually need. Like they send you out there in the

real world with information you didn't need, and they just send you out there hoping you get a job, or that you find some sort of success.

Although he did not define his interpretation of what success meant to him, I remember the conversation vividly. Mario spoke so ardently on the topic that I remember thinking to myself as a researcher, how was this student so wronged in education, and how is it that students who have such analytical capacities are often sitting on the margins of the school? Mario noted that "...over there, you can't really do much. There they force you to learn, they push you to learn, they expect you to learn on the spot." Interestingly, the term "force" came up again, but this time, from Mr. Tonin,. In fact, when Mr. Tonin described the WOTP program, he referenced the JFK regular program as mode of comparison in which he mentioned that "...it's not that we were all doing the same thing unlike a regular [JFK] class because students there, are forced to do all the same thing". As a researcher, I look at this from a different aperture. I have witnessed, through the participants' stories, certain flaws of the educational system. To put it in another form, I have also understood the WOTP pedagogy, in comparison to the JFK regular program. As such, Mr. Tonin's remarks were intended to show the traditional aspects of the regular JFK that had been imposed onto students, such as Mario, which have created tensions and unpleasant recollections of the normative system.

Subtheme: **Program outcomes**

My definition for the subtheme relates to how the WOTP program has contributed to the learning, development or critical thinking of its population. Much of the conversation around outcomes were centered on the role of the arts, given that was my

research topic, and the notion of outcomes is more expansive than discussed in this chapter. Essentially, students deliberated on their artistic continuities, or at the very least, they were able to express how the arts programming in the WOTP has specifically contributed to their learning in ways that constitute outcomes. Mario, for instance spoke of his artistic practice and credited the WOTP for his new-found interests. He stated, “[w]ell, I love doing it because it’s just fun and I get to finally use my imagination to do something that’s really cool and not just sit in my bed and dream of things.” When I interviewed Romeo, I recall his choice of words vividly, as he had elaborated on the notion of ‘imagination’. Like Mario, Romeo connected the arts to imagination, in ways that align with Greene (1995; 1998), in particular when “informed engagements to the several arts is the most likely mode of releasing our students’ imaginative capacity and giving it play” (Greene, 1995, p. 125). Extending from this, I noted Romeo’s outlook shifted from exposure to the arts in the WOTP, and he supported the idea that “here, at the WOTP art program, you can put your imagination to use. I was finally able to use everything in my brain and let it all out.” He argued further in closing his argument that “[a]rt isn’t just one thing: it’s all about imagination.” As such, it is my conviction that exposure to the many forms of arts in the WOTP have invited the participants to think more of the program as a space for creativity.

To continue this thought process, Mario’s account for how the WOTP program has impacted him offer a number of entry points. He stated, “it affected me greatly actually. Since I enrolled in the WOTP program, I became more mature, and learned many new things I wouldn’t have had the chance to do otherwise.” He also spoke of the role of the arts in such programming, and that having practiced the arts has enabled him to see differently today. He noted, “[a]rt now is about perception. I view things differently now

than I used to.” Furthermore, Anthony had much credit to give the WOTP program outcomes, along with its arts agenda. Anthony, a student known for his troubled path, continues to make art in his garage at home to this day. When explaining how the art program developed in the WOTP has affected him, he responded by saying:

The arts are more important now; they have become a big part of my life and created a big impact on it, I think it’s safe to say the arts impacted me to do good, more good than bad, in a sense, they helped me to calm down a bit sometimes, when I feel I need to slow things down- the arts have helped a lot, they really did become a big part of my life.

To explicate the students’ former situations in greater depth so that we may comprehend the full contextual conversation surrounding the WOTP students, Mr. V elaborated on how the WOTP students were perceived when they were in the regular program. In so doing, we see the difference the program has created for its ‘at-risk’ learners. Mr V. declared:

These are the types of students that probably would not graduate and probably drop out, so they are “at-risk” student. These are kids that used to be in trouble at the office, and I was the VP before I was the Principal, and with them, it was constant truancy, not coming to school, leaving early, and not telling anyone about it.

And in that conversation, I returned to a question I often asked myself in the course of this study: Is this not incredible? To see where students came from, and to witness the progress they have gone through in order to better their education has without a doubt reinforced the motives for conducting this narrative inquiry work. I then interrogated Mr. Tonin’s story more fully. He had evidently much to say about this program’s outcomes, what those outcomes represent to him as a teacher, along with how he perceives the impact the

program has had onto the WOTP population. Mr. Tonin had specifically recalled Anthony's artistic endeavors, and chose to interpret the connections between the students' artworks with his life story. Mr. Tonin stated that "...he's more grounded than he used to be, he's more confident in himself, he feels better about himself, and he's had the chance to get his life back in order. So I think that his work tells a story." When I prompted Mr. Tonin to speak in regards to the art program offered within the WOTP, he replied:

It built up their abilities to communicate their feelings, to communicate through artworks, to show emotions and it also allowed them to socialize with each other, to work more collaboratively, in physical tasks, which is a team building exercise that you can't put a price tag on.

The idea of collaboration had surfaced with Mr. Tonin on several occasions in our conversations. This was fundamental and foundational to how he ran this program. It was most interesting, to engage in Mr. Tonin's ability to value the arts to such great extents, and that, as a teacher, he was able to understand how to use art as a tool for transferring creativity and to channel intellectual curiosity. As part of the program outcomes, he was keen to mention the WOTP art has grown to become a multi-disciplinary tool that serves to connect other subject areas of the curriculum. He mentioned "[they] are tying art into math, entrepreneurship, and to creating a business; this year's goal is to create [their] own art gallery at the school [...] for their works to be appreciated by all the school, and the school community." As a program outcome, art has become a central force of the WOTP program. Mr. Tonin's remarks in regards to the role of the arts within his program spoke of the multitude of ways in which art can be used as a cross-disciplinary tool, serving to enfranchise the disenfranchised. In the process, Mr. Tonin had learned about new possibilities for

educational discourses that sought to engage the youths through the arts. A true testament of the role of the arts in such program, Mr. Tonin's account enabled me as a researcher to see the pedagogic principle that learning is an ongoing process, and can be refined and redefined at any moment in time.

Theme: **Belonging**

Inevitably, working in a school system with multiple teenagers, (some younger than others) had paved the way for the notion of belonging, as a predominant theme. As such, I chose to interpret this definition and appropriated it to the context of this research, in which the theme 'belonging' is defined by a being part of a sense of togetherness. In other words, to feel supported, valued by others and to be a member of a particular community.

Subtheme: **Family support**

When conducting the interviews, participants were encouraged to discuss a social setting or context in which familial relations impacted learning. I sought to investigate the level of support, if any, and how this was implicated in the students' educational goals and aims. Yet only a few participants mentioned feeling very supported by family, which explains part of the reason as to why certain students needed to be in the WOTP program as an extension of support in order to strengthen their academic endeavors. What had interestingly emerged from the stories was that few family members actually encouraged the students' artistic endeavors early in the lives. Rather students' artworks stemming from the WOTP program has since impressed the families of the participants and their support

now has played a significant role in the students' lives in terms of advancing their personal confidence, scholarly engagement and social connectivity.

Anthony, who had one of the most sensitive narrative account in this regard, expressed how the support gained from his parents since entering the program had brought him closer to his family. He noted: "My mom would encourage me, or push to continue for she saw I had something in it, she really wanted me to keep working at it". To further extend this point, Anthony discussed the impact seeing his family supporting him at the exposition hosted by the WOTP in previous years. He reflected:

When my family members came, at first I figured they weren't going to like my works and that they're just going to say they liked it to make me happy, but I thought they'd be lying. But I know they really liked my art, and it their reactions were honest.

Mr. Tonin commented in turn, "...you could see just by the way the students showed up with their friends and their families, there was such a great amount of pride there."

Subtheme: **Community support**

In the context of this research the common interest shared by all is that of education, where the WOTP established a space where a community of inquiry was fostered in relation to the wider social contexts of students, including the neighborhoods, the schools, the circle of friends and family that influence how students perceive support and receive guidance. From the stories gathered, I considered the specific incident of exhibiting artworks and the impact the community support had on the students while they displayed their works to the public. In their stories, participants mentioned art exhibitions

hosted at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in October of 2015, and at the Leonardo Da Vinci Community Center, in May 2015. This exhibits had an enormous impact on the students. For instance, Romeo recalled the support received from one of his sister's friend who came to celebrate their artistic efforts. In his words, Romeo stated: "[w]e went to the Leonardo Da Vinci center to showcase our works. My sister's friends came; they listened and looked around. One of her friends really loves art, so she took a good look at the artworks and said to me: '[t]his is cool, I wish I would have done this.'" Such exemplars of community support have since translated into Romeo's support of new students that came in the WOTP program after him. He observed, "...new students would come in and we would invite them to make art by saying, 'here, we have this entire room of supplies, go crazy-make art'" .

In a true sense of camaraderie, Mario spoke of his peers' creations when displayed at the exhibits. This sense of support had thus evolved into a new realm of meaning-making with increased bonding between students as they formed deeper connections to one another which through relationships, proved to be foundational to building a community of inquiry and practice at the WOTP. In itself, the WOTP has become a community within the wider community of the school, a space of incubation for fostering not only art, but living with purpose and productivity. Mario stated: "they congratulated us, and did all that. It felt good. In other words, it felt like we did better than we were meant to do, or what was expected of us, at the very least. It felt really good being treated well and being seen mostly."

It was clear that the students had appreciated their works to be viewed and critically acclaimed by their community, but Mr. Tonin saw things from a different angle. As an

educator, Mr. Tonin remarked that the exhibition of the students' works at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts which took place in October of 2015.

...it was all about the students. They felt like they were red carpet VIP's for a night, and in essence they were, and you could see a real appreciation for their work but also an appreciation of their part for what was being done for them, and an appreciation of the fact that they were being appreciated.

