john w. gardner center for youth and their communities

executive summary

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AN IMPLEMENTATION STUDY OF THE *ART IN ACTION* PROGRAM

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Founded in 1982, Art in Action is a nonprofit organization that brings visual arts education to classrooms and schools. Through its curriculum model, Art in Action seeks to make the arts an integral part of all students' education. Currently, Art in Action serves approximately 50,000 students across 1,200 classrooms including public, private, and charter schools in rural, suburban, and urban settings.

Targeting students in grades K-8, Art in Action's program consists of 12 age-appropriate lessons per year. After completing a series of trainings and refresher courses (either in person or online), parent and teacher volunteers teach the curriculum. The curriculum is based on historically significant artists and their works of art. Through semi-structured discussions, students examine a variety of masterpieces, learning about the artist as well as particular art styles and techniques. Students then apply the concepts they learned to create original works of art. Art in Action's curriculum is sequential and builds upon previous skills taught, while also introducing new material, artists, vocabulary, and techniques. Most participating schools choose to showcase students' artwork in an end-of-the-year exhibit, drawing in parents and other community members.

As Art in Action enters into a new strategic planning cycle, which includes attention to sustaining and scaling its programs, it needs to better understand how its curriculum is implemented within and across schools, how youth and adults perceive and experience the program, and the conditions that either hinder or support implementation. Thus, in 2014, Art in Action partnered with the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) at Stanford University in a year-long, qualitative, implementation study of its program in Bay Area schools and beyond. Through a multi-method research design—including interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and lesson observations—the study examined five schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, four schools outside this region, and three schools that previously partnered with Art in Action but no longer implement the program.

Art in Action Visual Art Exhibit

The following questions guided the study:

1. How do schools learn about Art in Action and why do they decide to adopt the program? Why do some schools discontinue their partnership with Art in Action?

2. In what ways do schools implement the Art in Action program? How does program implementation vary across and within sites?

3. What factors and conditions shape the implementation of the Art in Action program?

4. In what ways does the Art in Action program influence students, adults, and school communities? To what extent do program implementation factors shape these perceived influences?

The study was designed to develop a clear picture of Art in Action's program model and how its implementation varies within and across contexts. Further, this study sought to generate rich and nuanced understanding of how students, adults, and school communities experience the program. Often, program evaluations focus on program outcomes without considering the changes that are most reasonable for a program to achieve, or how the program and its components operate within varied contexts to produce observed results. Art in Action wanted to develop greater clarity about these dimensions to develop a clear program theory of change that can help strengthen the planning, implementation, and evaluation of its organizational efforts and strategies.

Overview of Findings

Overall, Art in Action had a flexible and decentralized program implementation model. There was significant variation in how the program was carried out, both within and across the case study sites. Schools had different goals for adopting Art in Action. While some sites aimed to create a disciplined fine-arts program, others implemented it to ensure that students had basic exposure to the arts. Differences in schools' goals shaped how the curriculum was structured including how much time was devoted to the program, who carried out the instruction, and which aspects of the curriculum were emphasized (art history vs. art-making). While parents in some schools coordinated the entire program with no teacher support, other schools utilized classroom teachers. One site hired a professional studio artist to lead students in the art-making process, while parents taught the art history component. There were also variations in the availability of docents and parent volunteers, a dedicated classroom space, and financial support, among others. Differences in program implementation suggested that while the Art in Action program had an overall 'form,' there was great flexibility within it that allowed schools to tailor the program to fit their needs and circumstances.

Regardless of how the program was structured and implemented on site, we found that participants reported broadly similar perceptions about Art in Action and its influences on students, adults, and school communities. Docents, parent volunteers, administrators, and teachers characterized Art in Action as a high-quality visual arts curriculum. Respondents expressed how the program helped expose children, as well as adults, to the visual arts world and encourage participation in arts spaces outside of school (e.g., museums). Participants reported how Art in Action provided a creative outlet for young people to create, explore, and exercise their imagination. They also expressed how by working together to implement the curriculum, connections among stakeholders at the school (e.g., between parents and teachers) were strengthened.

By exposing participants to the arts, establishing a space for creativity, and increasing connections at school, respondents reported that the Art in Action program provided opportunities for youth and adults to cultivate visual art knowledge and techniques, as well as habits of mind (e.g., persistence). Respondents stated how the program helped build confidence for self-expression, and make more visible the talents and skills of students and adults. Additionally, by displaying Art in Action projects within the school (e.g., hallways, auditoriums) and neighborhood (e.g., libraries, banks), participants expressed how the school became more visible to others in the community. Taken together, respondents described how these settings, conditions, and opportunities to develop in new ways helped instill in students, parents, and school staff a sense of pride and ownership, joy, and engagement with school.

In what follows, we provide further details about the study's findings and key areas for consideration.

