

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Participatory Action Research in Early Childhood Program Design



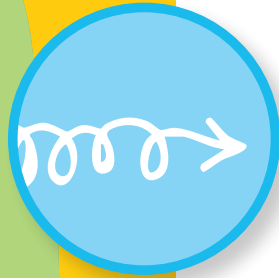
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Letter from Heather Nielsen, Deputy Director and Chief Learning & Engagement Officer

We build art and creativity experiences together with communities, fostering well-being, belonging, and empathy for all and advancing next practices in the field.

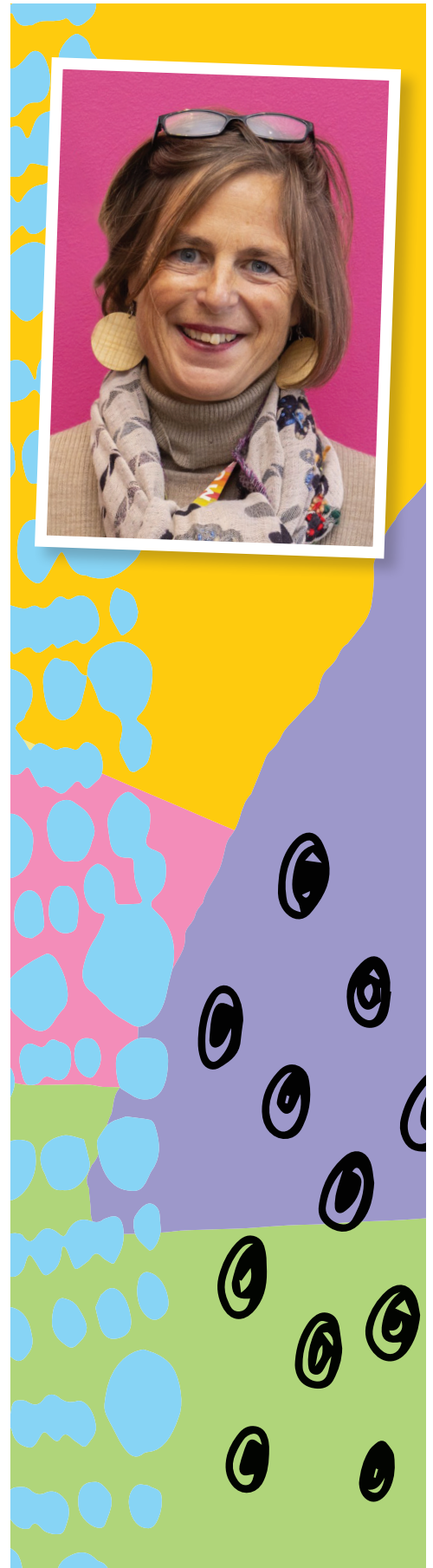
- Learning and Engagement Department, Impact & Action Framework

At the Denver Art Museum, our work is rooted in making a difference in our communities and in the lives of our visitors. Museums are at their best when they intentionally build connections, confidence, and a sense of ownership and when they include and welcome people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities. This is the mantra that we have had for decades at the Denver Art Museum. This belief guides the work we do and ensures that we operate in a space of innovation and imagination, always asking what might be engaging for visitors.

We are humbled that many consider the Denver Art Museum a leader in museum education, specifically in how we center families in our programming and commitments. For decades we have asked ourselves what more we can do to invite, welcome, and work alongside our youngest visitors and the adults that love them. We have built a museum that embraces families at the front door. Ours is a museum where being messy, loud, and joyful is encouraged.

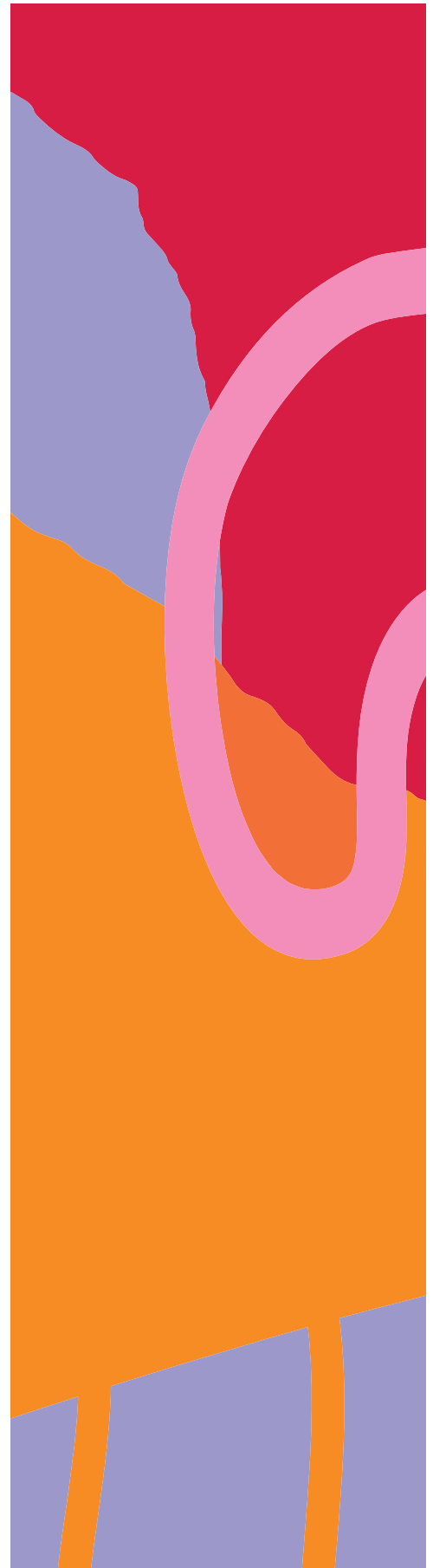
In recent years, we have found that it is not enough to expect that families will come to us. In the years after COVID, the need for art and creativity experiences in community was asked about far more than ever before. From our early childhood (EC) partners, the cry was the loudest. How might we serve them better? How might we build our own capacity for sustained community engagement? Could we use the assets of art, creativity, and expert staff to support workforce development? How could we change HOW WE WORK to better meet the needs of our community?

This project demonstrates that the how is as important as the what. We are proud that we built a new in-community early



childhood arts program and piloted a professional development program for EC educators. How we did the work is what I believe has yielded the greatest return on investment. Our goals were to build capacity in shared power and radical co-design. Three years and lots of hard work later, this IMLS grant has resulted in a moment of transformational change from the inside out that I believe is making us better and, ultimately, helping us engage communities in richer and deeper ways.

While it is a cliché, it takes a village—this project truly did. To all the staff, colleagues, community members, parents, kiddos, teachers, and administrators: This project is for you and for all of us committing to making museums brighter and better!



Project Introduction

The Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded the Denver Art Museum (DAM) a three-year \$222,601 grant under its Museums for America funding opportunity. The project term began in September 2021 and ended in August 2024. The DAM's project focused on expanding early childhood art and creativity programs using a community engagement method called Participatory Action Research.

In **Participatory Action Research** (PAR), community members and researchers (museum educators) work together to understand and address challenges. In PAR, everyone is an equal partner in the effort to identify the problem, design and prototype solutions, and evaluate outcomes. The DAM was deeply committed to the practice of co-design throughout the three years and remained flexible to the different needs of its two program areas, Art Lives Here and Creativity in Practice.