Mr. V added, "it was [a] very successful [event], very organized, it had class. It brought the community together, and remember, these are the kids you would least expect this from." As a researcher, I knew I had to prompt the conversation further, and explore how that had affected Mr. V, as a principal of the school, but also as an individual that is very much implicated in the local community. He then noted: "...to be honest, it was a very touching evening for me as person, I mean, forget that I'm the principal, but to see these kids with a smile on their face and a glow in their eyes, talking about their artwork, and everybody left that evening touched, and proud and happy."

There were many sentiments associated to this event. I recall the thought process, the reflections and the reflexivity involved. For example, in Mr. Tonin's recollections of this event, he sat humbled by what sounded like a prestigious experience. After a long pause, where I instantly knew that this event had mattered in multiple ways, he noted that "just hearing people pay homage to [the students] and their work was a unique experience". This moment that I experienced with Mr. Tonin had told me a lot about the event through his narrated account. As such, Mr. Tonin invited me to reflect on what it meant to be included in such events. From the moment that he had explained to me how

important for was to him to host arts exhibitions as part of the WOTP curriculum, I began to understand how much more this actually meant to the students. The idea that inclusivity within schools then extended further, reaching an entire community of support, before standing as a tangible aim for the WOTP program, and thus becomes quintessential to the idea of community.

Subtheme: Discouragement and a lack of support

In the context of this research, I chose to define the term ‘discouragement’ as students who are not receiving support, whether it is familial and/or academic and have consequently felt disregarded. . To my understanding of the stories gathered, the student participants had experienced a greater amount of discouragement and/or lack of support in regards to their creativity in general, but in particular, within the regular program at the school and in terms of their personal lives. As such, Mario explained his parents’ divorce as something “hectic” that affected him greatly. He then took a closer look at his past, and had observed that there was very little art in his household while growing up. He then went on to say that this was indeed very unfortunate. This helped me as a researcher to see how exposure to the arts mattered as part of the WOTP program.

Meanwhile, Anthony was rather concerned with the lack of support that he received from his father in regards to the arts. This, I believe also resulted in Anthony lack of creative opportunities as a youth. Furthermore, Anthony mentioned how it became challenging for him to find his place in the arts. He reflected:

The arts weren’t really big. To me, the way teachers described it when I was in school was that being an artist is about drawing landscapes, and details, and I

couldn't draw. I never felt like a drawing artist; I tried, but it didn't work. So that's why I think the arts were never really important to me while growing up.

Yet I wondered, are teachers not supposed to encourage students to practice their skills, or better yet, encourage students to believe in themselves? Mr. Tonin singled out Anthony in his own story, portraying his interpretation of the possible lack of support provided in Anthony's artistic path as a child. In regards to Anthony's past, Mr. Tonin stated:

There's a reason why he creates the pieces that he does. There's a reason why he takes paints, and literally creates a mish-mash mixup with it. That's because that's what this kid's life had been, for the longest time. And it was only then that there was some sort of semblance, direction and order coming together with him. When I look at his art, it reminds me of somebody who's grown up, living that way."

Fortunately, Anthony was able to find creative forces like in the WOTP that have allowed him to take his learning further in order to develop and build upon his artistic identity. It was Anthony's story that evoked the notion of identity development within the WOTP program. In turn, I looked closer at how the arts have impacted the students' notion of identity, and how they interpreted their learning, or identity development within the program. I was able to see how the WOTP had countered this notion of discouragement, and had invited the students to belong, to be part of a distinct community, and find value and worth in themselves as social individuals.

Theme: **Identity**

In the context of this research, I define the notion of identity as distinguishable features of a person or program, that form of a general attitude, personality and/or

disposition. . This theme became crucial as many codes and categories had surfaced in relation to the notion of identity, with key subthemes of artist identity, teacher identity, and pride. In this section, I explore the various subthemes which aim to address the different types of identities that have emerged from the collected stories.

Subtheme: **Artist identity**

Over my time spent at the WOTP program conducting the research, I have had the pleasure of knowing and discussing with the WOTP's very own artists what constitutes of their artistic identities. This discussion had allowed me to better understand how the students saw themselves as artists, and how they perceived their artist identities to develop with time. To begin this conversation, I interpret the definition of an artist as someone who continuously practices a certain craft, intertwining knowledge, creativity and professionalism. As such, artistic identities became a prevalent subtheme as the students had eagerly expressed how they viewed the world in relation to art-making and how they asserted themselves as visual artist within the school and the wider community, thus sharing their ideals, creative practices, and hopes for the future.

Romeo's story conveys hopeful messages in regards to societal norms and pressures. He explicated his thought process when making art, and depicted one of the work he had previously completed that spoke of gender norms, which I thought was quite interesting because of the program's nature consisting of fifteen boys and only one girl. I thought to myself as a researcher: Why is the WOTP comprised of an almost-all boys group, and furthermore, how does this get visually translated through the arts? In conceptual form, Romeo's artwork is provocative and daring, which I greatly appreciated

myself as an artist-researcher looking, at the subliminal messages that can be obtained from the youths through artworks. In regards to his artist identity, he claimed that “people always have their mind set on a certain thing that everyone thinks is awesome, but I find we should break free from that. As artists, we should use our art and create many different things.” When probing this conversation, Romeo further elaborated that “we [his family] were always confined to do one thing, like males should do male things, females should do female things, but we liked to do both.” Lastly, Romeo recalled an artwork he had made over the last year that speaks to such gendered identities and roles. He provided me with a powerful narrative account of the work:

The artwork I made was about society’s hands and they are grasping what you should think. What you find beauty is up to you to decide. I mean, at your age today, ask yourself: “what do you think is beautiful?” It’s all about how you feel and think as an individual that’s beautiful. It’s just a matter of perception”.

This I believe spoke volumes of Romeo’s intelligence as an artist. According to Greene (1995), “aesthetic experiences require conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed” As a teacher-researcher, I felt in awe when Romeo explained the reasoning for making the artwork, which I also felt was rather refreshing to see students make art with great purpose. In this sense, Romeo was fully engaged with the work; and in essence, they became one with each other. Romeo’s commitment to his work, narrated a profound interest in creating changes in our society.

Meanwhile, Mario narrated how photography as his art practice has helped him in a multitude of ways. As a student having always been technologically savvy, he elaborated

greatly on the impact photography has had on his artistic identity, as well as his personal identity. When describing his art practice, Mario mentioned: “I take pictures of stuff I think is good, so photography is important to me. If I see something really pulls my eye, and really catches me, I’d take a picture and try to the best of my abilities to capture the moment.” I remember fondly how Mario spoke of his practice and I felt a “catching moment” that I thought encapsulated his artistic practice quite well. He then discussed his photography practice: “I think it’s all about creativity ...you’re experiencing, trying different things, and more about exploring what you haven’t learned. In regards to my photography practice, it’s calming and relaxing. It’s less stressful for me.” Later on, Mario also elucidated to his role as an artist among others in the WOTP. Mario contemplated: “my practice evolved a lot. I’ve taken many pictures so far and at the WOTP, I get to document and do basically the filming of whatever we do to showcase to other people so they know what we do here”. As a researcher, I witnessed an important principle in Mario’s statements. I was able to see what Greene (1995) suggested “prevailing literacies and discourse should be taken as occasions for study and expression, for the sake of disclosing more materials in lived experiences-the multiplicity of lived experiences that mark our society today” (p. 111).

When assessing the theme of identity, it was evident that students were speaking to their experiences from a student perspective while interrogating possibilities for what could be. In so doing, they spoke of their works, what drove them as individuals, along with their ideals in our society. As student-artists, they have looked to communicate those ideals to a greater audience, along with solidifying their artist identities through personal reflections and reflexivity.

Subtheme: Teacher identity

The question of teacher identity emerged explicitly in this study, for instance, Mr. Tonin placed significant emphasis on the development of his teacher identity in relation to the WOTP, despite many years of teaching prior to joining this program. Mr. Tonin described himself as one who “is an animated teacher, who brings in a lot of personality, and has a lot of energy.” However, he continued to argue that not having pleasant experiences with art as a youth “there was no way [he] was able to fake skills at [teaching] something [he] wasn’t good at,” referring to the arts. From my understanding of the data, it seemed that having the arts brought in to his WOTP curriculum by my joining the program three years ago had invited him to learn yet again about the arts. This time, Mr. Tonin was determined to see where the arts could take him as a teacher and I believe that my contribution and presence in this program is part of the evolution of his perspectives. He confirmed, “the fact that I embraced [the arts] and even though it was outside my comfort zone, gave it a chance, let it happen and it led to so much more than what I had imagined.” This was a pivotal moment for me, as a teacher researcher where I was able to obtain confirmation from Mr. Tonin that “as a teacher, you’re still a student, and you’re constantly learning.” The fact that not only the students were pushing their boundaries through art, but that the teacher was also experiencing this shift in identity at the same time contributed to the level of synergistic exchange that took place within the community of the WOTP classroom. Students and teacher alike were opening themselves to a vulnerability of learning, and the vitality of this context is arguably evident in their stories,

as their identities seemingly shifted throughout the integration of the arts program in the WOTP.

Mr. Tonin elaborated on this shift by stating how important the arts suddenly became in the WOTP program. Mr. Tonin stated:

...the introduction of art presented me with sort of an epiphany; it was sitting there the whole time that I've been a teacher and I would have never thought to use it. And, all it took for me to sort of overcoming my past with art and say "no" forget about that, and let's take this because these kids like it.