"Being able to go to a museum with my son and we'll both see a name that we recognize…we'll stand there and have a discussion about the piece of art that we studied last year…I now know artists I didn't know before, and just learning the history behind it…I've learned lots."

– Docent

Perceived Influence of Art in Action on Schools, Adults, and Students

Despite significant variation in program implementation, participants reported broadly similar perceptions about Art in Action—both as a program and its influence on schools, teachers, parents, and students. While each school varied in its implementation structure and processes, at a 'big picture' level most respondents expressed how the Art in Action program helped:

- *Expose participants to the art world and invite their participation—within the Art in Action classes and beyond.* Through their participation in Art in Action, students, parents, docents, and teachers reported that they were exposed to the world of visual arts. They learned about art history and visual art techniques (e.g., how to draw a face), and became familiar and engaged more with art spaces outside the school such as galleries, museums, and art classes.

- *Connect people to one another.* By creating the opportunity and need for people to work together to carry out the program (e.g., coordinating volunteers, fundraising), we found that Art in Action helped connect stakeholders to one another. Connections included: (1) school to community; (2) teachers to students and parents; (3) parents to schools, teachers, and to one another; and (4) students with their peers, parents, and their schools.

- *Create "spaces" that foster creativity.* We observed how teaching the Art in Action curriculum helped create three types of spaces: (1) a *physical* space - even if a designated art room did not exist, the physical space of the gym, lunchroom, or classroom was transformed to create an environment for art-making; (2) a *temporal* space - a designated time in the schedule had to be carved out for Art in Action lessons; and (3) an *intellectual* space - children and docents reported how a unique intellectual space, which had a spirit of openness and creativity, was created during Art in Action lessons.

By creating the settings and conditions described above, respondents reported how Art in Action helped promote the following:

- *Develop visual art knowledge and skills, and habits of mind.* By participating in Art in Action, students and parents expressed how they were able to hone new skills and knowledge in the visual arts, as well as develop habits of mind (e.g., persistence).

- *Express themselves in different ways.* Through their participation in Art in Action, adults and youth found new ways to express their unique talents, skills, and identities.

- *Be more visible to one another and the larger community.* Participating in Art in Action helped make the school as an institution, and the different people within it, visible in new ways—to one another and to the community at large.

Taken together, the settings, conditions, and perceived influences of Art in Action helped instill in students, parents, and school staff a sense of pride and ownership, joy, and engagement with school.

- *Pride and ownership.* Our interviews and observations suggest that students felt proud of their art-making skills and artwork; parent volunteers felt proud of their children's artwork and for belonging to a school that valued the arts; and teachers and administrators felt proud of their students and school for their art accomplishments.

- *Joy.* Students frequently characterized the Art in Action program and the process of art-making as fun, and one of the few instances during the school day where they could be creative and use their imagination. Parents also expressed enjoyment in volunteering in the classroom and being with their children. Many families were happy to see their children's artwork displayed in the school, visual art shows, as well as in community spaces.

- *Engagement with school.* Adult and youth participants identified Art in Action as a space that encouraged openness and creativity. By organizing together to create this space, teachers and parents reported how children exhibited greater focus and engagement. Parents and principals also expressed how Art in Action helped increase families' engagement in the school and with their children's learning.

It is important to stress that while respondents reported similar broad perceptions about Art in Action, we hypothesize that how the program is implemented at school (e.g., number of lessons students receive, who provides the instruction, how much time and material support is devoted to the program) shapes the kinds of changes and development produced in students, classrooms, and schools. While the present study was not designed to measure these changes directly, results identify potential benefits from participating in the program (e.g., development of art knowledge and skills) that can be more closely assessed in future research.

Factors that Shaped Program Implementation

We found considerable variation in how the Art in Action program was implemented, both within and across the case study schools. Key factors and conditions—many of which are interrelated—that shaped implementation included the schools' goals for adopting the program; the structures and processes operating at each site; the docents and parent volunteers carrying out the program; and the level of material and financial inputs.

School Goals

Each site had differing visions and intentions for the Art in Action program, which, in turn, shaped how the adults in the school organized to implement the curriculum. Variations in school goals, and the extent to which they were explicit and agreed upon by adult participants, drove many of the differences in program structures and processes (see below). Still, despite differences in school goals, we observed a consistent element in the reason for implementing Art in Action: art was perceived as an essential part of children's holistic educational experience.

School Structures and Processes

The goals of the school for adopting the Art in Action program had implications for how the program was structured on site, including the types of processes the school employed to deliver the program. We observed variations in the following:

- *Coordination*. While all schools had some system for coordination, that system (and its formality) varied across sites. How Art in Action was coordinated at the school shaped the delivery of the lessons, such as the extent to which lessons were delivered on a scheduled timeline versus ad hoc. Coordination of the program also shaped how parent volunteers interacted with and supported one another across classrooms and grade levels.