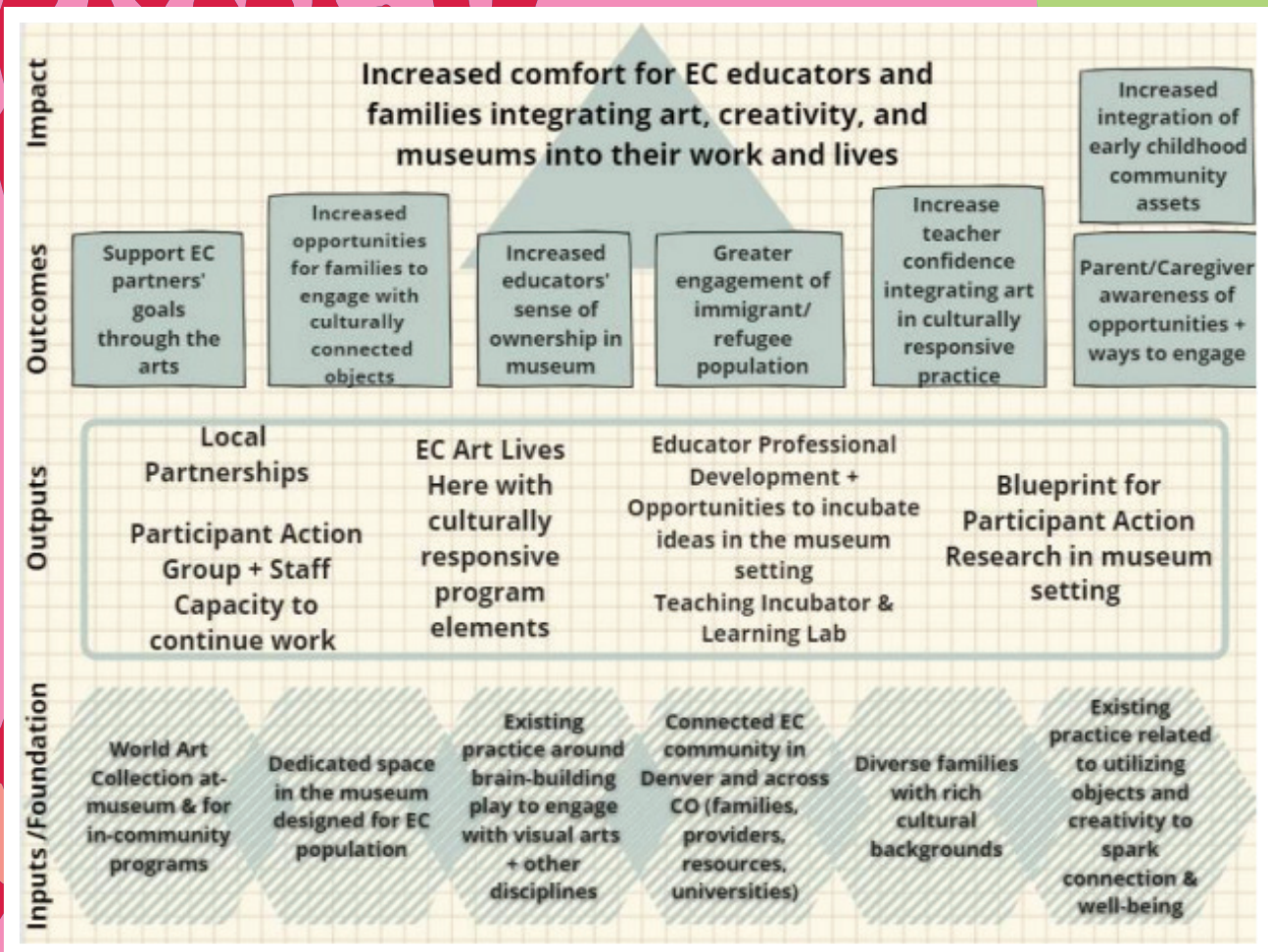
Art Lives Here/ El Arte Vive Aquí (ALH) is the DAM's signature in-community art program, bringing mini-exhibitions, artmaking workshops, and creativity supplies to schools, libraries, and organizations serving youth with barriers to accessing the museum. ALH program offerings had previously focused on children ages 8 to 14 years. The grant funding from IMLS enabled the DAM to work directly with young parents, early childhood educators, children's librarians, artists, and designers to develop an Art Lives Here offering for children ages zero to 8 years. After two rounds of prototyping, the new early childhood exploration carts explore creativity through play—from storytelling and music making to movement and close looking.

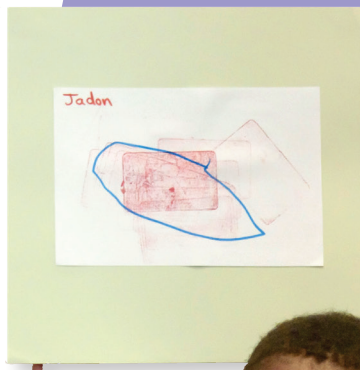
Creativity in Practice is a new professional development program for early childhood educators developed in partnership with community members and early childhood experts. It is designed to help build teachers' confidence and skills in incorporating art and creativity into their classrooms. The program was created in collaboration with critical thought partners at the systems level and early learning innovators on the ground. Creativity in Practice provides Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System (PDIS)-aligned training sessions that count toward early childhood educators' annual requirement for continuing education. The curriculum covers topics ranging from Exploring Art & Your Identity to Building Your Creative Toolkit and Designing Object-Oriented Lessons.



Long term, the museum aims to increase early childhood educators', children's, and families' comfort levels when integrating art and creativity into their lives and work. The DAM also intends to expand how its Learning & Engagement Department can partner with communities to create positive change.

Early Childhood Art and Creativity Initiative Logic Model
 Submitted to IMLS in the DAM's original grant application







Part I: Getting Off the Ground

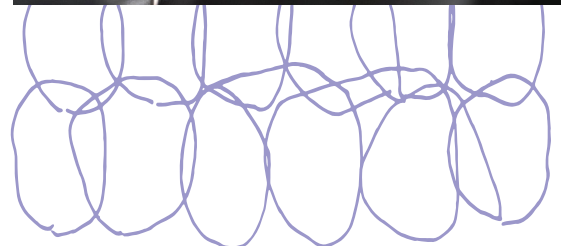
Learning a New Model of Community Engagement

From the outset, the Denver Art Museum's early childhood project prioritized capacity building: namely, how to deepen the resources and experiences of the museum's staff to engage community members in effective and responsive ways. The team took as its starting point the foundational principles of Participatory Action Research¹:

- Research and action are merged.
- A community-up approach.
- Seek to understand—don't debate, dialogue.
- Learning between and within.
- Strengths-based—honor the expertise and lived experiences of those most impacted.
- Knowledge transfer for sustainability.

The DAM's project team sought to learn and understand these principles as internal practice prior to building the comprehensive participatory team. Together, they examined the way that evaluation fell into the role of each of the participating team members, working to incorporate elements of reflection and external feedback into their individual roles, regardless of title. In other words, as part of putting these principles into action, each team member was encouraged to grow in their understanding of community-centered design, development, iteration, and reflection.

¹ See the materials in the Reference section at the end of this report.



Embedding an Evaluator within the Team

To fully embrace a participatory process, the DAM hired an external evaluator who became an embedded part of the project team. The consultant's role was to design the participatory framework for the project and facilitate trainings and skill development sessions. This decision ensured that the team did not have to "learn" to do evaluation and participatory design but rather could experience it and grow their skills throughout the life of the project. An embedded evaluator helped to establish within the team a culture of reflection and the practice of releasing control for a more collaborative and generative process.

Assembling the Participatory Action Group

After building its internal capacity for Participatory Action Research, the museum's project team worked to recruit early childhood community members that were reflective of the Denver community at large. They set out to ensure that the larger to-be-formed team, or Participatory Action Group (PAG), was intergenerational, bilingual in English and Spanish, and included caregivers, community partners, and thought leaders in the field. The team also wanted participation in the PAG to be beneficial for each member. To achieve this, participants were paid for their time and were offered opportunities for skill and knowledge development over the course of the project.

Most, if not all, of the PAG team members also had primary jobs. The museum's team was committed to providing a project structure that was flexible and could be adjusted to meet the needs and comfort levels of all PAG members. This meant that the internal team offered meeting times that were during the traditional workday and in the evenings or on weekends. The internal team considered not only transportation to and from meetings but how to ensure that parents in need of childcare, particularly if meetings took place outside of traditional work hours, would be able to secure safe and reliable care. It was also not unheard of for one to two children to join a meeting when a PAG member's childcare fell through. The museum's team intentionally created an easy, open atmosphere for the PAG: there was an understanding that life happens and if a participant needed to have their child with them in order to attend, they would of course still be welcome.

This open, inclusive environment created a sense of belonging and trust among all PAG members. Working together became a powerful example of living out the values of the DAM's Learning and Engagement Department's Action & Impact Framework.



The internal project team reviewed several models for paying community members, including as contractors, via stipends, or as part-time employees. The museum staff built models for each option with the Talent & Culture Department and consulted with other museums that had taken similar approaches. The DAM's staff also consulted with potential PAG members as each option carried some administrative burden on the external participants, and the DAM team felt it was important that they weighed in on which barriers would be easier to navigate.





We build art and creativity experiences together with communities, fostering well-being, belonging, and empathy for all and advancing next practices in the field.



what

Art & Creativity Experiences

We imagine and realize interpretive strategies, physical environments, programs, events, and partnerships that engage audiences at the Denver Art Museum, in communities, and online.

Together with Communities

We co-vision with audiences and stakeholders using human-centered design principles so that nothing about a group of people happens without their engagement and buy-in.

Designing for All

We leverage universal design principles and uphold the DAM's Commitment to Indigenous Communities and Position on Racial Equity to design impactful experiences *for all*.

Advancing Next Practices

We are committed to growing as leaders in creativity, experimentation, and innovation and to building and learning in public – evaluating and sharing our process, challenges, and wins with the field.

