

KID CITY Year 2 Evaluation:

Cultural considerations from the KID CITY artist team

KID CITY is a partnership between the City of Maplewood and Z Puppets Rosenschnoz that empowers communities through the power of playfulness and public art across age, class and culture, putting youth at the forefront of creative community revitalization. For the KID CITY evaluation, Wilder Research facilitated a focus group with the KID CITY artist team. This conversation centered on the fact that the KID CITY artist team is multicultural and about how that helped them engage Maplewood residents from multiple cultural backgrounds. The artist team provided their observations related to that question, as well as offered suggestions regarding how KID CITY may more effectively accomplish their goals of engaging diverse audiences and building relationships among them.

“We are more than our culture.” –KID CITY artist

To frame the findings from this focus group, Wilder Research wanted to highlight the above quote from one of the KID CITY artists. It exemplifies the complexity and nuance in asking about the impact of KID CITY’s multicultural artist team. The artist team identified a number of impacts that they attributed in part to the fact that they are from different cultural backgrounds; however, KID CITY artists also pointed out that these impacts are most likely influenced by other characteristics that comprise their identity as well, such as their gender, how extroverted they may be, or the particular art form that they practice.

It should be noted that KID CITY is a strategy employed by the City of Maplewood to engage groups that are historically underserved by the City, specifically Hmong, Karen, Latino, and Somali people. Historically, the City of Maplewood has been successful at engaging white residents. Because of this, when we say “diverse audiences” in this report, we mean engaging these four groups in particular as well as engaging nonwhite communities in general (because engaging such groups means that the City’s audiences are growing more diverse).

Diversifying the City’s audiences

Most KID CITY artists thought that having a culturally diverse artist team helped them to effectively engage diverse audiences. Artists recognized the difficulty of finding “evidence” for an impact like this. Some artists compared working with the KID CITY artist team to working with less diverse artist teams. Other artists mentioned examples in which race and ethnicity was a clear factor in how students or audiences interacted with them.

“Typically, I find that when I am the only artist of color and the other artists are Caucasian or white, the students have a very different connection with me versus them. But when I am working with the KID CITY artist team, I feel like the connection [between artists and students] is very all-around. I would say having a diverse artist team helped us reach these goals for sure.” –KID CITY artist

“There was an Asian boy in one class and he said something like ‘She gets it’ when he saw [KID CITY artist of Asian descent] performing a scene where she was eating in a particular way. It was clear he felt connection.” –KID CITY artist

“I remember a Somali kid was trying something and he was having a hard time, and his friend was trying to help him but he couldn’t help him. So his friend came to me and he said, ‘Go help him. He’s like you.’” –KID CITY artist

“I would say we haven’t been that successful in reaching out to African or East African residents. But having [KID CITY artist of African descent] perform, I have never seen so many East African, African American, or Black American audience members actually sitting down and watching at [a KID CITY] event.” –KID CITY artist

Working together: designing and delivering programs

The KID CITY artist team talked about their curriculum as it relates their overall goal of building cross-cultural relationships among students. One KID CITY artist described their approach in Year 2 as “addressing it through the back door,” meaning that KID CITY programs rarely focus on culture explicitly. Instead, KID CITY programs more often rely on collaborative arts activities to lay the foundations for relationships among residents and students of various cultural backgrounds. As one KID CITY artist said, “I love that we have this art thing that makes everyone work together.” Some KID CITY artists mentioned that they could be more intentional about addressing culture in their programs, if that is what KID CITY wants to do. However, another KID CITY artist pointed out that such a program design shift would require additional time and resources.

“We don’t point out the fact that we are diverse. We are artists and we are there.” –KID CITY artist

“Is that what our curriculum is about [referring to culturally specific or cultural bridging curriculum]? I think it can be an area of improvement if we feel like that’s what KID CITY really wants to do. We can make that more explicit.” –KID CITY artist

“Our goals are about connecting kids across cultures. I don’t think that all of our intelligences are being used when it comes to that goal. I don’t think we are leveraging all of them. Sometimes it feels like we’re just doing a curriculum that has been handed over to us. It didn’t feel like the curriculum development was with us.” –KID CITY artist

One artist mentioned that receiving demographic information about students from schools before they start a program would help them design programs that more directly serve KID CITY’s goal of connecting students across cultures. Another KID CITY artist mentioned that learning about student demographics may be feasible for school-based programs, but that it may not be possible for programs in other settings.

Adjusting to unexpected circumstances and challenges

KID CITY artists talked about two times in which they had to adjust in response to unexpected circumstances or challenges. The first was when they were teaching a group of students that were primarily English Language Learners (ELL). The second was when they asked for students to report on their race and ethnicity. For the group that was mainly comprised of ELL students, artists said that they adjusted by focusing on a handful of particular foundational concepts – saying them aloud repeatedly and physicalizing the concepts. These concepts included: objective, protagonist, antagonist, and other concepts rooted in participatory theater techniques.

“We made adaptations to the program like highlighting vocabulary words. We had the students repeat the vocabulary words because the teacher said that they like to learn words. They were highly invested in learning new vocabulary. We then demonstrated those ideas in physical form and repeated them again and again.” –KID CITY artist

All of the KID CITY artists said that asking student participants directly for their race and ethnicity was a negative experience for them and for many of their students as well, with one artist saying, “Getting that information was the opposite of what we were trying to do. It was a moment of not-connecting.” This demographic data was collected via a paper survey at the end of each youth program. In many of the programs, when this information was asked for, students had a negative reaction to it. This negative reaction, according to the KID CITY artists in

the focus group, took the form of students saying that asking for that information was racist, students instructing each other about which race they are, and students feeling like KID CITY was not intended for them.

“One of my students was not just helping to fill [the survey] out for another student, he was doing it for him. At that moment, I wanted to take the whole thing out and say we’re not doing this anymore [referring to the demographic survey]. I think it was one of the most invasive things I was a part of. I didn’t feel like I could stop it.” –KID CITY artist

“Philanthropically, we want to serve people who aren’t white. It’s no one’s fault [that asking for this information had a negative effect]. It’s awkward.” –KID CITY artist

Summary and moving forward

During this focus group, the KID CITY artist team highlighted ways that the diversity of their team contributed to engaging a more diverse audience for Maplewood. The KID CITY artist team also clearly communicated that there are other aspects of their personal identities that contribute to KID CITY’s effectiveness. It was also clear that KID CITY artists saw some tension between the goals of the initiative and the way that program curriculum is developed and delivered. Moving forward, Wilder Research recommends that the City of Maplewood, Z Puppets, the KID CITY advisory board, and the KID CITY artist team reflect on the following question:

Should KID CITY explicitly address culture?

Answering this question will lead to answers to other critical questions, such as: Should the KID CITY artist team design curriculum for specific cultural groups? How involved should each KID CITY artist be in designing and refining curriculum for their cultural group? What is KID CITY’s point of view regarding how cultural bridging activities are most effective?

No matter than answers to these questions, KID CITY should pursue, if possible, the option of receiving demographic information for students prior to when programs begin. Receiving this information beforehand would 1) allow the KID CITY artist team to tailor the program to the students who will be in the program, and 2) alleviate the stressors that arose when asking students directly for their race and ethnicity information.

**Wilder
Research**
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451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700
www.wilderresearch.org



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For more information

For more information about this report, contact
Ryan Evans at Wilder Research, 651-280-2677.
Author: Ryan Evans
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