From this I truly felt how much movement there was in Mr. Tonin's way of repositioning himself as an educator. As such, his reflexivity had engaged him to be more accommodating and present as a teacher, seeking to find alternatives and ways to connect with his learners while embodying the notion of continuing to learn as a teacher. Mr. Tonin disclosed, "we were able to go further with our learning because of what art brought in us, and that has made me a better teacher." Finally, as drawn from his story, Mr. Tonin ended his letter with educational advice:

As a teacher, sometimes we tend to be too hands-on, and do too much. One thing is to be perfect in a way, but we tend to think we always know better than the kids, and we don't have enough confidence in them to let them explore, and I think we have to let go of that sometimes

As Mr. Tonin's letter illustrated quite brilliantly the impact the WOTP art program has had on his teacher identity, his teaching praxis was refined because of what the arts had taught him. The research project brought forth the notion of teacher identity as subtheme for Mr.

Tonin's story displays the importance of renegotiating teacher identities for the benefit of the student learning.

Subtheme: **Pride**

In the context of this research, I interpreted the subtheme 'pride' as a feeling of self-worth, or accomplishment. A great amount of personal pride was noted from all participants of this study. Pride was especially important when discussing how the students benefited from having their artworks displayed to the public at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in October 2015, and at the Leonardo Da Vinci center in May 2015.

Romeo recalled an art show hosted at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2015, and he felt the students' parents were bound to be proud of their kids for all that they had done artistically. He noted: "I would hear people say, 'this is great work, I can't believe students made this!' The students' works are in the museum, and for that reason, I imagine parents were extremely proud of their kids, so I was truly excited." Mario, had supported his classmates very much in the WOTP. In his story, he extended his sense of pride for his peer Anthony, who then received an award from the museum. Mario said:

I really enjoyed watching other people look at the arts the WOTP made and hear all the compliments during the art shows. I was proud of Anthony when he got a scholarship from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. I was proud when he came and they offered him a scholarship.

Anthony's pride surfaces when he makes art. From his story, Anthony "does art today so that [he] could be proud of himself" as a way so showcase his acquired talent. Yet, the

most comprehensive discussion of pride in this study came from Mr. Tonin and Mr. V, as they looked at pride from a different aperture.

Drawn from his story, Mr. Tonin spoke of pride by describing how the student conducted themselves as artists, students and members of society. He mentioned that "...you could see just by the way the students showed up with their friends and their families, there was such a great amount of pride there. It was truly an unforgettable event". Mr. V also commented on the event, and spoke of pride witnessed during that evening. He too, suggested the students' pride resonated outside the walls of the institution, which is something beautiful as seen from an educators' perspective. Mr. V stated: To see how proud everybody was of them- it was very successful, very organized, it had class. It brought the community together, and remember, these are the kids you would least expect this from, so to see them on the vernissage night, especially, when we did the second vernissage at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, that evening there was, high end stuff, we were super proud and it kept them motivated to want to do more afterwards. Essentially, Mr. V had explicated how successful the event was, but how much this actually meant to the students and their community. The sense of pride spoke volumes of the students' works, but I believe that it became consequential of the students and teachers' concerted efforts to celebrate their artistic endeavors. Mr. V, admitted that "everybody left that evening touched, and proud and happy".

In this chapter, we have explored the main themes, which serve as my interpretation from my research findings. As such, various subthemes were then retrieved and interrogated further in order to grasp a better understanding of the WOTP program's true nature. As evidence, we have collectively explored the notion of pedagogy, the WOTP

strategies, regular JFK recollections, program outcomes, the essential feeling of belonging, community support, family support, discouragement and the theme of identity, comprising artist identity, teacher identity and pride.

These themes and subthemes have thus paved the way for further reflections and work to be conducted with disfranchised youths, as well as to document the WOTP program's ethos, and population's diverse situations. In my educational significance chapter, I will deconstruct what this research means in the greater scope, looking at how this research could be interpreted, and especially to explore further the questions associated with how this project is integral to youth work within art education.

Educational significance: A call for reflection and change.

Dear educators and colleagues,

A few years ago, I was introduced to Freire's (2005) "Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach" book. This manuscript had then opened up a whirlwind of conversations that I had in regards to teacher-training and educational philosophy. For certain, it had left a significant mark on my educational journey, for the idea of employing letters as a form of sharing knowledge resonated deeply within me. In turn, this book resulted in my ambition as a researcher to employ letters as telling stories within my body of work. In finding new alternatives and pedagogic actions within the public educational sector, this study shed light on traditional hierarchies in teaching and learning in an effort to oppose educational normalization by highlighting alternate pedagogical paradigms employed in this case, at JFK. In other words, I offer suggestions in this study for how we can create change, but most importantly, why we need to change the ways in which we teach. As evidenced in the stories of Romeo, Anthony and Mario, Mr. Tonin and Mr. V, and my own story, such understandings and allowances within the

institution of schools has become critical for many youths who I believe have been marginalized, sometimes unjustly. In the end, I believe schools do a disservice because the educational pathways are increasingly limited and at times exclusionary, leaving too many students out of the vital learning conversations that are essential for inclusive practice, social adjustments, and indeed, purposeful and meaningful lives. .

There is still so much to learn. In this case, I only offer suggestions without pretense. I do not have all the answers I sometimes wished I had in regards to how we can fix current issues in art education that involves marginalized youths, but I find it crucial for the community of teachers, educators, scholars and students to unify and share our own experiences and knowledge with one another in hopes to unhinge obsolete teaching paradigms. I am humbled to have learned much while conducting this research endeavor. It is important to note that I have learned as much about myself, as I have about the students and the staff that I collaborated with, while gaining an in-depth understanding of an overarching institution that is the school system.

I now bring forth the notion that this study serves as an opening for discussion around critical pedagogy. As I conducted this inquiry, the emergent design provided me with multiple entry points that all interconnected as a *métissage* (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009) generating critical reflexivity upon our lives as students, researchers, and social educators within public pedagogy (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013). In this essence, we are reminded by McLaren (2007) that “...public pedagogy refers to the important idea that pedagogy as an oppositional practice and active process of learning is fundamental to the creation of critical citizenship and inclusive democracy” (p. 191). Extending from this, I had previously deliberated on the detrimental effects of using a teacher-centered practices (see Chapter 2) that heavily add to Freire’s (1972/2005) notion of the *banking system* in education. Yet, I feel that exemplifying the

learning that occurred during the research study serves as platform, which could demonstrate how beneficial a reconsideration of pedagogy, identity and belonging. In this regard, my study demonstrate how what constitutes minor changes in the greater scheme of teaching and learning can bring to the classroom, and how the marginalized spaces of learning such as WOTP in fact are sites for dynamic change in the public educational sector.

The educational significance is broadly encapsulated in this thesis, and I especially want to highlight the arts-based practices in the form of letters as stories given the profound impact this act had on the participants as a whole. In this essence, the letters collaboratively crafted by me and the participant depicted personal and insightful information seen from various perspectives, seeking to inform through reflections and reflexivity, the participants' pasts, presents and futures. As such, Romeo, Anthony, Mario, Mr, Tonin, Mr. V and myself, all provided testaments of our own lives telling our stories about navigating through educational institutions at different times, in different places and with different outcomes. In this blended conversation, various standpoints explored our involvements in the WOTP art programming as an exemplar of practice, along with how participation in the program has affected our identities as artists, teachers and researchers. Returning to the research questions guiding this study, my compelling interest was guided by:

- 1) How does having a project-based pedagogical approach in art programs for disenfranchised teens affect the students' abilities to build on their identities?
- 2) What becomes of the educator in project-based pedagogy in special programs for marginalized teens?
- 3) How does participation in a project-based art program help define their emerging identities as artists?

These questions were firmly rooted in my curiosity of arts pedagogy within alternative programming for disenfranchised youths. As such, my goals in this endeavor were simply to examine the WOTP program, to document how such a program function as well as to disseminate alternative instructional and learning strategies that emerged from this work. In conclusion, I deliberate on the limitations of this study; how such pivotal driving questions laid the groundwork for the research I subsequently conducted; and I consider why the project in itself was pedagogically sound and significant for the field of art education.

Limitations of my study:

As an emerging scholar, I believe it is critically important to not only state my biases, but also to raise the limitations of this project in order to be forthright and encourage future researchers, scholars and educators to take these limitations into consideration should they discuss this particular research, or conduct a similar project of their own. I operate from a perspective that education should be a just, democratic and critical place and process that invites each and every one of us to grow, as social and committed individuals in the field of art education, a field that I am deeply passionate about.

Within my research study, I must acknowledge that my previous teaching experience in the WOTP program has surely influenced my ease when working with the participants. Prior to working alongside the students, teachers and principal of the school, I was already familiar with who they are as individuals, and pertaining to the students' situation, I was also familiar with certain parts of their pasts, since I must be aware of any disabilities when working with coded students, as was the case. My work in the program began in September of 2016 and extended through the data collection period, ending in December 2016. Much as Von Den Hoonaard

(2015) reminds us, the “predispositions, stereotypes, and prejudices we bring to the research environment render a disservice to the people we aim to study; these pre-established notions, in effect, pre-empt participants’ explanations, experiences and points of view” (p. 60). Building on this idea, I ensured my relationships with my participants were authentic, professional, and I worked hard to ensure it was clear I was learning from them as valued members of the research process (Van Den Hoonaard, 2015) and not subjects that were studied from a distance.

It was important to me that I acted as researcher and teacher throughout the study and I took purposeful steps to ensure this was in place. One of the peculiarities of this study was a personal struggle to navigate through the various roles that I took on. During certain days, I would be the key instrumentalist (Creswell, 2015) to this research project, while on others, I would be teaching art to the same students. This was at times difficult to manage in terms of separating a researcher role and seeking to investigate with participants from a teaching role that hopes to create and learn with the students. Although these roles can often be similar, it was important for me not blur the line between these two distinct roles in order to preserve the essence of the data interpretation process and better manage my time conducting research with the students who participated in this study. The duality of my presence at the WOTP site hence became challenging, and sometimes confusing, and upon reflection I would even argue influenced my process of collecting and thinking through data. At the same time, this established relationship was essential for the transparency, and most importantly the trust I developed with the participants prior to the interview processes. I was often left with a sense of urgency to record the stories told by the participants themselves. Van Den Hoonaard (2015) noted:

We tend to imagine what the answers to our research questions might be. Yet, given our limited experience and unfamiliarity with the life-worlds of the groups and

peoples we wish to study, it is unlikely that our imagined answers will reflect the reality of the situation. (p. 61).