Well-Being

Art and creativity experiences support personal growth, pride, self-worth, and connectedness, contributing to personal and community health and happiness in the process.

Belonging

Art and creativity experiences build connections, confidence, and a sense of ownership when they include and welcome people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities.

Empathy

Art and creativity experiences improve our ability to understand and share the feelings of others, fostering interconnectedness within and among communities.

how

why

Addressing Staff Turnover in Getting Started

Amidst the kick-off of the project, museums across the country began facing increasing staffing challenges, and the DAM was no exception. The DAM's staff submitted its IMLS grant application in the fall of 2020, and by the fall of 2021, six of the eight staff members named in the original budget justification for the grant were no longer employees. This reality was not unique to the DAM, but navigating these changes informed and shifted the work. DAM leadership had to onboard new staff into a grant project that they were not a part of drafting. The grant aligned with the organization's strategic initiatives and still, the project director had to work with the team to build their understanding and buy-in as to:

- why they were learning to engage the community in a new way, and
- why they were investing in the Denver early childhood ecosystem at this specific moment in time.

Not only did the new team need to buy into the particular focus (early childhood), but they also needed to adopt a shift in approach to program development (to Participatory Action Research).



Creating Alignment and Building Buy-In

The project leader intentionally worked to ensure that staff understood the approach and focus of the grant in the context of the museum and its larger aims, initiatives, and priorities. In a kick-off meeting for the grant, a river metaphor helped project and departmental staff understand how this specific effort fit into the larger picture of the museum's goals and how their personal contributions fit in as well.

The use of a river, its tributaries, and the sea visualized the work—its intersections and true direction—and mapped it within the overarching institutional goals.

Tips for building a sense of belonging and inclusion within a Participatory Action Group



Offer culturally relevant food—for example, pan dulce from a local panaderia.



Start every meeting with a universal ice breaker—for example, "What's your favorite summertime activity?"

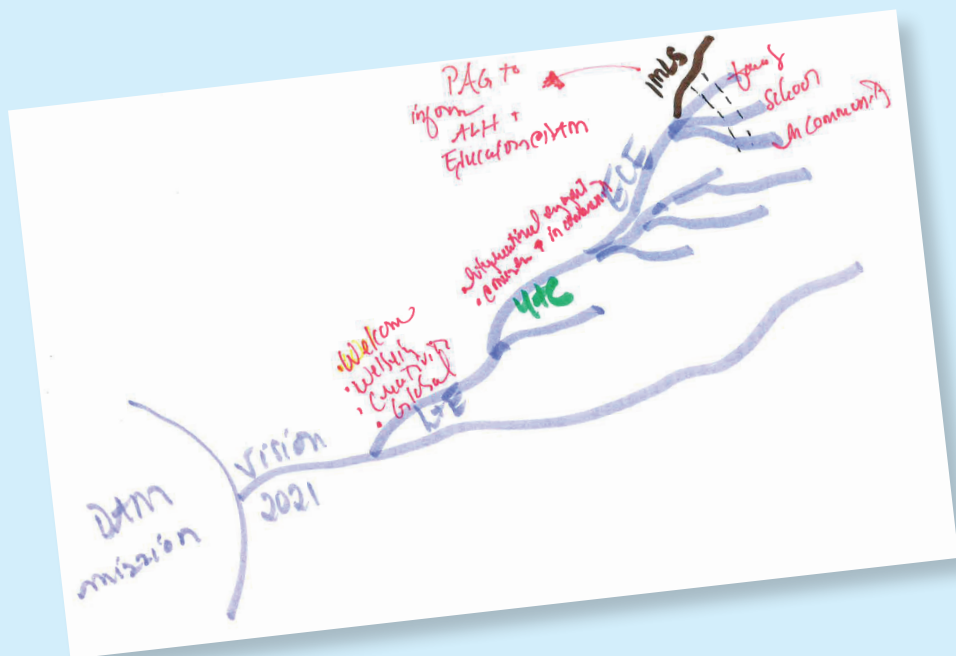
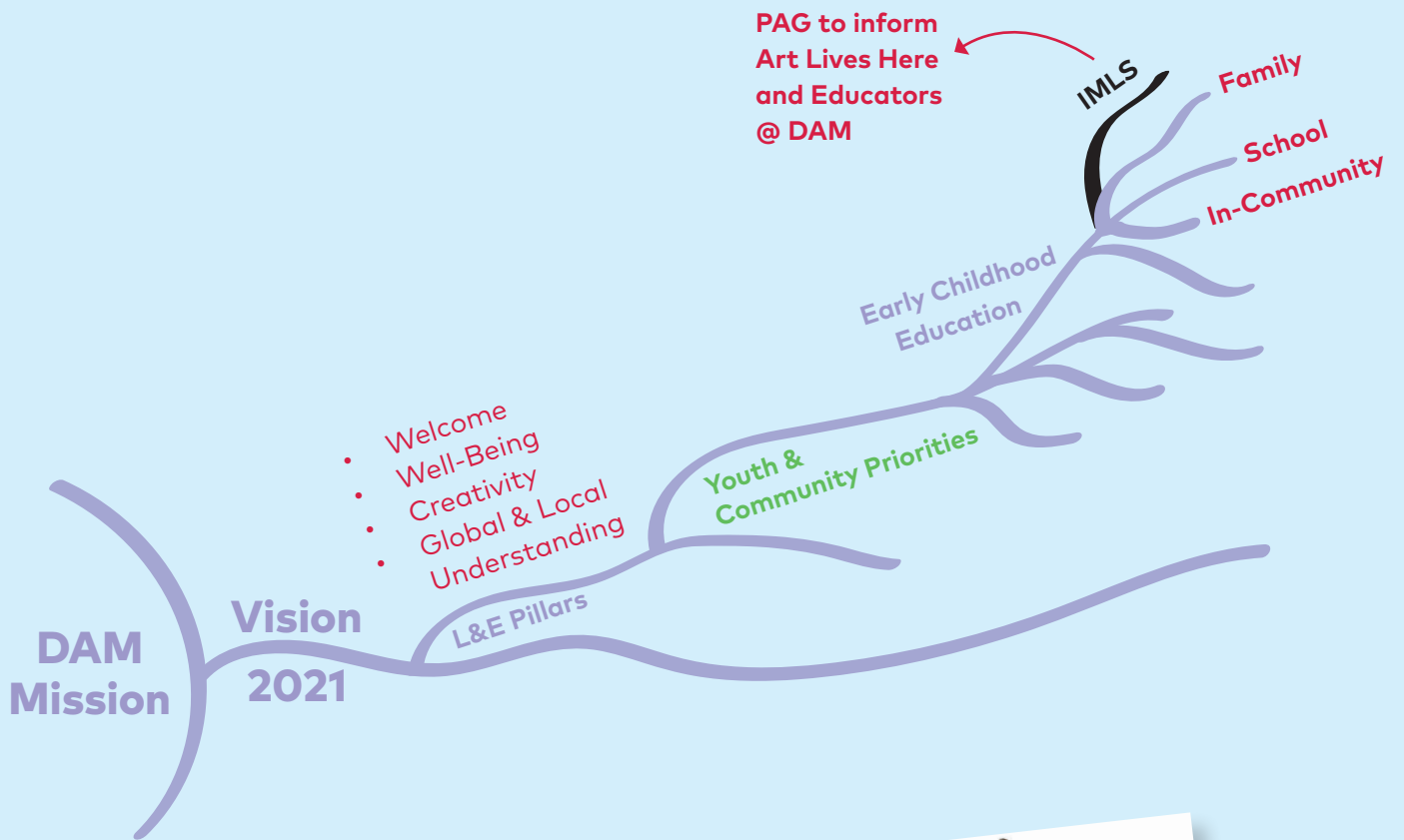


When possible, hold the meeting in the language of most PAG members' hearts if other than English and provide English interpretation.



Have mess-free artmaking supplies, such as Model Magic, and kid-friendly snacks available at every meeting to ensure participants feel truly welcome bringing their children.





Investing in a Project Manager

With staffing changes shifting the project team roster, museum leadership realized they needed a project manager to ensure clear, consistent communication and to facilitate project completion on time and on budget. Traditionally, the DAM reserved project managers for cross-functional curatorial and exhibition teams; however, with a multiyear timeline and multiple program strands, it became clear the project would benefit from a project manager to help steer the course and meet key milestones. This role also supported the more complex structure of the team given that the Participatory Action Group would be made up largely of external collaborators.

The decision to hire a project manager as a part-time DAM employee was also rooted in the Participatory Action Research principle of honoring the unique expertise that each team member brings, and the DAM team needed a more structured mind with a talent for creating processes and providing steady operational support. Adding the project management position offered the team a dedicated person to lead communications, timelines, space acquisition, contracts, partner commitments, and more. The project manager served as a point person for coordination between the project's two focus areas and its internal and external team members and was a consistent thread throughout staff transitions. The role was pivotal to the success of the project.



