Students born today will be 22nd century citizens. Their lives will be affected by global issues and interpersonal interactions that are difficult to imagine today. Futurists say there is one truth we can be sure of: our students will lead an even flatter globe and will need stronger “people skills.” What prepares them for this intensified global interconnectedness they will face? Art. It’s an amazing tool for building a deep understanding of self and others.

Start With Self-Awareness
Every interpersonal interaction requires a strong sense of self. Thinking about their emotions and social relationships, and then tying personal reflections to creative self-expression prepares students to manage interpersonal relationships.

Hamline Elementary School in Chicago redesigned its curriculum to put the child in the center. Just as literacy skills are built with a close read of text, this school uses art to do a close read of self. The inter- and intrapersonal skills that come from a child knowing how to read emotions and self-manage behavior are arguably as important as knowing how to read text.

“Our children face many challenges in their lives. One that we can teach them to manage is the ability to sense an emerging feeling,” explained principal Taina Velazquez-Drover. “They can identify and master the beginning of anger or frustration before it becomes outrage and loss of self-control.”

Social-emotional management strategies are taught using the arts. Kindergarteners sketch what feeling safe looks like versus being afraid. Third graders...
use dance, music, and movement to explore what agitation feels like, how to catch it early, and redirect it. Older children weave themes of empathy and others’ rights into history lessons of the Civil Rights era and current social injustice around the world. “It’s easier for them to imagine how situations impact others thousands of miles away after they really understand their own feelings,” said Velazquez-Drover.

**Art as a Study of Mindfulness**

Students today face many distractions. A new skill that didn’t need to be taught a generation ago is how to turn off clutter and be mindful of whom they are interacting with and what is occurring here, now. Park Forest Elementary School’s principal (or the title she prefers, lead learner), Donnan Stoicovy, calls this “being present.” The leader of the State College, Pennsylvania, elementary school explained why art is the ideal medium for teaching kids about themselves and others around them: “Artists are observers. They communicate emotion with a palette of colors and symbols that can be read by others. When art-making is collaborative, the interpersonal communication brings students to a deeper understanding of their classmates. It builds empathy, compassion, and the importance of really listening to and looking at each other.”

Park Forest Elementary used a sketchbook project that teachers called “Making Learning Visible.” This year-long visual journaling documented the evolution of students’ thoughts and feelings—and their thinking about their thinking. Their metacognitive process included explorations of poverty, inequality, fracturing, and personal discoveries about the responsibilities citizens have to speak up in a democracy. The students chose their topics of inquiry and worked in pairs to get to know what sparked their partner’s sense of wonder. “Students moved from being self-focused to really caring about what others cared about,” Stoicovy said. “They decided how together they’d amplify their voices on issues that moved them—creating motivational posters and the school constitution. The best part of mindfulness is figuring out what to do with an idea, and knowing that your idea could change the world.”

**Broadening the Lens**

As an International Baccalaureate school, Monarch Global Academy in Laurel, Maryland, is focused on preparing students for the globally interconnected world. Its interdisciplinary curriculum is built around six cross-curricular themes that are art infused, which every grade-level team explores for six weeks:

- Who We Are;
- Where We Are in Place and Time;
- How We Organize Ourselves;
- How We Express Ourselves;
- Sharing the Planet; and

Every subject from language arts to math, science, and social studies, and all art forms (visual and performing arts), are studied as part of these themes. Students choose the focus within the themes, and their projects include a global lens for every grade level in developmentally appropriate ways. Principal Donna O’Shea provided an example that brings the How We Organize Ourselves theme to life. “This theme covers a range of topics around governance, community, and of course cross-cultural comparisons, which occur in every theme. When

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**A World of Opportunity**

The World Affairs Councils of America website provides a list of local councils in more than 40 states that offer lectures, resources, and advice for educators seeking to bring a global perspective to educational topics. These councils share their expertise on current events and longstanding issues, such as energy resources, patterns of conflict, and cultural treasures.

The World Affairs Council–Washington, DC provides free professional development to educators who travel from around the country to attend its annual summer institute. Additionally, the council finds sponsors that fund study abroad trips for educators to deepen their understanding of other nations’ cultures. The institute’s professional development themes include understanding freedom, social justice, and public health. Resources from the 2015 institute, “Narratives of Identity: Exploring the Intersection of Culture, Migration & Globalization,” are available for educators. For more information, go to [www.worldaffairsdc.org](http://www.worldaffairsdc.org).

—Amanda Stamp, Global Education Director, World Affairs Council–Washington, DC
our fifth-graders picked their project, they looked at provocations and propaganda. Art was the way they explored differences in multiple views of truth and how they could become convinced of something—not because it was true, but because others wanted to manipulate their view.” These students saw firsthand that art is more than a painting or drawing; it is a way of convincing others and manipulating beliefs. The higher-order thinking skills students developed in these art-infused thematic explorations will stay with them as memorable experiences.

Using the same How We Organize Ourselves theme, kindergarteners took a classic early-grade topic—community helpers—to a new level. “When our kindergarteners study firefighters, health care workers, and transportation drivers, they aren’t limiting their lens to a typical U.S.-centric or Western cultural view,” O’Shea explained. “They research and sketch what firefighting is like in a rural village with grass huts; teaching in a developing country with 60 children in a shack with a dirt floor and no books; and health care without ambulances or multistory hospitals. Sketches help them absorb what life is like across the globe. They quickly get a sense of universal needs and unique circumstances.”

Global Connections Today

While global connections are inevitably part of every child’s life in the future, don’t ignore the global interconnectedness many students have today. The mission statement of The Family School in Bronx, New York, states, in part: “Our students will graduate with the ability to achieve as learners and contributors in our increasingly multicultural, diverse, and complex world.”

Many of the students are first-generation, recent immigrants from dozens of countries, including Ben-gali, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Dominican Republic, and Columbia. Thus, the school developed an art-integration program based around the countries and cultures in its community. “We use the arts to help children connect with these countries’ traditions. Many of our children travel back and forth from their countries of origin and when they return to school we want to weave the arts they saw being authentically created by the village elders into our classrooms,” said principal Pamela Lee.

To help classmates connect with these experiences, The Family School uses traditional folktales, painting, quilting, music, and dance. Many of the folktales woven into the curriculum focus on lessons of understanding self and living in harmony with others.

While standardized, high-stakes testing is a focal topic today, the most challenging tests students face don’t occur in schools. Students’ lives are getting more complex and interconnected. Art deepens their understanding of self and others while providing a cross-cultural context that will help them navigate their future.

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