

Using the arts to help social cohesion

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This research was conducted by **Dahyun Lee** at **Ohio State University, USA**

Summary

This paper describes what happened in Columbus Ohio during the Guernica Peace Mural Programme in July 2010. The GPMP brought together 18 US graduate students and approximately 20 Somali children over five days to create a piece of public art. By using participatory arts in a community setting the participants were able to better understand each other's cultures and form friendships across cultural divides.

The research used a participatory-observer method

The author of the paper was an active participant in the mural project in addition to conducting 21 semi-structured interviews (15 with the children). The researcher also gathered 12 questionnaires from the graduate students and analysed 117 online postings which reflected on the project.

The project created exposure and understanding, relationships, and solidified connections

The author found that the participatory and collaborative nature of the arts, the informality, the interactions between people and the lack of a hierarchy helped to foster these outcomes. To measure this the researcher looked out for 'increased understanding of Somali people and Somali culture, tolerance of difference, friendship, empathy, mutual trust, mutual respect, a sense of oneness, solidarity, and cohesion'.

Participants were able to use art to bridge language barriers, and finished the project operating like a single group of equals

In thinking about how these outcomes are achieved, the author arrives at the idea of bridged-bonding social capital (which in their words ‘not only bridges two groups but functions as social glue for a cohesive community, increasing in-group loyalty’). Although the graduate students included seven practicing art teachers, they were all instructed to approach the project without a sense of hierarchy.

Four of the eight graduate students who responded to a follow-up questionnaire one year later said they had engaged further with the Somali community since being part of the mural project.

Keywords

cohesion painting USA observation interview students social children

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