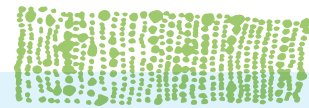
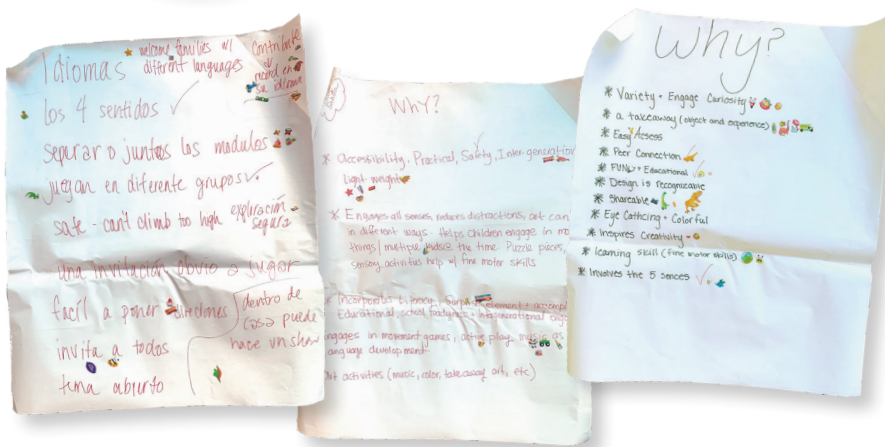
Finding Growth Opportunities Amidst Challenge

Getting any large project off the ground can be challenging. For the DAM's IMLS-funded early childhood project, the team faced meaningful staff turnover, navigated a dynamic post-pandemic environment, partnered with external stakeholders as team members, and utilized a new community engagement strategy, all of which required new levels of coordination, communication, and flexibility. The payoff in the end was a vision embraced by the whole museum and a project team and Participatory Action Group bonded by trust and a deeply engaged process.





Part II: The Process



Shared Power is:

The distribution of ownership and decision-making authority among a group. It is similar in meaning to shared leadership; however, the phrase is often used to emphasize sharing power not just among educators but also among the students, families, and community members who form the larger school community.

Teacher Powered Schools, 2024, Education Evolving. Retrieved 7/15/2024 from <https://www.teacherpowered.org/glossary/shared-power>

Participatory Action Research requires an internal understanding of power and a critical lens about partnership. To engage in PAR and set the project up for success, the museum's staff undertook personal capacity-building and a thoughtful assessment of existing partnerships.

Building Capacity to Share Power

To fully embrace the ideology of Participatory Action Research, the internal team had to honestly reflect on existing power dynamics as individuals, as staff members of a highly regarded institution, and within the museum's organizational structure. This step was essential in creating a team that strived for a shared power model.

Beyond the internal project team, staff within the Learning and Engagement Department were invited to participate in the training. The project director wanted to increase knowledge sharing beyond the project team, provide context for this new approach to working in community, and more deeply imbue equity practices across the DAM. The training also aligned with the museum's goals to further equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The training gave the museum's staff action items to shift their approach to community work before engaging with PAG members, accountability partners to check in with regarding personal and professional commitments, and a shared vocabulary, understanding, and approach to community-centered, shared-power work.

Facilitated by the project evaluator, the purpose of the three training sessions was to support the museum's staff in relinquishing control and growing in their practice of sharing power, activating the expertise that exists within communities, and building relationships based on reciprocity.

Power & Identity Training

All project staff participated in a three-part Power and Identity training.

The training focused on promoting self-reflection and conversation, as well as on applying a critical lens to how each individual's own positions of power and authority need to be addressed and mitigated in pursuit of more equitable community engagement.

The team identified the power that comes with one's own identities and the power that comes with being an employee of the Denver Art Museum, and they explored the potential impact of bringing things like job titles into the dynamic of a newly formed community-centered team.

With newfound understanding of power dynamics, the DAM's project team members practiced engaging in uncomfortable conversations and agreed to work with EDI accountability partners throughout the project. These partnerships were aimed at maintaining a practice of reflection, critical conversations, and a commitment to action.



One way the Denver Art Museum pursues its Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) goals is by using its Racial Equity Lens. The lens is a set of critical questions asked during decision-making:

- Who is most impacted by the decision, policy, or practice?
- What is the potential impact?
- Will this exacerbate or ignore existing disparities or alleviate them?
- Who is heard and who is left behind?
- Are the right people in the room?

The DAM's Racial Equity Lens interrupts the impact of unintended consequences by taking into consideration the lived experiences and perspectives of the racially diverse communities the DAM intends to serve. The power sharing training that the project team undertook reinforced this critical mindset and encouraged the team to use the DAM's Racial Equity Lens in assembling and collaborating with its Participatory Action Group.

Assessing and Selecting a Variety of Partners

Participatory Action Research requires partnerships that are well-resourced, mutually trusting, and values-aligned. With the PAG members in place, the DAM's project team determined that they wanted an increased understanding of the depth of various partnerships before choosing whom to work with on the grant.

First, the internal project team identified both current and desired partners that were in the DAM network, as well as those in the local ECE ecosystem. The team generated a thorough list of potential partner organizations that would be a good fit for the project. This initial idea generation was informed by the PAG and focused on organizations serving children aged 0-8, their caregivers, and early childhood educators. The list became quite expansive, and since all the potential partners under consideration were aligned in mission and vision, the team had to look to other criteria.

To further narrow down the list of potential partners, the project team took a critical eye to what participation in the project would be asking of the partner organizations, how rooted the existing relationship was, and who within the project team or the museum as a whole was best positioned to propose the partnership. Using these questions, the team identified three categories: deep partnerships, evolving partnerships, and potential partnerships.

Deep partnerships: These partners had a collaborative history with the museum, an internal champion, active communication, bandwidth for partnership, and alignment and interest in the project.

Evolving partnerships: These partners had a track record of engagement with the museum but in more event-focused or one-off ways. The Denver Art Museum staff knew less about the operational bandwidth of these organizations.

Potential partnerships: These organizations had strong alignment with the goals of the project and DAM's strategic goals and initiatives, but the relationships between these organizations and the DAM were untested.

DEEP PARTNERSHIPS

In this category, the project team assessed the strength of the relationship, its history, and the community organization's bandwidth given the project's length and scope. The team detailed what was being asked of a potential partner for this specific project to clearly communicate needs, expectations, and benefits with the partner from the beginning. A central



As the museum's project team adjusted to sharing power in PAR, there were moments throughout the project when staff hesitated to make a decision without more community input. The internal team learned there is no steadfast rule for shared power models in terms of how much input is enough; there always needs to be a balance—times when organizational staff must step forward and push a final decision through to avoid analysis paralysis.



aim of this work was transparency: to ensure that the DAM was providing as much information as possible so potential grant partners could make an informed decision about their participation in and commitment to the project.

The project team made the decision to draft a Memorandum of Understanding and used this to articulate the time commitment, space needs, communication expectations, and any other logistical requirements for an effective partnership.

These details supported the museum's team in determining which of the partners on the larger list could be considered for the project. With fewer than a handful of appropriate deep partnerships, the project team also reflected on ways to incorporate and engage other community partners and nurture partnerships for future endeavors.

EMERGING PARTNERSHIPS

While some of the organizations on their short list made a lot of sense "on paper," the DAM team was thoughtful about approaching partners with whom they had never collaborated on such a large project. They identified places within the scope of the grant to invite emerging partners to begin the process of deepening the relationship. The team accounted for an 18–24-month period to build knowledge, engagement, trust, and reciprocity. The DAM has integrated this insight and created a new practice that facilitates authentic and responsive relationship building and prepares both the museum and community organizations for the long lead-up between grant applications and grant kick-off.

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

The list of potential partners operated as a kind of "wish list" of organizations within the early childhood ecosystem who were doing impactful and innovative work but with whom the DAM was not yet intimately connected. In the spirit of relationship building and reciprocity, the DAM's approach to community engagement meant they first took time to support the potential partner's activities, events, and programs—to simply be a regular participant and supporter of their work. Then, the team would offer opportunities to access the Denver Art Museum or participate in relevant DAM programs. From there, the relationship could bloom into something more involved.

It is important to note that the DAM recognizes that not every relationship needs to "progress" to a deep relationship and that not all deep relationships need to yield collaboration or partnership on a large-scale, long-term project. This was simply



Valverde Elementary, a local school with a history of hosting Art Lives Here installations and visiting the museum frequently, was a perfect existing **deep partner** to invite into the project. Two of their early childhood educators joined the Participatory Action Group, and the PAG prototyped the exploration cart at the school in the spring of 2024.