With this said, I believe that my familiarity with the students as I have worked with them in previous years allowed me to gain deeper insights into the core of the research, through their trust in my will and abilities to help them find academic success through art. Also, it is important to mention that “the longer you stay in the setting, the more informed you will become of its routines and activities, and the more the participants will become familiar with *your* routines and activities” (Van Den Hoonard, date, p. 64).

My Letter To the artists,

When it comes to your work free yourself to dare, and dare to be free. Trust yourself. I know I did during this research project. As you may already know, I have been working with narratives in an effort to elevate the students and teachers’ involvement and understanding of their situations within a realm of art-based research practices. Writing as a method for research was never something I had imagined I would do, but as Greene (1995) argued, “our imagination [...] requires reflectiveness on our part to acknowledge the existence of the[se] unexpected and unpredictable vistas and perspectives in our experience” (p. 125). What I draw from this is exemplified in the work conducted with Mario, Romeo, and Anthony, all of whom have created astonishing visual artworks in conjunction with their letters. Yet, I consistently ask myself, how did we, as a group of artists, come to execute such work? In all fairness, even I, who orchestrated this research endeavor, could not have envisioned the process and unexpected evolution to the extent of which it grew from narrative inquiry, and how the textual letter writing transferred into visual artworks.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let us start with the foundations: Mario, Romeo and Anthony have all been students of my visual arts classes wherein collaborative work through a project-based teaching and learning model serve as dominant creative forces. It is my belief that the students that partook in this artistic research endeavor critically understood project-based work, and recognized an aperture for creativity that easily and readily went beyond textual narratives. They demonstrated an ability to provoke a particular teaching and learning agenda through being immersed in a space where the arts are clearly valued, extending to a deeper understanding of arts-based practices, for as Greene (1995) claims, “informed engagements with the several arts is the most likely mode of releasing our students’ (or any person’s) imaginative capacity and giving it play” (p. 125). As an artist myself, the students, teacher, and I continuously discuss the many forms of art, and engage in critical conversations about what art is, and how we can define it, in today’s society. I feel that it is crucial to invigilate such conversations in order to help the student, become informed, critical agents of art, culture and society. In so doing, I found myself mentoring them in ways that both facilitated their learning and my study, by responding questions students had about their work, and discussing the many facets of art that surround us today, in turn, helping students to find their place within an art subculture.

Applying methods of deep listening through meaningful conversations, Snowber (2005) discusses the many forms in which we can be tender to our students and provide them with care through mentorship. As such, time spent on the field, conversing with participants while crafting their stories into a series of heartfelt letters, invited me to better understand the intricacies of their situations, as social beings who matter, who make a difference, and who are able to

generate change through their creative and thoughtful experiences. After all, Snowber (2015) claims:

All art teaches us to stop, look and listen to life on this planet, including our own lives, as a vastly richer, deeper, more mysterious business than most of the time it even occurs to us to suspect as we bumble along from day to day on automatic pilot.

(p. 347)

In this case, the students' created artworks became testaments of their creative skills. Although many students have expressed shunning the acts of reading and writing as part of their academic discourse, they understood and displayed a visual language through the creation of their artworks that stemmed from the written stories. It is my belief that Mario, Romeo and Anthony have developed an affinity to create, and conceptualize artworks through their ongoing engagements in various art projects at the WOTP program, including this research endeavor. Their stories became research stories. Furthermore, they have been able to discuss their art, as well as those of others during the interviews. Greene (1995) argued that "aesthetic experience requires conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed," and in my view, that certainly took place in this study (p. 125).

Thus the visual works conceived in the process of learning and in response to the letter-writing enacted an embodiment of lived experiences as the foundation for this research project. Being immersed in this natural setting (Creswell 2015) where the arts are used as an interdisciplinary tool allowed for their conceptual skills to surface, and they subsequently created visual works that depicted in a multitude of ways, the notions of *pedagogy, belonging and identity*. In addition, let us be reminded of Romeo's words in

regards to being an artist in the WOTP. As part of his carefully crafted story, he stated, “...there are many types of art. And that’s what I like most about it. It’s very open; you can use your imagination, your skills, whatever you have, and if you’re a bad drawer, it doesn’t really matter, since everyone has a different way of perceiving art.”

According to the students, participating in such projects encouraged and facilitated the opportunity to explore the realm of the arts, dipping their toes into possibilities, and raising awareness of the vast, artful potential ahead and they continue to employ their imagination through creative means. As noted in Romeo’s letter, “art is about perception,” and as I draw this study to a close, perhaps the arts, when employed through project-based practices, can become much more than a single channel, whereby students employ their creativity and actual knowledge as living, pedagogic inquirers (Sameshima, 2008). Perhaps when students are immersed in artful settings, their senses become more attuned to creative possibilities, and when artful possibility exists, pedagogic engagement and hope for a more colorful and creative future may prevail.

To the teacher,

I have been thinking very deeply and for quite some time now about how we could change the ways in which we teach art to our students. But why would I think and wish for such change, or, why is it that this is so important to me. The answer is simple: from a personal standpoint, I think it is time we change how we design and deliver our lessons from a standpoint of inclusivity and public pedagogy. As McLaren (2007) reminds us on the important impact, he noted that public pedagogy is “...designed to help students invest in public life. Not only does it presuppose some notion of the future, but [...] it also assists students in locating themselves in a broad range of public discourses” (p. 192). I often

reflect, sure enough, no student has ever fallen ill from being bored and passive during class time...right? But they do fall out when bored and passive, as I did, and as the students in this study have also. What are the consequences, to the lives of these students, to the lives of their teachers, to the schools they inhabit, and to the society in which they will soon find themselves? In any event, I believe we must all remain critical. Too much harm is coming from the absence of good consideration when teaching students like Romeo, Anthony and Mario, and without the commitment of teachers like Mr. Tonin and principals like Mr. V, what options are there for them? Where are they destined to be? What is my social responsibility as a teacher and researcher, having intimately understood their stories through my own struggles, now that I advance my opportunities? There is surely something we can do about it. At the very least, we can start to think about generating small changes for how we can work with our students, and shed away the unwarranted political baggage we bring, or do not bring to our classes on a daily basis. Perhaps we just need to consider the statistics to bring value to the stories we hold:

In 2012-2013, the proportion of those who left school (general education, youth sector) without a secondary school diploma or qualification (annual dropout rate) was 15.3% for Québec as whole. It was 18.8% for male students and 11.9% for female students. (Quebec Education Indicators, 2014, p. 6)

One of the worrying figures in the aforementioned citation, is that male students are at a significantly higher risk of dropping out in Quebec. Unfortunately, I can attest to this, since in a class of approximately 15 boys that make up the student body of the WOTP program, there is only 1 girl. Perhaps there is still much to investigate in terms of why boys often

find themselves in alternative programs. Moreover, there is also further work to do in order to find ways to reach out to the youths, and the boys most particularly, and help those find success. I believe this is the next step in my research trajectory, to investigate more fully the role of gender and alternate programs as this aspect was beyond the scope of this study.

Within my research work that I conducted at the WOTP, I was able to understand through my data analysis how Mr. Tonin, who teaches at the WOTP program has altered his pedagogic philosophy to fit a more challenging educational context that required a certain adaptability. As such, I hold the utmost respect for teachers such as Mr. Tonin. Mr. Tonin is a dedicated mentor who has opened my understandings of the challenges and the rewards of WOTP. In this particular case, it became evident that he, as the principal teacher of the alternative program, allows himself along with his instructional strategies to shift in order to cater to his students' situations and learning needs. In his story, Mr. Tonin notes that "as a teacher, you're still a student and you're constantly learning." He also argues that as a teacher, it is very difficult to help students become better, and that it requires much constant work, but the results of seeing the students succeed in tasks that go beyond academic tests are priceless. This is the heart of a teacher, and while some may suggest this is idealistic of me, I firmly believe, as Mr. Tonin suggests, while promoting the teaching of real-life applicable skills through project-based pedagogy, we keep a realistic perspective on our purpose, for "it's one thing to prepare to take a test, but that doesn't give you the same pressure, because there's nobody outside of the class other than the teacher who's gonna be looking at that test."

Extending his philosophy, my hope is that as an educator, I will embody the essence of *curriculum* and its etymology. Stemming from the Latin word *currere* (Irwin,

2003/2004; Pinar & Grument, 1976, Sameshima, 2008) which contrasts the term *curriculum*, the latter is largely meant to be static. In effect, *currere* means “to run” (Pinar, 1974b; Pinar & Grumet, 1976) and is also dynamic. Much like Mr. Tonin’s teaching strategies and outlook on how curriculum is thusly implemented in his classroom as situational praxis, his learning from students was dependent on the reciprocity of his students’ learning, thus acting as collaborative ‘dwellers’ of the curriculum (Aoki, 1980). In my eyes, Mr. Tonin well understood the conceptual premise of the word *teaching*. The fluidity in his thoughts, actions, teaching praxis and plans as part of the curriculum resulted in his students speaking very highly of the program (see Chapter 4) he has commandeered for years, as well as of him as an educator. Sameshima (2008) further argued:

Currere is about movement, about awareness, about acknowledging learning through the body. [...]. That notion must be extended to the teaching self—to embody learning, researching, and teaching that way. A refocus of ways of being a teacher and incorporating *currere* as an integral part of pedagogic living is critical to transformational teaching practice. (p. 32).