- *Docents.* Who taught the program and how it was taught varied among schools. In many sites, parent volunteers organized the entire program. In one school, a professional artist taught the curriculum with parent support (e.g., parents helped prepare materials and with cleanup), while in other schools classroom teachers carried out the lesson without assistance. Who taught the program influenced the pedagogy used and which aspects of the curriculum were emphasized.

- *Time and lesson structure.* The amount of time allocated for the Art in Action program differed among schools. For instance, the number of lessons adopted by schools varied with some opting not to teach certain lessons because they were not feasible (e.g., the school did not have a kiln for clay projects) or did not align with the school's overall intentions for the program.

- *Physical space.* Many schools implemented Art in Action's curriculum in the traditional classroom space, while some had a designated art room for the whole school, and still others shared spaces such as a lunchroom or gymnasium. Where the lessons were taught shaped classroom transitions, how docents were able to prepare the space prior to the lesson, and the extent to which art-making was perceived as an activity that took place outside the conventional classroom space.

People

Students' art pieces on display

- *Individual goals.* Just as schools had different goals for their program, docents brought their own intentions to each lesson. Some docents emphasized the art-making and visual art techniques while others stressed the art history component. Others utilized the Art in Action lessons to have rich discussions with students about a piece of art.

- *Individual skills and teaching experience.* Docents had varied skills and experience in art as well as in teaching. While classroom teachers demonstrated pedagogical knowledge, few of them had direct experience with visual arts prior to the program. Most docents were not familiar with either teaching or art, other than through the Art in Action program.

- *Time available for coordination, preparation, and teaching.* Who was teaching the program also affected the amount of time available for preparation of the lesson, coordination, and teaching. One of the biggest observed differences was that some schools served a majority

of families in which two parents worked full-time jobs outside the home. By contrast, other schools had a population of parents who worked full-time at home and had greater flexibility in their schedules.

- *Trainings and support.* Schools and individual docents and coordinators differed in how much they accessed the trainings and supports provided by Art in Action. These variations shaped the confidence level of docents to teach the curriculum, and the school's sense of connection to Art in Action as an organization.

Material Inputs

- *Art materials.* Many schools took advantage of Art in Action's supply boxes. Other schools purchased their own supplies and put together what was needed for each lesson separately. Still other schools purchased the boxes and then supplemented with additional materials.

- *Financial support.* We observed variations in the financial support for the program, including who was in charge of fundraising and the amount of support received. The level of financial support determined whether the school was able to sustain the program, year after year.

Questions and Considerations

Present findings suggest that Art in Action's program implementation model is highly flexible and decentralized. While this flexibility was perceived as an asset by many in this study, it nevertheless shapes participants' experiences with the program and the extent to which any particular outcome is likely to develop (e.g., art skills, art history knowledge). Given these variations, results point to important questions Art in Action may want to consider as it expands to more schools including how to support schools with different goals for the program; determining standards and expectations for the teaching and delivery of the curriculum; and how to potentially leverage the program as a family engagement strategy. Perhaps the central overarching question for the organization is:

> ***Are there certain outcomes at the student, docent, or school level—beyond arts exposure—that Art in Action cares deeply about? If so, are there ways to shift the program curriculum, structure, or supports to maximize these outcomes?***

If the main priorities of Art in Action are to prize flexibility of implementation over consistency, and provide students access to the visual arts, then the program is largely achieving these aims. If, however, Art in Action cares about developing particular types of changes in students, classrooms, and schools—with any consistency across sites—it must decide which outcomes it cares most about. For instance, are there certain habits of mind the program would like to develop in students? If so, there are likely ways to support schools in thinking about these and ways to highlight them in the curriculum. Are the development of visual art skills and techniques particularly important? If so, opportunities to reflect on the art creation process and iterate might be important. In short, clarity around these organizational goals can promote more intentional and focused efforts that support students' learning and experiences in the arts.

Conclusion

In summary, our study suggests that Art in Action is an extremely flexible program that can be easily adapted to meet the goals, needs, and circumstances of schools. Although program implementation varied significantly, both within and across schools, participants report similar broad perceptions about the program and its influences on students, adults and school communities. Many see Art in Action as a high-quality visual arts curriculum that provides unique and substantive ways for parents to be involved in their child's education. Participants express how Art in Action helps provide a structured and student-centered learning environment that encourages exploration, and where children are allowed to explore. Respondents also report how the program helps create safe and joyful spaces for students—as well as adults—to learn about the visual arts, engage in the creative process, investigate new perspectives and ideas, and express themselves in novel ways. Moreover, because parents, teachers, and administrators work together to implement the program, Art in Action is perceived as providing a way to increase connections and foster a school community.

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