TOOLKIT

Partnership Checklist



Start Early

In a best-case scenario, engage in relationship building with community organizations before contemplating any request for a multiyear partnership. When that's not possible, account for 6+ months of relationship development before project kick-off.



Show Up

Invest in the relationship by participating in the partner's events and supporting them with resources (e.g., space, activities, etc.) when possible.



Be Clear

Discuss and write down mutual expectations, especially around each partner's role to play in and resources to contribute to the project. See the Appendix for an example of a Memorandum of Understanding.



Stay Flexible

Expect to renegotiate the plan (e.g., timeline, communication, etc.) so that it works better for the partner and still accomplishes the project's goals.



Set Parameters

During co-design, establish as many requirements as necessary while having as few as possible—the more concrete the better (e.g., fits in a car trunk, costs less than \$10,000 to build, etc.).



Find Champions

Build a strong one-on-one connection with the internal point of contact at a partner organization so they can serve as an ongoing champion of collaboration.



Go Deeper

Especially after the project is complete, look for opportunities to integrate the partner into other relevant programs.



Two community partners were emerging at the time of this grant: **Florence Crittenton Services** and **Clayton Early Learning**. These partners had been on the DAM's radar, but the team had yet to find a relevant opportunity for starting an authentic partnership. With the foundational ideas of building an early childhood version of Art Lives Here (ALH) and an early childhood professional development program (later to become Creativity in Practice), the DAM felt the timing and opportunity were right to collaborate with these organizations. In both cases, the project team found deep alignment between the grant project's goals and the partner organization's goals.

Florence Crittenton Services is a nonprofit that supports young mothers. It has a high school, early childhood education center, medical clinic, and other support services on a single campus. The DAM approached the partnership as an opportunity to further the school's desire to provide its students with paid learning opportunities that have real-world applications. Meetings were held at the convenience of the students, and accommodations were made for schedules, childcare, and transportation. The project team decided Florence Crittenton Services would also make the ideal partner for prototyping the very first early childhood model of ALH.

Clayton Early Learning is an early childhood innovation hub with Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms as well as a Research & Evaluation practice onsite. In partnering with Clayton, the DAM worked hard to secure professional development credits for participating teachers, developed a family day at the museum as part of the programming, and adapted the timeline for the PD series to fit within the already established schedule of the school.

The museum's responsive and thoughtful approach to the **emerging partnerships** not only created dynamic programming but also meaningful partnerships that the museum intends to make into long-lasting connections.

a way for the grant team to recognize what it means to ask a partner for intense collaboration and to assess where the team had relationships that were primed for such an endeavor.

Because of the scope of the project, the DAM was able to select multiple partners. A central partner to support the participatory action group (Florence Crittenton Services), one partner to pilot the teacher professional development project (Clayton Early Learning), and other partners to act as host sites (Valverde Elementary) and to be “first on the list” when the final product was ready for public programming. This allowed the DAM to think creatively about what was needed for the project while centering the needs, interest, and bandwidth of partners.

CASE STUDY

Pivoting to an “On the Ground” Participatory Action Group—Art Lives Here/El Arte Vive Aquí

As part of the participatory process, the DAM team was committed to building a group representative of those most impacted by the final product to envision, build, test, and refine the new exploration cart.

An internal project team brainstormed important roles and perspectives needed to have a robust PAG. This initial PAG was made up of members from libraries, higher education, informal learning, and early childhood centers. Together, they learned about the project and the DAM’s programs and shared how they viewed the gaps and opportunities within the early childhood ecosystem. The PAG met with the internal team often and generated enthusiasm, energy, and plenty of ideas.

As the project continued and site partners were solidified, the internal team came to realize that the initial PAG might serve the project in a more strategic way—as critical thought partners. This group was able to think together at the systems level and see potential and obstacles on the horizon. From this vantage point, they could support the team in staying attuned to relevant needs and emerging trends within early childhood.

In coming to this realization, the internal team had to think through how best to keep this initial group informed and engaged, how to build a more “on the ground” PAG, and if the second arm of the project—Creativity in Practice, aimed at developing the creative identity and classroom practices of EC teachers—needed a similar community-based group.

The original participants welcomed this shift in focus because it allowed them to maintain their connection to the project while

To honor the critical role of Participatory Action Group members and to underscore the valuable personal and professional development that occurred over the course of the project, the DAM team drafted the following language for their resumes:

Member, Denver Art Museum Participatory Action Group, April 2023–August 2024

- Designed a mobile art and creativity cart for kids 0-8 years and their grownups.
- Evaluated the cart’s impact on kids and caregivers using direct observation and structured interview techniques.
- Participated in iterative design sprints to increase the cart’s safety, accessibility, and interactivity.
- Contributed to a bilingual user guide to improve the user experience for host sites.
- Facilitated artmaking experiences at intergenerational community engagement events.



best using their influence and expertise for its advancement. The new meeting cadence (quarterly) better fit with their already full plates so that they could engage more fully when needed.

Then, the internal team had to think through the logistics of pulling together a more project-oriented PAG. They paused to inventory the perspectives, expertise, and lived experience needed to develop their mobile art and creativity cart. The internal team decided that caregivers of young children were the most important voices to incorporate into the design process along with classroom-based early childhood teachers and programming staff in a library or community center setting. Unlike the critical thought partners, these participants would need to meet frequently (biweekly or monthly).

A public high school for young mothers, Florence Crittenton, became the central partner for the PAG. In concert with the school's administration, the DAM team found a time during the school day that allowed for students to participate in the group. As the internal DAM team prepared to kick off the new PAG, they took to heart their commitment to reciprocity and ensured that each PAG member would be paid to attend meetings. The DAM also worked to eliminate transportation barriers by providing rideshare gift certificates. In addition to these logistical supports, the project team tried to support PAG members' academic or professional skill development through their work together.

The shift from one PAG to a critical thought partners group alongside an "on the ground" PAG served both the project and the community participants. It honored the bandwidth of various partners while remaining committed to co-designing and -evaluating with community.

CASE STUDY

Prioritizing Responsiveness in Partnerships— Creativity in Practice

Another important output of the grant was a professional development program for early childhood educators. Originally referred to as the Learning Lab, the name was changed to Creativity in Practice. In examining its deep, emerging, and potential partnerships, the team selected an early childhood innovation hub, Clayton Early Learning, for its wide-ranging capacities and its focus on under-resourced communities. They worked persistently to get on the school director's schedule and brought an initial design for the professional development sessions, including a proposed timeline.



During the initial meeting, many things became evident: the school had already planned out much, if not all, of their professional development days for the year; the fall (when the team visited) was packed with events and commitments leaving few teachers free to participate; and the school was very used to outside groups coming in to “partner” but having a very prescriptive plan for the partnership.

The DAM’s Manager of School & Community Programs quickly moved into action. She opened up the conversation and made it clear that flexibility would be possible. The Denver Art Museum would happily adapt their timeline to fit what worked for the school and their teachers.

The Manager’s positioning was so tactful and responsive that the partner immediately expressed her appreciation. This would be a different kind of partnership—one in which the needs, timelines, and commitments of both parties would be considered together.

By the end of the meeting, the school director gave the project team a wholehearted “Yes!” and shared that she felt surprised—in the best way—that the museum was so open and flexible in their timing and even in asking for reflections on the draft training outline.

Engaging from a place of flexibility and understanding allowed for an emerging partnership to blossom into a deep one with potential to be sustained well beyond the life of the grant.





Part III: The Products

The Denver Art Museum's early childhood project integrated the principles of Participatory Action Research into program design, rooting its work in community perspective, voice, and experience. In so doing, the DAM team had to commit to openness and flexibility, allowing for the evolution of the products and programs.

The two "products" of this project were the expansion of Art Lives Here into early childhood with a custom-designed exploration cart for kids 0-8 and the creation of a professional development program for early childhood educators hosted at the Denver Art Museum.



Art Lives Here/El Arte Vive Aquí



Participant Feedback Changed Everything

The internal program team initially predicted that reimagining the Art Lives Here exploration cart for early learners would be a process of slight modifications and age-appropriate additions. Once the “on the ground” Participatory Action Group was formed—with mothers of young children, early childhood educators, and children’s librarians—the specific insights and lived experiences of the group proved invaluable. The existing elementary school cart was presented to the group, and they immediately provided feedback about its safety (or lack thereof) for littles. After the meeting, one internal team member stated, “Even if this is all we got from the process, it was worth it. That feedback changed everything.”



