

Art as Personal Identity Narratives

Visual gateways to exploring self & others.



Vansville Elementary School,
Beltsville, Maryland

Art integration is a rigorous teaching strategy that helps students understand complex, multifaceted subjects. It's uniquely well-suited to strengthening students' social-emotional learning and creating personal identity narratives that expand their understanding of self and others. Children's personal identity narratives can—and should—be ambiguous and ever-shifting. The quest to see one's personal identity in new light, to shape and reshape it, and then to share it with others is a reflective process that impacts students' confidence and behavior. The art-rich iterative process of taking what is familiar, challenging it, and expanding it—to look at "who I am" in a new context—is a powerful way of developing a sense of self.

Exemplary educators have shared examples of using art-integration projects to explore personal identity issues—through visuals and creative writing—that result in students creating multiple narratives about who they are, where they come from, what has influenced them, and how others perceive them. This reflective work changes how students see themselves today and who they become. The imaginative nature of art enables children to move from the static here and now to transcend both time and location, and envision themselves in new ways. The historic and cultural nature of art enables children to explore traditions—their own and others'—to see how ancestral narratives and artifacts influence beliefs and dispositions. Implementing these strategies in your school can impact students' sense of self and well-being.

Our Past Affects Our Future

Apply the lessons learned from Theresa Vaisa, principal of Santo Niño Regional Catholic School, to your school. She has deep personal roots in the Santa Fe, New Mexico, community and its three historically prominent cultures: Anglo, Spanish, and Native American. She envisioned a creative leadership project for her faculty and students, "Art of Our Elders Helps Create Our Futures," knowing that respect of others' history would unfold as students studied the ancestral art forms.

Her students stepped back in time and imagined growing up in the 1800s as they walked through the reconstructed homes and simulated villages in local museums. They began to see recurring historical patterns, pointing to their similarities instead

of differences. “Our students realized that when functional objects became embellished, it represented special significance those objects had in the daily lives of ancestors,” Vaisa explained. “Today, kids turn on a faucet to get water. Looking at the vessels each of the cultures used to gather water—the Pueblos, Spanish colonists, and Yankee traders or Anglo settlers, they began to appreciate what life was like hundreds of years ago and who lived on this land before us.”

One of Vaisa’s favorite cross-curricular art explorations is the Pueblo storytelling dolls. “The art forms of pottery and storytelling are both honored with these dolls. As students handcrafted their own versions ... they gain a deeper appreciation of their own and classmates’ heritage,” Vaisa said.

Reversing Stereotypes

Consider how the objectives of this project can be adapted to your school. Educators in Seligman, Arizona, wanted an innovative, uplifting approach to combat the misunderstandings that have been prevalent in their community for generations. For hundreds of years, the people who lived in this area had dismissed, disliked, distrusted, or disrupted the lives of others who lived near them. Seligman Elementary School principal Jeff Baker and his creative leadership team of teacher leaders considered how the arts could instill a sense of pride and respect for both the Native American and ranching cultures their students came from. They found that immersing students in the traditional visual art, dance, music, and storytelling of their elders helped dispel myths and reverse stereotypes.

“When we approached the objective through art, it enabled our students to feel good about where they came from, connect with who they are, become curious about and respectful of others’ traditions,” Baker explained. With the help of the Hualapai tribe



Santo Niño Regional Catholic School, Santa Fe, New Mexico



Students at Santo Niño Regional Catholic School explore the traditional art of storytelling dolls.



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and rancher artists, students engaged in hands-on art experiences, and saw and heard performances that they had never been exposed to before. Baker described a scene from his schoolwide assembly that moved him deeply: “As the traditional music and dance began, students were asked to close their eyes to connect with the spiritual energy. They all did it—and we all felt something powerful. The past came toward us and brought students to a collectively respectful place. Days after the event, students both from the reservation and the rancher communities commented on how special it felt to be together in this schoolwide celebration of respect.”

Baker offers advice to principals interested in using the arts to build a sense of personal identity and respect for others’ cultural narratives:

- **Be patient.** It takes time and tenacity to puncture the myths about others. Art helps to paint a more meaningful picture of who these “different and too often distrusted people” really are.
- **Establish trust with the community.** You’ll need to find out how each community protects certain traditions and what would or wouldn’t be appropriate to share in school. Elders take very seriously the transmission of traditions to the next generation, so ask for their guidance and don’t overstep boundaries.
- **Be authentic.** Each culture has a rich set of traditions that need to be researched and respected. For example, when students made storytelling necklaces and handcrafted animal beads, they were mindful of the attitude differences various tribes on the reservation have toward animal species. Some tribes view bison as the symbol of strength; for other tribes strength is symbolized by the hawk. Some students did not create owl or snake beads out of respect for what those creatures mean to their tribes.
- **Provide a balance.** Be inclusive of all cultures represented in your school.

ART AS PERSONAL IDENTITY NARRATIVES



Clockwise from top left: Coronita Elementary School, Corona, California; Rawlins Elementary School, Rawlins, Wyoming; North Summit Elementary School, Coalville, Utah; Vansville Elementary School, Beltsville, Maryland

Visualize Our Roles in Humanity

Author Maya Angelou often told her students that reflective journals challenge us to be our greatest self and unafraid to shine. Children step outside of today's constraints and rise above barriers when they reimagine themselves and the impact they can have on others. Mankind has always used portraits, masks, and other visual metaphors to inform sense of self and show others who we want them to see.

The role of art in expressing personal identity has been a focus of Vansville Elementary School in Beltsville, Maryland. Art teacher Virginia Bute-Riley and music teacher James Dorsey lead their school's creative leadership team. They have used music and artist identity books to focus students on questions of "Who am I? Where do I belong? What influences and represents me?" Students merge art and writing to juxtapose multiple contexts, exploring personal identity in powerful ways.

Bute-Riley outlined the way artist identity books are used across grade levels:

■ Young students begin with realistic self-portraits, informed by mirrors.

They move to family portraits that use shapes to communicate relationships. By de-emphasizing details and using inference techniques, children consider "what others could infer about me and the interpersonal relationships portrayed in my art."

■ **Students learn about artists' intentions and how art conveys meaning.** Choice of colors, space, shape, and patterns communicate. Looking at art created in other eras helps students imagine "what if" they lived then and there—making a personal connection to history. There is an epiphany or "aha" moment when students interpret historic paintings and the life challenges depicted. This helps students build empathy and see themselves with a different lens.

■ Older students study masks from the Smithsonian collection.

They relate ancient masks to contemporary issues of "What do I present to others versus what isn't revealed, but lies within?"

Strong collaboration, led by the creative leadership team, closely links social studies to their art-integration identity narrative projects. Moving from literal, realistic portraits to symbolic and abstract helps students move to broader views of self. Vansville Elementary's principal, Tom Smith, credits Bute-Riley and Dorsey as helping students explore the many layers of personal identity.

Self-image is interwoven with what others think of us. It is rooted in traditions that children learn about themselves and others. Visual explorations of self can build confidence and compassion. Identity is an ever-evolving narrative that can be shaped and reshaped by asking probing questions and looking beyond the current landscape. Art enables students to see parts of themselves and others that they never saw before—providing them with wings and new personal flight paths. 

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Coronita Elementary School, Corona, California



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