In essence, Mr. Tonin’s teaching praxis shifted as he encountered the integration of the arts programming within the WOTP. In his case, he was not particularly familiar or comfortable teaching the arts, and yet through our collaborations, Mr. Tonin invited the arts to become integral to the WOTP, and in the process learned how the arts were taught, but also sought to find ways in which he could better his teaching practice by using art as an interdisciplinary tool. And I did the same, observing Mr. Tonin as a mentor, making my apprenticeship as a teacher richer and stronger. Much like Mr. Tonin, I began to realized that it was critical to breakdown the hidden barriers that limit teachers and students. As

such, Sameshima and Irwin (2008) noted that “overcoming the egocentric view amounts to realizing that a center is not always in the middle... More often, the environment is dominated by other centers, which force the self into a subordinate position,” and as I look back, I believe this was indeed in play during this study (pp. 5-6).

What can we learn from this? Perhaps that education, and most of all, teaching, is a democratic act that often needs to change or be re-adjusted in the moment. My research only serves as mere fraction of work that could be developed. The essence of the work is to look for ways in which we can render our students, and ourselves, as educators, more engaged in the practice of learning and seek ways we collaboratively take on such challenges as a community of inquiry. It is important to note that times are changing, and so rapidly, I might add. Why then is it that the structure of education remains the same? Should we not find alternatives and emergent pedagogic actions, in order to salvage the innate good that constitutes education? This project that I have conducted at the WOTP documented such change, something Mr. Tonin witnessed and experienced himself, as I did, and I believe the students and principal did also, through the arts. As such, every situation will differ, but I am convinced that change can occur if we dare to change our ways, and become caring and attentive artists, teachers, and researchers in the process. I am often reminded of Kincheloe’s (2012) words whereby he claims that “to embrace hope in this era of cynicism is a revolutionary act. But as long as we can formulate visions, possibility persists” (p. 2).

To the researcher,

In creating this arts-based educational project, I was invited into a world where I learned and experienced research as a dynamic process, hence embarking on a venture that

has allowed me to better understand a working arts program along with the staff and the students' situated within it. By entering the WOTP program as a research site and a natural setting (Creswell, 2015), I immediately noticed from a researcher's perspective two very important components regarding the WOTP space itself in relation to the high school, and the lack of art exhibitions within the school which I believe indirectly described the research site itself, and without words. As such, I have since gained an interest in further investigating these perceived ideas in the future, and I am hopeful other research projects will further inform my inquiries and contribute to the advancement of art education practices.

As I close this thesis, I remember first walking into the John F. Kennedy High School WOTP department: it then seemed so far and so remote from the rest of the school. My initial reaction was to question why the department that hosted mostly coded students was situated so far from the rest of the school community. Throughout the research project that I have conducted, I well understood that the WOTP operated very differently than the 'regular JFK.' As documented within the participants' stories, the WOTP is a truly unique program that offers alternatives for marginalized students. And I now have a number of lingering questions that have emerged from the study: What does the spatial design tell us of the school and furthermore of the WOTP program and its students? What does such separate, or indeed alienation, say to our students who all have learning disabilities? How do teachers who operate in such programs come to work under such circumstances? How does their mindset shape their teaching identity? What is my duty as a public pedagogue to advance inclusivity based on the findings of this study? What is my responsibility to the participants now that the study is complete? In this particular case, does Mr. Tonin and his

students feel this study helps them gain a sense of freedom from the curriculum, or does it create a greater divide? These are all questions that I have thought of exploring further during my research study, and I seek to explore these inquiries as an artist, researcher and teacher in order to better understand how learning occurs in such programs.

Within my research plan, I also noticed on several occasions that the participants' experiences when showcasing their artworks in various settings had deeply impacted their views of themselves. From a researcher point of view, I believe there is much more work to be done when working with disenfranchised youths and museum or gallery educational programs. Based on the recorded interviews, I subsequently noticed the participants were left with great contentment when we discussed how they felt when they exhibited at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, among other gallery centers, weaving in the notion of identity as part of the conversation.

Extending from this, I seek to find innovative ways whereby current educators, along with those of tomorrow, can strengthen their teaching praxes by creating and continuing cross-community partnerships. More specific to the museum and gallery education, Rahm (2016) noted from her study that "teachers who are committed to project-based learning [...] may be more inclined to seek out learning settings outside of their classrooms to enrich and support student learning" (p. 195). As such, inquiries stemming from museum education that especially gravitate around youths and project-based pedagogical approaches have thus become an area of great interest for my research path. From gathering such insightful information drawn from various case studies, I will look to further investigate how we can work with youths and devote more attention to their work by showcasing, while examining

the effects that showcasing in galleries and museums can have on the marginalized populations' self-esteem.

Entering this research foray was quite a test for me. I have seen myself grow throughout the project as I gained much experience conducting research, as well as to note an in-depth understanding for alternative art programs in Montreal. I come to the end of this study with an understanding that conducting research is no easy task. It became a very challenging at times, but it is rewarding in its own right. Not only do I feel as I have strengthened my teaching praxis, but I was also able to write a text that serves to document the learning that occurred, the innate good, if I may be indulgent, that is part of the WOTP program, along with its participants and my own creativity. In capturing such a rich dynamic of learning and teaching, I was honored to orchestrate an artistic, critical and informative experience that is my thesis. From this, I stand proud today to have the chance, knowledge, opportunity, and *privilege* to have taken on such work.

Yet we must continuously remind ourselves, as cultural workers, to continue to diversify our teaching practices, to be bold, to dare, and to demystify the notion of what art actually is, and to democratize whom it is for. It is our duty, as artists, teachers, and researchers, to share our understanding of the world seen from different views, and to build bridges in efforts to interconnect communities. I wholeheartedly honor the idea that a good educator can embrace knowledge and students together, but a great teacher shares that knowledge and constantly seeks to refine and redefine the learning and teaching boundaries. My research was only a fraction of what could be, perhaps as all research is always partial. In the end, I believe we need to start thinking about reform in the educational system, that is, changes in how we teach, changes in how we treat and see our

learners. And changes in what we do. After all, this research project taught me this: it is all about possibilities, imagination, and shifting the paradigms and the horizons ahead. I invite you to think about, and possibly make changes in your praxes. Perhaps the question remains for us all, what changes could you make, and what changes will you make?

Yours truly,

Thibault Zimmer

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APPENDIX A:**List of sample questions for student-participants**

- 1) Can you describe in your own words, the place which you grew up in?
- 2) Can you tell me about any particular moments in your childhood when you made art?
What did you make?
- 3) What was the role of the arts in you household when growing up?
- 4) Can you recall moments in your childhood where art became really important to you?
- 5) Can you recall of any moments when someone, when you were younger, has helped you, or shown great interest in your abilities to be creative?
- 6) Could you describe how the art you create now?
- 7) What motivates you to conceive the artwork?
- 8) How do you think your past informs your art experiences today?
- 9) What do you like most about making art?
- 10) How has your involvement in the WOTP contributed to your current art practice?
- 11) Could you describe what you do in the WOTP art program?
- 12) Could you describe your previous experiences at the WOTP art vernissages?
- 13) What artwork did you showcase at the museum? And what did the work represent, and how?
- 14) Can you tell me about how you felt throughout the vernissage event at the MMFA hosted in 2015?
- 15) From all these experiences, how do you think art plays a role in your life today?
- 16) What kinds of art activities do you hope to see in the future for WOTP?

APPENDIX B:**List of sample questions for administrator-participants**

1. Can you describe in your own words, the place which you grew up in?
2. What was your involvement in the arts throughout your youth?
3. Can you recall moments in your childhood where art became really important to you?
4. Can you recall of any moments when someone, when you were younger, has helped you, or shown great interest in your abilities to be creative?
5. Can you describe the WOTP program, and its population?
6. How do you think art affects the students?
7. In your own words, what kind of art do the students make?
8. How do you think the art they make impact the student's self-esteem?
9. What kinds of art projects or events have been conceived in the past
10. Can you describe the art vernissage previously hosted by the WOTP?
11. Can you tell me about how you felt throughout the vernissage event at the MMFA hosted in 2015?
12. How has the arts impacted the WOTP programming?
13. In what ways has the students been impacted by the arts programming at the WOTP?
14. From all these experiences, how do you think art plays a role in your life today?
15. What kinds of art activities do you hope to see in the future for WOTP?

APPENDIX C:**Thematic matrix**

Theme:	Pedagogy
Sub-theme #1:	Teaching strategies [WOTP]
ROMEO	<p>It's awesome here and when Mr. Tonin said, "well, we do this here, and we don't sit down in a classroom and study all day, we get up and move around"- I immediately thought: "why haven't been here all the time? This is what I loved to do."</p> <p>We don't sit around all day, we get up, we grab things, we move, we do what we like to do and have fun doing it.</p> <p>We do regular school stuff that's because we need to, and we need that in life, but what they teach us here, is about getting a job, learning trades and what you need to succeed in the real world. Not sitting in a classroom, doing nothing but listening to your teacher talk. It's more hands on. We're vey open, we're never just doing one thing at a time.</p> <p>I wanted do that, and we had a chance to do that as a group,</p> <p>Thibault would come in, and tell us we have artworks to do, and their going to be showcased in the museum or displayed, here at Concordia. We would sit down altogether and say "ok, this is the topic, and brainstorm with the team as to what we should do". That's when everything goes off. I was finally able to use everything in my brain and let it all out.</p> <p>Here, we give you an idea, or a topic and we go crazy with it- that's what we do.</p>
MARIO	<p>Here, at the WOTP. It's the way they teach you. They make learning a lot more exciting; they make it a lot more interesting. They make it so you can be more encouraged with what you want to do.</p> <p>Essentially at the WOTP, they teach you real world things, like what you actually need.</p> <p>Here, at the WOTP, they teach you everything to their best abilities, they teach you as much as they can of the real-world things; things that matter.</p> <p>Here you can do what you can but within the parameters.</p> <p>Here, at the WOTP, they take their time, and invest themselves to help you learn and grow as a person. I think the program is truly fantastic. I really hope it continues to succeed as it does now and throughout the future, I hope it gets bigger and more people</p>