Choosing an Artist Who Fit the Ethos

The Participatory Action Group were not the only contributors to the project, however. The internal team needed to select a featured artist to collaborate with, too. Choosing someone who supported the ethos of participatory action was essential. The DAM values artists and their creative process, and this project needed someone whose process was open and adaptable to the community vision and to the needs of the littlest learners and who exemplified the notion that creativity was everywhere and for everyone.

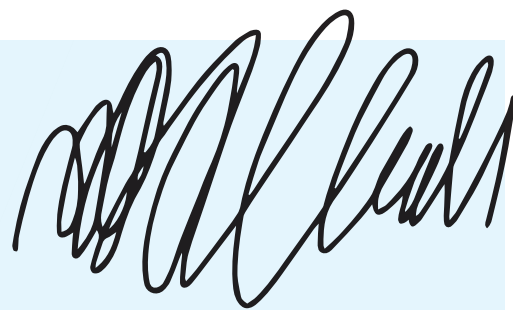
The internal team decided to contract with Denver-based artist Moe Gram. Gram had experience in early childhood education, and she had worked previously with the Denver Art Museum. Her work was well known as being bold and playful and able to tap into empathy. She also had a history of and commitment to working with and in communities. Gram often used “regular” objects in her paintings and installations, and the members of the PAG found that her style inspired creativity and encouraged viewers to find art and beauty in everything from trash to treasure. With her on board, the project took on even more life and momentum.

Art Lives Here Design Parameters

- ✓ Mobile
- ✓ Self-directed
- ✓ Intergenerational
- ✓ Low impact on host sites/educators
- ✓ Incorporates literacy and social-emotional development
- ✓ Centers art and creativity
- ✓ Safe for littles



In order to bring the Participatory Action Group's full vision to life, the team engaged two additional artists, Bree Angela and Sam Mobley, to design and fabricate the exploration cart alongside Moe Gram. The three worked closely and collaboratively for over a year to create the mobile experience, each supporting the project with their own skills, expertise, and unique magic.



Bree Angela is a designer for play based in the Denver area. Bree holds a BFA from Pratt Institute in Visual Communications Design, certifications in Interior Design, Floral Design, and ABA Play Therapy, and is working towards a Masters in the Reggio-Emilia approach to education. Bree is passionate about creating inspiring moments of joy for children in both her artwork and by committing time as an educator with art outreach programs wherever she goes. Bree Angela is a magician with an inventor's mind and a sewing machine. Most recently, she designed and created an interactive toy store and open-ended creativity space in Erie, Colorado. As she continues to promote imaginative play experiences for all ages, Bree is looking to expand her creativity into more public spaces to reimagine the way we educate and inspire out of the box thinkers and creative problem solvers.



Moe Gram is a multidisciplinary artist living in Denver, CO who works on a diverse array of mediums that include murals, collage, and large scale installations. Gram graduated from California State University Bakersfield with a major in Visual Arts and a minor in Cultural Studies, during which she participated in a 6-month museum studies and studio art program in Florence, Italy. Currently, her art can be seen in murals throughout Colorado, including an installation in the Denver Art Museum's Creative Hub. Moe Gram's work is distinctive, engaging, and thoughtful. Through her playful color palette, messaging, and juxtaposition of unique embellishments and found objects, Moe's work encourages the viewer to absorb and reflect—for the the betterment of oneself and collectively for us all.



Sam Mobley is a graduate of Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design where he earned a BFA in Graphic Design. He began his career working in advertising agencies and design studios. He has since worked as a product designer and fabricator and, for the past 15 years, has been specializing in design and fabrication of interactive experiences, displays, and props. His clients include the Denver Art Museum, the Denver Botanic Gardens, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Epiphany Luxury, the Arvada Center, the Clyfford Still Museum, the Boulder Public Library and many more.



Embracing Teaching for Artistic Behavior

The addition of Gram to the project team was in step with the project's orientation toward Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB). The guiding principles of TAB are:

- The artist practices.
- The child is the artist.
- The classroom is the child's studio.

These principles were integrated into the design and delivery of the Art Lives Here exploration cart for early learners. The Participatory Action Group members were encouraged throughout the process to tap into their own creativity and view the cart as a mechanism to bring out the artist in every child. As the team continued to refine their vision, they developed a statement about the cart:

The purpose of this cart is for children and caregivers to find the artist within themselves. Every student and teacher is an artist, and our cart is a studio!

Designing for Easy Use at Different Types of Sites

Finally, the team envisioned the cart serving the community not only in classroom settings but also in spaces such as children's sections of libraries and community centers with early childhood care. The PAG kept this in mind as they thought through the footprint of the cart, the number and style of the creative stations within it, and the facilitation needs. The PAG provided detailed input on two types of user guides: one for the adult champion at a given site, like a teacher, librarian, or administrator, and another for the kids using the cart. The internal team then took these notes and brought them to life—with a little help from the artist Moe Gram.

Creativity in Practice

Identifying Our Zone of Proximal Development

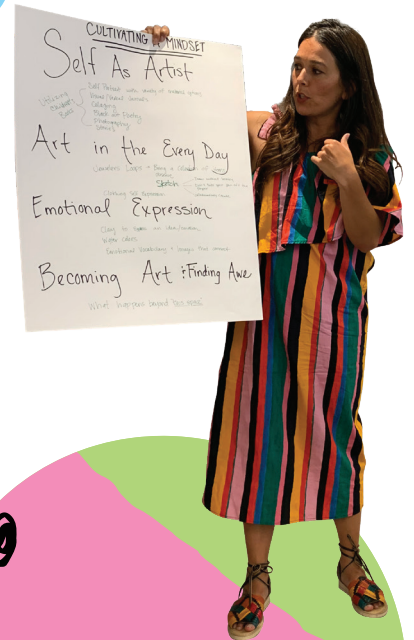
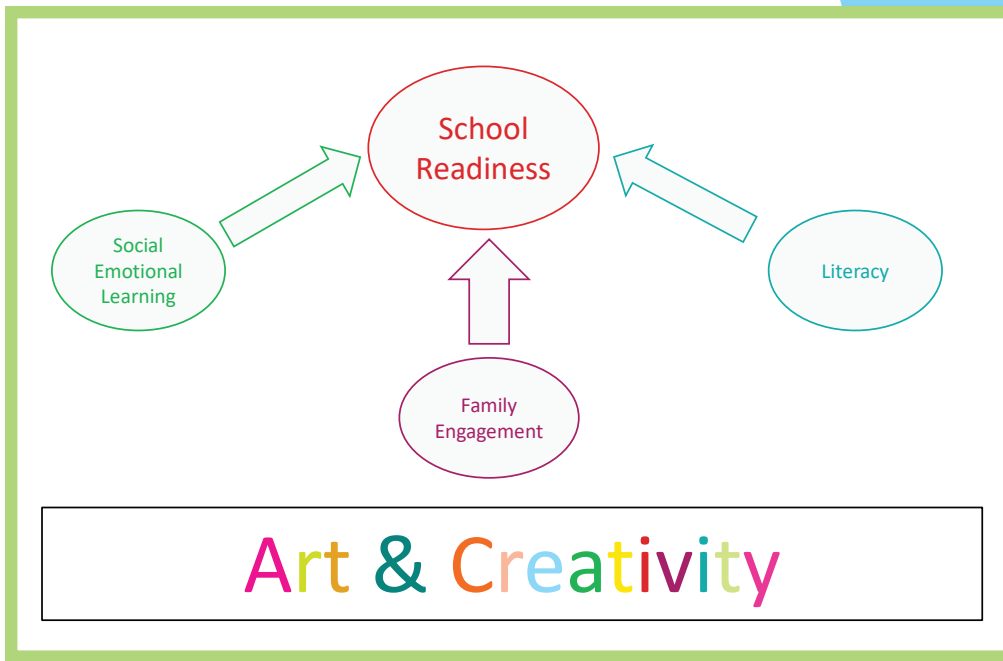
As part of this grant, the DAM committed to developing an "incubator" or "learning lab" for early childhood educators that also activated the museum's new physical spaces devoted to kids 0-8 years. The critical thought partners—the systems thinkers and leaders in the early childhood sector in Denver who made up the original Participatory Action Group—envisioned this project filling a gap for providers by focusing on trauma-informed care and "providing for providers." These initial conversations were enlightening and helped the DAM staff better understand the complex ECE landscape and the urgent needs of educators and caregivers. However, as the internal team reflected on this direction, they also considered what the Denver Art Museum was uniquely positioned to provide within the sector.

