

"...and they came and they made art." Considerations for an Open Art Studio

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Abstract

As an intern, the author was given the challenge to create an art therapy program at Threshold, a youth services provider, in their alternative school program. The students, 17-25 year-old high school drop-outs, were returning to attain their General Education Qiploma (GED). The administration desired to graduate "well-rounded individuals" from The Learning Center (TLC). The objective for the art therapy component was to provide an experience for the students in which to develop creative thinking abilities, expose them to the arts, and promote the competence of each individual.

An open art studio seemed a sensible and exciting concept for the students and for this writer, but developing the program was to be a challenge. The students, who presented themselves as willful, decisive, and motivated, appeared to be a good fit for an expressive setting. Staff members showed great interest in the products and process of art therapy and the open studio program.

The student body was a robust mix of adolescents and young adults, from inner city neighborhoods. Over 90% of them were pregnant or parenting. The cultural makeup was African-American, Hispanic, and Caucasian. Overall life themes included failure, poverty, abandonment, substance abuse, death, hardship, and violence.

The open studio was available to students and staff during lunch breaks and after school, also one class period per week. The author quickly discovered that having the space and materials available was not sufficient enough incentive for participation from this group. This writer opted to risk self-disclosure and engaged in some tentative, yet honest, art-making. My foray into the uncomfortable paid off. The studio became approachable - even busy at times. Most typically, artwork was begun and abandoned; a telling metaphor for what was to come.