	<p>see us that we continue to have more vernissages and maybe get something else at the museum- that would be pretty cool again.</p>
ANTHONY	<p>Their program started me, you know. If I didn't come here, I probably would have been a criminal today, or a delinquent. I would still be doing drugs; I probably would have been selling drugs. WOTP saved me and started me in a sense.</p> <p>WOTP is that it's not like regular high school. They teach you things they normally wouldn't teach you in a regular high school. In a sense, you're treated more like an adult, and not a kid. You know, you're treated with more respect, you learn to respect more, and if you ever do wrong, you're not just given trouble- you're told why, once you did it, and what caused it afterwards.</p> <p>Even when I got here, I was still in a rough patch and doing a bit of drugs, but one day I went out and did drugs, smoked- did what I had to do, and came back to class, stoned. Thibault presented Gerhard Richter. During that time I wasn't even really paying attention and stuff- I was stoned and I didn't hear anything. Then we had to get up, and do work with the spatula. I didn't even know what I was doing but I took two random colours, and I just did it.</p> <p>The theme was <i>Heart</i>. To refresh your memory, I had to do a painting that described heart and stuff like that. One day after class, Thibault told me: "this is the theme, let's see what you can do right now, on the spot". So I took this giant sheet of paper, I took a whole bunch of colours, and I created.</p>
TONIN	<p>These students are being given the chance to get caught up on basic academics. And at the same time, get a taste for education from a different perspective.</p> <p>They have different courses than everybody else and they have stages, and so the students take part in a stage program, one or two days a week. So that gives them a different perspective on life. A lot of them aren't interested in school. We run things as project-based learning.</p> <p>Art was brought in, simply because it was gonna be done for credit.</p> <p>Students were shown different forms of art, different techniques, different medium, and using different art material. From there, everyone got to try it, but nobody was forced to roll with it after they've had the chance to try it.</p> <p>It was almost an individual plan or project for each student except for when they were collaborating. It was so unique to each kid, and that's what made things magical over here.</p>

	<p>So the idea of trying, and choosing and then rolling with your choice was really cool because it got the most out of them. From this, we were teaching them the fundamentals of what a strong artist is able to do, and that's make personal connections between their work and anything else that becomes their lives and being able to communicate and express those connections to their audience, classmates or viewers, and being able to do that, made them much more powerful artists.</p> <p>The kids expressed themselves through their work.</p> <p>It had opened up a new realm of personal creativity that the kids could express that wasn't in our program when the art started. In the past, we were much more 'working in the box' before art came, and this introduction to our program has enabled us to allow the students to start working outside of the box. There was very little room for personal creativity, personal expression within the classes we were able to have here.</p> <p>And art brought an unknown tool that I could use with my students, to get them to become more productive, global students than what they used to be.</p> <p>One of the great things about art is that you can tie it in to anything. If you use your creativity, (and never forget that is part of our jobs, as teacher) you can find connections between the subjects.</p>
JOE V.	<p>The teachers work very closely with the students- it's a small group, it's only about 12 students.</p> <p>It's a lot of "hands-on" work in the classroom of the WOTP, a lot of moving around, if they don't get in the regular classroom, and it keeps them motivated.</p> <p>The teaching strategies are very different than the rest of the school, because of the level that the kids have. It's more like a one on one, one on small groups. The teachers are very creative in the way that they handle the students in the classroom, and they'll work with students on different and specific subjects, a lot of moving around, and a lot of getting kids to do different things that they feel comfortable with so that they feel the success that perhaps they didn't feel in their other classes.</p> <p>It's very unconventional teaching. The teachers have to be creative, and motivated and they have to show they care for the kids. The kids have to feel safe in their environment.</p>
Theme:	Pedagogy
Sub-theme #2:	Regular-school recollections

ROMEO	<p>I had a really rough time in school. The atmosphere of being in a classroom all the time wasn't really my thing.</p> <p>I would always hear other people talk about how WOTP people are stupid. This was crushing, and I felt terrible for quite awhile. In the JFK regular program- you're always confined to doing certain things that you might not like.</p> <p>The problem is that you don't really use all of your imagination; you can't just go in the art room during lunch, grab some paint and go crazy with it.</p>
MARIO	<p>In regular JFK, it gets very discouraging. You're not learning real-life things that you learn here, you sit at a desk for 75 minutes day on end, and you're just there learning how to read a book, which is nothing interesting.</p> <p>Maybe you'll learn a math question that perhaps, you will need in the future.</p> <p>JFK Regular teaches you all the things people think you should know. And they don't teach you the things you'll actually need. Like they send you out there in the real world with information you didn't need, and they just send you out there hoping you get a job, or that you find some sort of success.</p> <p>Like for instance, construction- I wouldn't have learned that in JFK Regular. Working with my hands, I wouldn't have learned that over there. I would just be a pencil pusher just doing what they would tell me to do.</p> <p>Over there, you can't really do much. There they force you to learn, they push you to learn they expect you to learn on the spot.</p>
ANTHONY V	<p>I figured I was just going to focus on academics you know.</p>
TONIN	<p>We didn't have much art in our elementary school; we were a pretty poor school. So we didn't have much resources.</p> <p>Teachers back then didn't have the same sensitivity that they have now.</p> <p>It showed that what they did when they were laughing at me, because of my art was just a lack of training and sensitivity back then.</p> <p>We didn't work here [at the WOTP] by a set sort of lesson type of design art [found in the regular program], where everybody was like: "ok- today we're all making a painting with acrylic, or today we are all making a collage, or today, we are all free-style drawing". That's not how it worked here.</p> <p>It's not that we were all doing the same thing unlike a regular class because students</p>

	<p>there, are forced to do all the same thing.</p> <p>Before it was just pen and paper, and it was right with a blue check-mark, or wrong with a red-x. And art allowed them to do that because there's no blue pens—and no red pens. There's no checks and no X's.</p> <p>Think an academic class that allows you to prepare that way. It's one thing to prepare to take a test, but that doesn't give you the same pressure, because there's nobody outside of the class other than the teacher who's going be looking at that test.</p>
JOE V	<p>These are kids that used to be in trouble at the office, and I was the VP before I was the Principal, and with them, it was constant truancy, not coming to school, leaving early, and not telling anyone about it.</p> <p>These are not your kids that teachers necessarily wanted in their classes, they had their heads down, they were often not in school, they were basically the students that had nothing else to do than to cause trouble because they couldn't keep up because the material was above their heads</p>
Theme:	Pedagogy
Sub-theme #3:	Program outcomes
ROMEO	<p>It's always very big, it's more fun here, and on some days, yeah we slow it down, but sometimes that's just the way life is- that's what our artworks reflects.</p> <p>At first, I briefly saw the artworks here, and then when I heard about the MMFA, I said to myself: "we have a museum in Montreal?" I never really knew about this.</p> <p>In truth, just being there was an eye opener.</p> <p>I didn't really have artworks because it was previously made from last year. So I would walk around and think: "this is really cool, I've never done this type of art in my entire life" I saw these cool artworks and thought: "wow" that's something I'm going to do?</p> <p>I wanted do that, and we had a chance to do that as a group, which was an unforgettable experience.</p> <p>Art in my life now still plays a pretty big role, like I still love doing art.</p> <p>Well, I love doing it because it's just fun and I get to finally use my imagination to do something that's really cool and not just sit in my bed and dream of things.</p>

	<p>Here, at the WOTP art program, you can put your imagination to use.</p> <p>I was finally able to use everything in my brain and let it all out.</p> <p>Art isn't just one thing: it's all about imagination.</p>
MARIO	<p>I've also started my art there, my pictures.</p> <p>it felt like we did better than we were meant to do, or what was expected of us, at the very least. It felt really good being treated well and being seen mostly.</p> <p>Art now is about perception. I view things differently now than I used to.</p> <p>I see things pretty differently: colours can blend in, and change and all that, and that changes aspects to what and how I see today.</p> <p>It affected me greatly actually. Since I enrolled in the WOTP program, I became more mature, and learned many new things I wouldn't have had the chance to do otherwise</p> <p>I think the program is truly fantastic. I really hope it continues to succeed as it does now and throughout the future, I hope it gets bigger and more people see us</p>
ANTHONY	<p>My parents would have never expected me to do this now.</p> <p>And their [WOTP] program started me, you know.</p> <p>Well, I want to tell people that I'm good at what I did and that I could show something for it too. At least I did something good, and that felt great. I never thought I could get somewhere with my paintings,</p> <p>And once they were showcased at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, I told myself, it could happen. You don't have to be a good drawer; you could do other types of art too.</p> <p>In general, I was shocked we showcased at the museum- I was also surprised.</p> <p>But I know they really liked my art, and it their reactions were honest- you could simply tell.</p> <p>The arts are more important now; they have become a big part of my life and created a big impact on it, I think it's safe to say the arts impacted me to do good, more good than bad, in a sense, They helped me to calm down a bit sometimes, when I feel I need to slow things down- the arts have helped a lot, they really did become a big part of my life.</p> <p>Painting has kept busy. This is all so unreal.</p>