Creativity in Practice Design Parameters

- ✓ For educators and caregivers
- ✓ Learning alongside littles
- ✓ TAB-based, play-based, and object-oriented
- ✓ Multicultural (in the collections it leverages, the teachers it engages, the artists it showcases, etc.)
- ✓ Hands-on



While the DAM took to heart the perspectives of its critical thought partners, they also came to realize that they were not best equipped to offer that type of support. There was still potential for the DAM to be a building block in the care infrastructure for the city's earliest learners and their devoted teachers, but it would need to look different. Reflecting on their resources and expertise and the needs of the ECE landscape, the DAM decided it could be a supportive conduit for school readiness through art and creativity experiences that support social emotional learning, family engagement, and early literacy.



Early Childhood Roundtable & Design Charrette

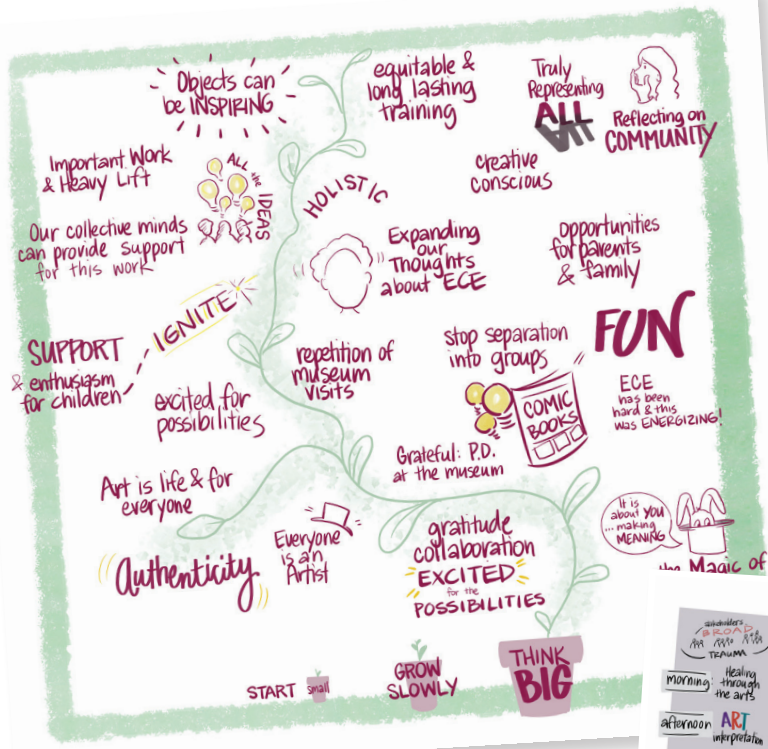
With this clear understanding, the DAM team decided to connect with a broader set of early childhood stakeholders and invited thought leaders, practitioners, educators, and parents for a day of discourse, creative design exercises, and experience sharing.

The day confirmed that creativity resides within us all and that sometimes just being in the art museum and connecting to the objects can spark ideas for integration into one's life and work.

It also inaugurated an emerging partnership with Clayton Early Learning and inspired the teachers from Clayton to think more directly about the role the museum might play in the lives of their students and within their classrooms.

See the Appendix for the full set of graphic notes from Roundtable and Charrette.





Witman



"DAY/WEEK IN THE LIFE" ACTIVITY

July 6, 2023

Morning: healing through the arts, family friends neighbors, feelings

Afternoon: ART interpretation, parent-child, social skills

Back Home: found items, virtual, immigrant families, self & others in the community

Day 1: Working on THEM (Teachers), IDENTITY & SKILL BUILDING w/ CHOICE

Day 2: Art Teaching Pedagogy, 'Just in Time' visual literacy

Day 3: Bringing Kids to Museum, could lead through the museum, teaching going good feedback (social/emotional skills)

Care over Mornings: importance of art & science led by student leader, OFFERINGS of Spanish & English, Professional Development Afternoons, Teacher evenings, students choose THE ASSIGNMENT, goals, lesson plans, differentiation

Start: student choice & exploration, investigation - break, rest & making sense, play, curiosity, connection & de-brief, social skills

BIG FAT STUFF: Free Barings, expectations, Add class, gratitude, support, social

Self as Artist: intention, Art in the Everyday, Emotional Expression, Becoming Art & Finding AWE, Micro learning, Not a linear process, Adult Learning

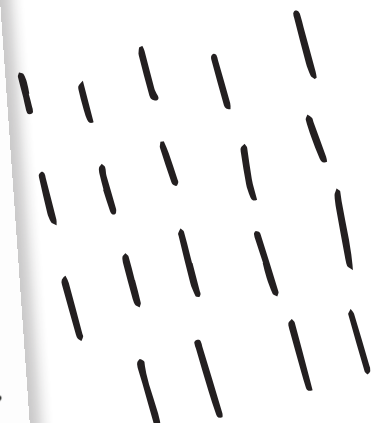
1x month: Morning: 0-5 + caregivers, social learning, Midday: Storytelling, social learning, Afternoon: Professional Development, Family time together, Family time together, Play the wide time, Early Childhood Art Exhibit - kids, parents, educators

July 6, 2023 witmanstudios.com

IN GALLERY ACTIVITY

July 6, 2023 WitmanStudios.com

- I want to make & have my own little bag
- People had to discover this
- way to color textiles
- science & art - slake dye
- I can recreate this... its shapes, colors
- Identity
- connections across cultures
- Climate change identity - seeing oneself
- What do you see? Re-creating
- Lots to unpack
- big, heavy inviting
- Identity & place
- different culture
- Minimal Color
- color theory
- texture environment
- adorning your body
- Art & Usefulness - everyday - functionality
- grief/loss re create animals
- struggle women trauma carrying it through to their family
- generational stories abstract yet identify faces
- Love Minimalism rethinking everyday objects
- gravity & support structures
- textures hands on



Building a Sustainable Model from the Beginning

After the charrette, the internal team developed a curriculum that wove district, school, and museum goals together.

Clayton recruited a group of ten teachers and teacher coaches for the inaugural pilot, and in a focus group at the culminating event, it was clear from their feedback that not only was the project successful but the impact of the group went beyond the professional and touched the personal lives of all teachers involved.

"I think overall this project was about healing and discovery. To help all these kids and people from different aspects and different places see themselves in art. And I'm like, oh, I get to do that, too. So it was healing."

"I really enjoyed how we started with grounding and family and culture and . . . our art identity. I thought that was brilliant because I heard through this process all the teachers referring back to things they enjoyed when they were a child or saying this is something that inspired me because it was connected to them personally."

Given the responsiveness of the internal team throughout this pilot, making the partnership easy and flexible, Clayton was eager to re-engage after the grant period. The Denver Art Museum will welcome a new cohort of 10-15 teachers and coaches from Clayton Early Learning in the spring of 2025.

In addition to running an annual Creativity in Practice cohort for early childhood educators teaching in Head Start or Title I schools, the internal team also has plans to generate revenue with the professional development curriculum: They will host a paid one-day session at the Denver Art Museum that is open to all EC educators and provides credit toward yearly continuing education requirements in the summer of 2025.

With its powerful impact on educators, their students, and their families, and with the new connections it forged between early childhood organizations and the art museum, Creativity in Practice has the potential for years of valuable service to the EC ecosystem.



**COLORADO
SHINES**

**START EARLY
START STRONG
QUALITY EARLY LEARNING**

The DAM received Colorado Shines PDIS approval for its Creativity in Practice curriculum. This means the museum is able to provide 6 hours of continuing education credits to early childhood educators toward their annual requirements of 15 hours. This innovation was the direct result of the DAM's Manager of School Programs and Teaching Resources's expertise as an early childhood educator. She understood what would motivate teachers to attend the trainings beyond the DAM's ability to provide honoraria during the pilot phase.





Part IV: Paying It Forward

To formally conclude the grant and pay forward all their rich learnings from the past three years, the project team hosted a small convening at the Denver Art Museum in August of 2024. Two teams currently working on IMLS-funded Museums for America grants involving significant community co-design were invited: the Clyfford Still Museum team for its Art Crawl program and another Denver Art Museum team for its Designing for Accessibility efforts.





On piloting new programs:

I still remember the motto she [Cat Lynch, educator at the Columbus Museum of Art's Wonder School] shared at our Round Table:

**'Dream big,
start small,
go slow.'**



On designing a new early childhood exploration cart:

Don't be afraid to make the program work for you! We put a design parameter in place early on that the cart needed to fit in the trunk of a car and be easy for one person to lift.



On reciprocal relationships with partners and community members:

It was important to learn about them first and show up when they asked and how they needed us to, and also to invite them to our programs and events so they could understand what we're about. In this way, we worked to create an environment where power dynamics were less of an issue.



On sustaining the work beyond the grant:

We made a decision early on to invest in process over product. That meant building capacity for the internal team. That meant choosing a process evaluation over a developmental evaluation. That meant challenging each individual to find personal growth opportunities in the project.



