

To Form Creative Partnerships with Public Schools

In his 2008 Ted Prize wish speech, American writer, editor and publisher Dave Eggers spoke about how 826 Valencia; a homework center/pirate supply store in his publishing company McSweeney's office provides a conduit in bringing two communities (the writers' community and that of local students) together. Drawing on the flexible hours that many of his writer colleagues worked and an interest in addressing one of the key challenges that public school teachers face; the need to give individual attention, between the hours after school and when the students go home, writers give up their time to work with students on their homework. The goal is one-on-one attention. 826 Valencia provided an opportunity for students from public schools (some poorly funded) and/or non-English speaking families to be empowered through the written word. In a context where their learning experience is reframed in a pirate supply store and more importantly where their thoughts and words are supported and honoured by professional writers who work side-by-side and model the behaviour of writers to the students. The transformative partnership has resulted in an "addictive" attitude from students towards writing and homework.¹

I came across Dave Eggers' talk about a year ago. It has been an inspiration for me as an example of the potential of unlikely partnerships and a reminder of the power of collective resilience²; communities helping people in ways that government can't or choose not to. Not long before this encounter with Eggers the new New Zealand Curriculum was released and is currently in the process of being rolled out in schools. Amongst the emphasis in this new document, a partnership between schools, students and communities has been foregrounded. However, the new government's budget announcement in May seems to have taken a turn from these initial goals. Amongst the funding cuts is the Artists in Schools programme. The Artists in Schools programme forms partnerships between people in the field of visual and performing arts with schools where a different learning context/experience maybe co-constructed. These partnerships are typically for a sustained period of time of up to 10 weeks where the artist(s) working collaboratively with the classroom teacher can decide on how he/she/they would work with the students depending on the students' needs and strengths. Though I have never been part of the programme, reading through some of the digital stories and case studies online³ I am a firm believer that it is a meaningful and rich partnership that uses very small amount of resources to achieve much of what the new curriculum sets out to achieve. On top of that the programme potentially offers some balancing of the disparity between rural schools and schools in main centres' capacity to access art practices.

With the demise of the Artists in Schools programme in sight and the example of 826 Valencia at the back of my mind, I am interested as to whether a possible conduit may be initiated and produced by the creative communities that will allow for a direct and continued engagement with public schools. I believe such an undertaking will require us to be deeply aware of our interconnectedness to the communities that surrounds us. It will require collaboration, generosity and a re-evaluation of the ways in which the surplus of our society is redistributed.⁴ It will require us to suspend our own interests and requirements temporarily to look for ways that we might be useful to others. I believe in the notion of ownership of our immediate communities, in the sense of shared care and responsibility. The expression "he rangatira taatou katoa" meaning we are all chiefs can be used to provide a way to think about relationships between communities and schools. Within this expression I understand the

position of a chief to mean one where he/she shares ownership of things that happen in his/her community and to share a sense of responsibility for the individual and collective potentials as well as shortcomings. I also believe in collective action that functions as a moderating influence that is gradual rather than radical. That is direct rather than symbolic. That is sustained rather than temporary.

Why schools? Because of the compulsory nature of schooling in New Zealand. Because school is at a time in an individual's life where they are least in control. Because children and youth in school have their rights and potentials defined by others. Because of the apparent disparity in the distribution of resources in that sector. Because it is a place where we can address feelings of disempowerment and assist young people to gain control over their own life directions.

Presently the government is focussing its emphasis on literacy and numeracy for school education. The exclusion of other modes of skills and intelligences is not only short sighted it could prevent a range of individual and collective potentials from being uncovered. Being part of communities of artists who frequently and consistently utilise and understand the value of the range of different intelligences that we have capacity for I feel that it is not out of place for us to put some brain thrust into how we might creatively shift this imbalance. To instigate models that will be responsive to the New Zealand context and sustainable to achieve the aspirations our social imagination might lead to.

-William Hsu, 2009

¹http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/dave_eggert_makes_his_ted_prize_wish_once_upon_a_school.html
1 “I wish that you - you personally and every creative individual and organization you know – will find a way to directly engage with a public school in your area and that you’ll then tell the story of how you got involved, so that within a year we have 1,000 examples of transformative partnerships.

... We hope that the attendees of this conference will usher a new era of participation in our public schools. We hope that you will take the lead in partnering your innovative spirit and expertise with that of innovative educators in your community. Always let the teachers lead the way, they will tell you how to be useful.

I hope that you will step in and help out. There is a million ways you can walk up to your local school and consult with the local teachers, they will tell you how to help.”

² <http://www.metropolism.org/features/interview-with-binna-choi-casco/>

³ <http://www.artistsalliance.org.nz/html/education.php>,

http://arts.unitec.ac.nz/artistsinschools/digital_stories/

⁴ http://www.messhall.org/ten_points.html