TONIN	<p>He came in, and he brought a totally different mindset, and really put things into perspective. He brought a different form of energy into the room, and showed us that you don't need a lot of natural raw artistic talent to be able to produce beautiful art. And that's especially what he taught the kids.</p> <p>He's more grounded than he used to be, he's more confident in himself, he feels better about himself, and he's had the chance to get his life back in order. So I think that his work tells a story.</p> <p>We ended up showcasing our artworks at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as a group.</p> <p>But you know, it was all about the students- they felt like they were red carpet VIPs for a night, and in essence they were.</p> <p>Hopefully, it's something that they'll experience again, but for a lot of them it, it'll be something that they'll remember for the rest of their lives.</p> <p>My deepest emotions all have to do with knowing how important this was for the kids. It had opened up a new realm of personal creativity that the kids could express that wasn't in our program when the art started.</p> <p>Yet, the fact that I embraced it and even though it was outside of my comfort zone, I gave it a chance, let it happen and it led to so much more than what I had imagined.</p> <p>It built up their abilities to communicate their feelings, to communicate through artworks, to show emotions and it also allowed them to socialize with each other, to work more collaboratively, in physical tasks, which is a team building exercise that you can't put a price tag on.</p> <p>So it allowed for partnerships to be built. Now it has much less to do with a raw talent, and more with ideas, creativity, and the ability to collaborate.</p> <p>Our next plan over here: we're tying art into math, we're tying it to entrepreneurship, and to creating a business; this years' goal is to create our own art gallery at the school, so that the students can their work up permanently, and that we can have a physical space for their works to be appreciated by all the school, and the school community.</p> <p>What we've done here- it's something I'm always going to keep with me, and keep transferring to every project that we do.</p>

JOE V	<p>I think they surprised a lot of the staff members at the school in their talent, and I think it's changed the perspectives of how they are now viewed by the staff members that had trouble with them. So the exposure not only built their self-esteem, but painted a positive picture of what these kids can do, and it's changed the views of the people that they exposed to because that wasn't the view they ever had of them.</p> <p>So I think they had like a hidden talent that no one ever knew about, and I guess it made a different relationship to the teacher that they had, and kind of smoothed over any, let's say 'bad blood' that they might have had for any trouble that they caused in the past, so it almost gave them a fresh start.</p>
Theme #2:	BELONGING
Sub-theme #1:	Family Support
ROMEO	<p>Growing up in Montreal, I lived in a very welcoming house</p> <p>My two sisters were always there for me.</p> <p>In our house, I remember we had more sculptures of women's faces than anything else; Mom loved that stuff- she loved sculptures. We also had typical paintings in our house, flowers, meadows, and things like that.</p> <p>It was the culinary arts that were important.</p> <p>My grandmother, she was a very open to her family. We would often go to her house. Well we lived there for a little bit. I remember she would grab pens and markers, and ask me to draw, or teach me how to sew. It was very welcoming place, she was such a nice woman</p> <p>I had a good childhood, certain parts where good, certain parts were rockier.</p>
MARIO	<p>I used to go up and down to visit them, it's the Italian life style- always found myself spending time there, so I had been doing that for almost 14 years, until Mom and Dad separated. It was hectic, because sometimes they would fight a lot, but other than that, things were all right.</p> <p>Our aunt from Ottawa would always bring me those crayons, a coloring book, and she would say, "don't color outside the line, be neat, color inside the lines, be creative and use different colors, do what you think is right" In small efforts, she would be the only one who would encourage me to be creative.</p> <p>Mom had much more trust in me. From this point on, she would let me go out and experience new things that I may have missed out when I was younger.</p>

ANTHONY	<p>Growing up, I was mostly with my grandmother because my father was always working and my mother was still in university at the time. Today, I consider my grandmother a second mother to me. She really took care of me. I remember seeing my parents on the weekend;</p> <p>Back then, I felt that my father only ever cared about my grades, which was good but he never expected me to do what I do today.</p> <p>I remember that because mom would put it on the fridge for like 5-6 years or more, and that's why I would remember it- I would always see it.</p> <p>My mom would encourage me, or push to continue for she saw I had something in it, she really wanted me to keep working at it.</p> <p>My cousin who draws well said to me "what you do is the new thing, what I do is old", so you should be proud, and I hope you remember that".</p> <p>When my family members came, at first I figured they weren't going to like my works and that they're just going to say they liked it to make me happy, but I thought they'd be lying. But I know they really liked my art, and it their reactions were honest</p> <p>This became an unforgettable moment for me- to see my family take pride in my paintings.</p> <p>But to be honest, the people I care who see my art the most, is mainly my family</p>
TONIN	<p>You could see just by the way the students showed up with their friends and their families, there was such a great amount of pride there</p> <p>There was such an overwhelming feeling of gratitude</p>
JOE V	<p>She studied art history, so we were always exposed to art within my family. I always took on different projects with her, and then that's something that I kept up with even later in life. She really got us into it, you know? She exposed us to different things: painting, sculpting, you name it, we'd do it with her.</p> <p>The thing about her was that she used to just let us express ourselves the way we wanted with the arts.</p> <p>I mean there was always a huge turnout, [...] families came out.</p>
Theme #2:	BELONGING
Sub-theme #2:	Community Support

ROMEO	<p>I said:“Mrs., Mrs.! Look at this!” and she replied, “Wow, one day you’re going to be a doctor!” I said. Wow! So that was one of the cool moments that always stuck with me,</p> <p>The truth is that despite what others would say about WOTP students, I was already making friends the day I arrived</p> <p>I would hear parents repeatedly say, ” This is awesome, my son did this, my daughter did that, students made this?” In truth, just being there was an eye opener</p> <p>The paintings weren’t all the same; they were all so different. You walked past the art and could appreciate all the efforts that went into them.</p> <p>I would hear people say, “This is great work, I can’t believe students made this!” The students’ works are in the museum.</p> <p>Later on, we went to the Leonardo Da Vinci center to showcase our works. My sister’s friends came; they listened and looked around. One of her friends really loves art, so she took a good look at the artworks and said to me: “this is cool, I wish I would have done this”</p> <p>I remember new students would come in and we would invite them to make art by saying: “here, we have this entire room of supplies, go crazy-make art”</p>
MARIO	<p>I remember the one I’ve taken of Ram- It made me feel good, my art being there, and then showcased in a community center and that people were looking at it.</p> <p>I remember my friend Kim’s artworks. She had a portrait of herself, her sister, and I think with a baby as well. It was a colourful picture of them- what they represented as family- so it was also like a portrait, but using different media</p> <p>I think I really enjoyed watching other people look at the arts the WOTP made and hear all the compliments during the art shows</p> <p>I think everybody had a good time. People didn’t even see us a kids-they saw us as artists</p> <p>they congratulated us, and did all that. It felt good. In other words, it felt like we did better than we were meant to do, or what was expected of us, at the very least. It felt really good being treated well and being seen mostly.</p> <p>I hope it gets bigger and more people see us that we continue to have more vernissages and maybe get something else at the museum- that would be pretty cool again</p>

ANTHONY	<p>Everyone that would see my work eventually would say: “you’re good- continue!” my teachers would tell me I’m good, and that support itself was motivating.</p> <p>I never thought I could get somewhere with my paintings, and once they were showcased at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, I told myself, it could happen</p> <p>So many people took pictures, I thought “wow, I’m that good?” And then I got more interested at that time, more into it. You know, I was happy.</p> <p>I remember once I was painting, and Thibault said to me “you’ve found your talent” At first, I didn’t really quite believe it, but as we got more into it, I’m like, he could be right, and he was right.</p>
TONIN	<p>The school had some money to work with a community organization Youth Fusion, and said they were going to send an “artist” to help us make a mural and this could be included in as part of our art class. From that point, everything art related in the WOTP changed.</p> <p>He came in, and he brought a totally different mindset, and really put things into perspective. He brought a different form of energy into the room, and showed us that you don’t need a lot of natural raw artistic talent to be able to produce beautiful art. And that’s especially what he taught the kids. He did the opposite of what I thought was going to happen</p> <p>Eventually, we ended up showcasing our artworks at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as a group.</p> <p>it was all about the students- they felt like they were red carpet VIPs for a night, and in essence they were- and you could see a real appreciation for their work but also an appreciation of their part for what was being done for them, and an appreciation of the fact that they were being appreciated.</p> <p>Just hearing people pay homage to them and their work was a unique experience.</p> <p>All the partners came together to make this happen for these kids, and sometimes it’s hard to believe how much it means to them</p> <p>this years’ goal is to create our own art gallery at the school, so that the students can their work up permanently, and that we can have a physical space for their works to be appreciated by all the school, and the school community.</p>
JOE V	<p>So basically the WOTP program is an alternative program that’s offered in this school. We’re one of the only regular high schools that have this program offered to the students.</p>

	I went to public school in Montreal. Graduated from Pearson: where I'm the principal now.
Theme #2:	BELONGING
Sub-theme #3:	Lack of support/ discouragement
ROMEO	<p>things started to go downhill from there. Mom and Dad eventually got divorced, and I had to move around a lot. The place that I used to live in changed, and I had to get used to new places. Now that I think more about it, I really moved around a lot, changed a lot of schools. It wasn't always easy.</p> <p>I found we were always confined to do one thing- like males should do male things, females should do female things,</p>
MARIO	<p>I had been doing that for almost 14 years, until Mom and Dad separated. It was hectic, because sometimes they would fight a lot,</p> <p>I'm sure you'll recall this, but Mom and Dad were never really artsy. Perhaps this is why the arts were never really important to me when I grew up</p> <p>But before that, there was really no art when I was growing up, and this was very unfortunate.</p> <p>When I was younger, I wasn't able to do many things. For instance, I couldn't go outside because my parents were afraid they'd lose me, or fear I'd get in trouble. So in ways, I felt as if I was confined to my house and I couldn't really do much outside of it,</p>
ANTHONY	<p>my father was always working and my mother was still in university at the time</p> <p>the arts weren't really big. To me, the way teachers described it when I was in school was that being an artist is about drawing landscapes, and details, and I couldn't draw. I never felt like a drawing artist; I tried, but it didn't work. So that's why I think the arts were never really important to me while growing up</p> <p>At first, my father wasn't really interested in my creative side; maybe he was, but he didn't really show it</p> <p>To be honest, I don't think my past had an affect on me today; growing up, I would always think that to be an artist is to be a good at drawing. Yet when I was young, I</p>

	<p>never had a spatula and different tools to create and recreate my thoughts through art, so that changes things too.</p> <p>I never thought I could get somewhere with my paintings</p> <p>To begin, I didn't think many people would come; I didn't think anybody would appreciate my work and my paintings in particular</p> <p>When my family members came, at first I figured they weren't going to like my works and that they're just going to say they liked it to make me happy, but I thought they'd be lying</p>
TONIN	<p>So when I made art, I would get made fun of because of course</p> <p>I took no art classes after that, because again, there were only drawing or painting classes, so I avoided those like the plague.</p> <p>there's no way I was able to fake skills at something I was not skilled in, and having never taught art before, I didn't know how vast the realm of arts was.</p> <p>Naturally, having somebody who's not comfortable with art wouldn't have made that experience that good for the students.</p> <p>there's a reason why he creates the pieces that he does. There's a reason why he takes paints, and literally creates a mish-mash mixup with it. That's because that's what this kid's life had been, for the longest time. And it was only then that there was some sort of semblance, direction and order coming together with him. When I look at his art, it reminds me of somebody who's grown up, living that way</p>
JOE V	<p>These are the types of students that probably would not graduate and probably drop out, so they are "at-risk" student. These are kids that used to be in trouble at the office, and I was the VP before I was the Principal, and with them, it was constant truancy, not coming to school, leaving early, and not telling anyone about it.</p>
Theme #3:	Identity
Sub-theme #1:	Artist identity
ROMEO	<p>As artists, we should use our art and create many different things. Also, I loved adding cool meanings to my art; there were always these things in the back of my head</p> <p>We were always experimenting with cool things</p>

	<p>I found we were always confined to do one thing- like males should do male things, females should do female things, but we liked to do both. It's tough to explain, but it was about breaking away from the gender roles, like do what you want and be who you want to be.</p> <p>So I would walk around and think: "this is really cool, I've never done this type of art in my entire life" I saw these cool artworks and thought: "wow" that's something I'm going to do</p> <p>The artwork I made was about society's hands and they are grasping what you should think. What you find beauty is up to you to decide. I mean, at your age today, ask yourself: "what do you think is beautiful?" It's all about how you feel and think as an individual that's beautiful. It's just a matter of perception.</p> <p>These days, what I like most is to experiment with art. There are many different types of art, and that's what I like most about it. It's very open, you can use your imagination, your skills, whatever you have, and if you're a bad drawer, it doesn't really matter, since everyone has a different way of perceiving art.</p>
MARIO	<p>I'd have to say that since he came into the program, art became more influential: it was about creativity, experience, and exploring with what you think you like, and how you think you could make art from it all.</p> <p>I seek to view the world in a multitude of ways. I take pictures of stuff I think is good, so photography is important to me. If I see something really pulls my eye, and really catches me, I'd take a picture and try to the best of my abilities to capture the moment, that's what I think photography is. It's catching moments.</p> <p>It's calming and it's a lot nicer than things you have to plan and prepare, like naturalistic things are much more interesting to me</p> <p>I think it's all about creativity- you're experiencing, trying different things, and more about exploring what you haven't learned. In regards to my photography practice, it's calming and relaxing. It's less stressful for me</p> <p>Taking a picture is a lot less stressful in my opinion. If it doesn't work out, you take another one. For that, my practice evolved a lot. I've taken many pictures so far and at the WOTP, I get to document and do basically the filming of whatever we do to showcase to other people so they know what we do here.</p> <p>I've taken a lot of pictures of other people, portrait shots</p> <p>People didn't even see us as kids-they saw us as artists. They treated us like artists, they didn't say: 'oh these kids, you know they're just creative for the time being" and they didn't judge us poorly.</p>

	<p>Art now is about perception. I view things differently now than I used to.</p> <p>but now that I've been introduced to art, I see things pretty differently: colours can blend in, and change and all that, and that changes aspects to what and how I see today.</p>
ANTHONY	<p>growing up, I would always think that to be an artist is to be a good at drawing.</p> <p>And I said: "well, it's <i>heart</i>, so and there's good and there's bad" Not everybody is good, and not everybody is bad. I feel this work really captured all that I was feeling and going through at the time.</p> <p>I do art today so I could be proud of myself</p> <p>Well, I want to tell people that I'm good at what I did and that I could show something for it too. At least I did something good, and that felt great. I never thought I could get somewhere with my paintings, and once they were showcased at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, I told myself, it could happen. You don't have to be a good drawer; you could do other types of art too</p> <p>I see the world in a different view. The arts are more important now; they have become a big part of my life and created a big impact on it, I think it's safe to say the arts impacted me to do good, more good than bad, in a sense, They helped me to calm down a bit sometimes, when I feel I need to slow things down- the arts have helped a lot, they really did become a big part of my life.</p>
TONIN	<p>I had no traditional artistic talent as a child</p> <p>I ended up hating the arts because in elementary school</p> <p>I had the ideas; I didn't have the execution. There were other forms of art that I was really good in. I was a good actor; a performance art type of guy</p> <p>Earlier in this letter, I stated how much I had little to no experience as an art teacher, let alone an artist</p>
JOE. V	<p>Today, I still paint, when I have time- usually in the summer. I explored different types of art,</p> <p>it's always been there, but with different roles that you take on, you have less time to be able to do it, but I think it's helped me to be able to express myself, keep creative, and it also takes you away from the reality, when you're involved in it so much, and I think that's how it impacted me now- it's a way to kind of escape. I was doing a lot of landscapes, I stopped when I started teaching because I didn't have time, and then recently, for about four years, I've done a painting here and there. More on request</p>

	from people, but I like it.
Theme #3:	Identity
Sub-theme #2:	Teacher identity
TONIN	<p>I always wanted to be an elementary school teacher, actually.</p> <p>After three years of teaching students in the behavioural modification program, I had the opportunity to come and run was then known as the 16+ program. so my program is now at JFK and I inherited that program</p> <p>So when I made art, I would get made fun of because of course, the teacher back then didn't have the same sensitivity that they have now. But I did learn to not take it necessarily as an insult. This really taught me to be self-critical, and those skills transfer over to what I do today</p> <p>So it's strange that I grew up as somebody that hated anything that had the concept of art attached to it, and it's weird how I ended up having to teach art. So that's an interesting thing,</p> <p>Naturally, having somebody who's not comfortable with art wouldn't have made that experience that good for the students. You're an animated teacher, you bring in a lot of personality, you have a lot of energy.</p> <p>I stated how much I had little to no experience as an art teacher, let alone an artist. Yet, the fact that I embraced it and even though it was outside of my comfort zone, I gave it a chance, let it happen and it led to so much more than what I had imagined.</p> <p>What I've learned from this, is that as a teacher, you're still a student and you're constantly learning.</p> <p>we were able to go further with our learning because of what art brought in to us, and that has made me a better teacher</p> <p>What we've done here- it's something I'm always going to keep with me, and keep transferring to every project that we do. As a teacher, sometimes we tend to be too hands-on, and do too much. One thing is to be perfect in a way, but we tend to think we always know better than the kids, and we don't have enough confidence in them to let them explore, and I think we have to let go of that sometimes.</p>
Theme #3:	Identity
Sub-theme #3:	Pride

ROMEO	<p>I showed my teacher the work I made. I said:“Mrs., Mrs.! Look at this!” and she replied, “Wow, one day you’re going to be a doctor!” I said. Wow! So that was one of the cool moments that always stuck with me,</p> <p>So I would walk around and think: “this is really cool, I’ve never done this type of art in my entire life” I saw these cool artworks and thought: “wow” that’s something I’m going to do? I would hear people say, “This is great work, I can’t believe students made this!” The students’ works are in the museum, and for that reason, I imagine parents were extremely proud of their kids, so I was truly excited;</p>
MARIO	<p>I think I really enjoyed watching other people look at the arts the WOTP made and hear all the compliments during the art shows</p> <p>I was proud of Anthony when he got a scholarship from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts</p> <p>I was proud when he came and they offered him a scholarship. I think everybody had a good time</p> <p>It felt really good being treated well and being seen mostly.</p> <p>I remember the one I’ve taken of Ram- It made me feel good, my art being there, and then showcased in a community center and that people were looking at it.</p>
ANTHONY	<p>I know he’s proud of me, but I don’t think he expected that, because I honestly was never really big on art when growing up. Neither did I think I would come so far.</p> <p>I do art today so I could be proud of myself</p> <p>I want to tell people that I’m good at what I did and that I could show something for it too</p> <p>I never thought I could get somewhere with my paintings, and once they were showcased at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, I told myself, it could happen</p> <p>My cousin who draws well said to me “what you do is the new thing, what I do is old”, so you should be proud, and I hope you remember that”.</p>
TONIN	<p>they felt like they were red carpet VIPs for a night, and in essence they were- and you could see a real appreciation for their work but also an appreciation of their part for what was being done for them, and an appreciation of the fact that they were being appreciated</p> <p>You could see just by the way the students showed up with their friends and their families, there was such a great amount of pride there</p>

	<p>Just hearing people pay homage to them and their work was a unique experience.</p> <p>It had built up the students' self-confidence so much</p> <p>Looking at it now, we were able to go further with our learning because of what art brought in to us, and that has made me a better teacher</p> <p>Because of this, they're probably thinking: "I want to step it up! I want to make sure I do my best possible work here, that I am as meticulous as possible".</p> <p>What we've done here- it's something I'm always going to keep with me.</p>
JOE. V	<p>Bigger projects actually bring the group together, yet more importantly, I think it shows the love of their own works once it's done, and it gives them a sense of pride that they've never had before, and I saw it myself with the two vernissages that we had and the kids were super excited.</p> <p>They've produced amazing work, and the pride is there- you see it when you visit, the kids- they're super happy. And the best part is that now the kids are in school and they're loving it, and it's these projects, like these various art projects that keep them hooked.</p> <p>As a principal, the first thing I need to say is that their art programming and vernissage events were a great success.</p> <p>It was a very touching evening for me as person, I mean forget that I'm the principal, but to see these kids with a smile on their face and a glow in their eyes, talking about their artwork, and everybody left that evening touched, and proud and happy.</p>