On balancing commitment and flexibility:

When decision points came up, I learned to ask, 'What does the project need?' This helped us stay faithful to the spirit of the grant—to our why and our how—above all else. It allowed for flexibility without changing the core.



On managing ourselves and key stakeholders:

Take time to clearly define roles and responsibilities. Ask yourself: What is my job on this project? What is my role in this meeting?

INSIGHTS ON KEY QUESTIONS

The discussion was rich and far-ranging, and the Clyfford Still and DAM teams zeroed in on two core questions and concerns in particular: How did you integrate the planning for post-grant into the project itself? And what did sharing authority look like in practice?

Insights on Planning for Post-Grant

- Ensure the new products or programs don't require additional staff.
- Consider alternative incentive structures, e.g., professional development credit instead of a cash honorarium.
- Explore potential for revenue generation without compromising accessibility and impact.
- Find ways to apply insights from the grant project to related programs, e.g., redesign of the primary school Art Lives Here exploration cart.

Insights on Sharing Authority

- Provide clear parameters at the outset of the design process that are as specific as they have to be and as open as they can be.
- In valuing the lived experience of community co-designers, don't remove "expertise" from the equation entirely, e.g., expertise of early childhood educators, of museum educators, etc.
- It's okay to provide choice among a limited set of options, but make sure every option on the table is viable and acceptable.
- In remaining committed to process over product, approach co-design less attached to specific outcomes.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Christoph Heinrich, the Frederick and Jan Mayer Director of the Denver Art Museum, for his vision and support of museums as accessible spaces and abundant resources for little learners and the grownups who care for them.

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References

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Jordan Casteel, *Sylvia's* (Taniedra, Kendra, Bedelia, Crizette, De'Sean), 2018. Oil paint on canvas; 90 x 78 in. Denver Art Museum: Purchased with funds from CultureHaus, Burgess Services, Maude B. Lofton M.D., Robert F. Smith Family, Tina Walls, and Contemporary Alliance, 2019.20. © Jordan Casteel. Image is courtesy of the artist and Casey Caplan, New York.

Leonardo Drew, *Number 162*, 2012. Wood, metal, paint, gouache, thumbtacks, ink, graphite, and paper; 123 x 185 x 24 in. Museum purchase in honor of Cathey Finlon's contributions to the Denver Art Museum, 2013.7A-P. © 2024 Leonardo Drew

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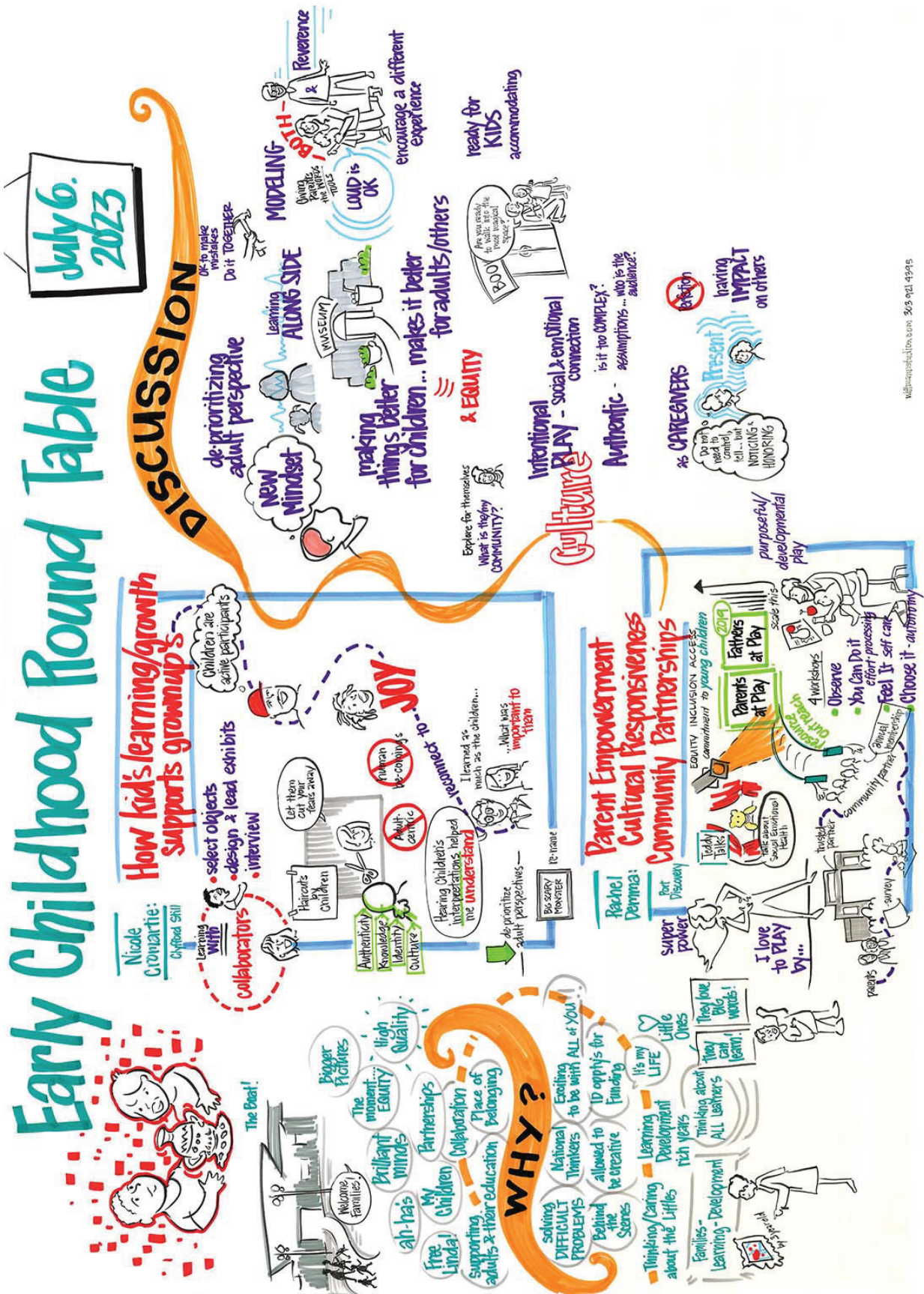
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The background of the page is an abstract composition of various colored shapes. A large orange shape dominates the upper half. Below it, there are sections of purple, green, and yellow. The bottom edge features a row of light blue, rounded, bubble-like shapes. The word "Appendix" is centered in white text on the orange background.

Appendix



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Design Charrette Illustrations



"DAY/WEEK IN THE LIFE" ACTIVITY

July 6, 2023

stakeholders: BROAD TRAUMA

Healing through the arts

family friends neighbors

feelings

children offering their ideas

afternoon: ART interpretation

parent-child

Child-led

Build Parent Skills

back home

found items

virtual

immigrant families

Staff & Parents as CO-LEADERS

Care giver mornings

importance of art & science led by student teacher

OFFERINGS IN Spanish & English

Professional Development Afternoons

practice different abilities

Teacher evenings

goals lesson plans

differentiation

students choose THE ARTWORK

start student choice & exploration

investigation - break, rest & making sense

play, curiosity

connection & de-brief

Evening Huddle

BIG FAT STUFF:

- Free Parking
- expectations
- Gratitude
- Adult Chairs
- REFLECT
- good food

going OUTSIDE

Day 1 working on THEM (Teachers)

IDENTITY

SKILL BUILDING w/ CHOICE

Day 2 Art Teaching Pedagogy

"Just in Time" visual literacy

Day 3 Bringing Kids to Museum

child led through the museum

student art critique

teaching giving good feedback (social-emotional skills)

Validation

intention = Self as Artist = MINDSET

= Art in the Everyday

= Emotional Expression =

= Becoming Art & Finding AWE =

Micro-learning

Not a linear process

Adult Learning

1x month

Morning 0-5 + caregivers

Midday Storytelling

casual learning

Afternoon Professional Development

Family time together

Family Time

Play the whole time

Early Childhood Art Exhibit - kids, parents, educators

July 6, 2023 wittmannstudios.com

I want to make & have my own little bag

People had to discover this way to color textiles

science & art - stable dye -

I can re create this... its shapes, colors

- Identity

connections across cultures

Climate change identity - seeing oneself

What do you see? Re creating

lots to unpack big, heavy inviting different culture

Identity & place

Minimal Color

color theory

immediate & accessible room for creativity & follow up activity

texture environment

adorning your body

sorting, patterns animal expressions

Art & Usefulness - everyday - functionality

grief/loss re create animals

struggle women, trauma carrying it through to their family

Love Minimalism rethinking everyday objects

gravity & support structures

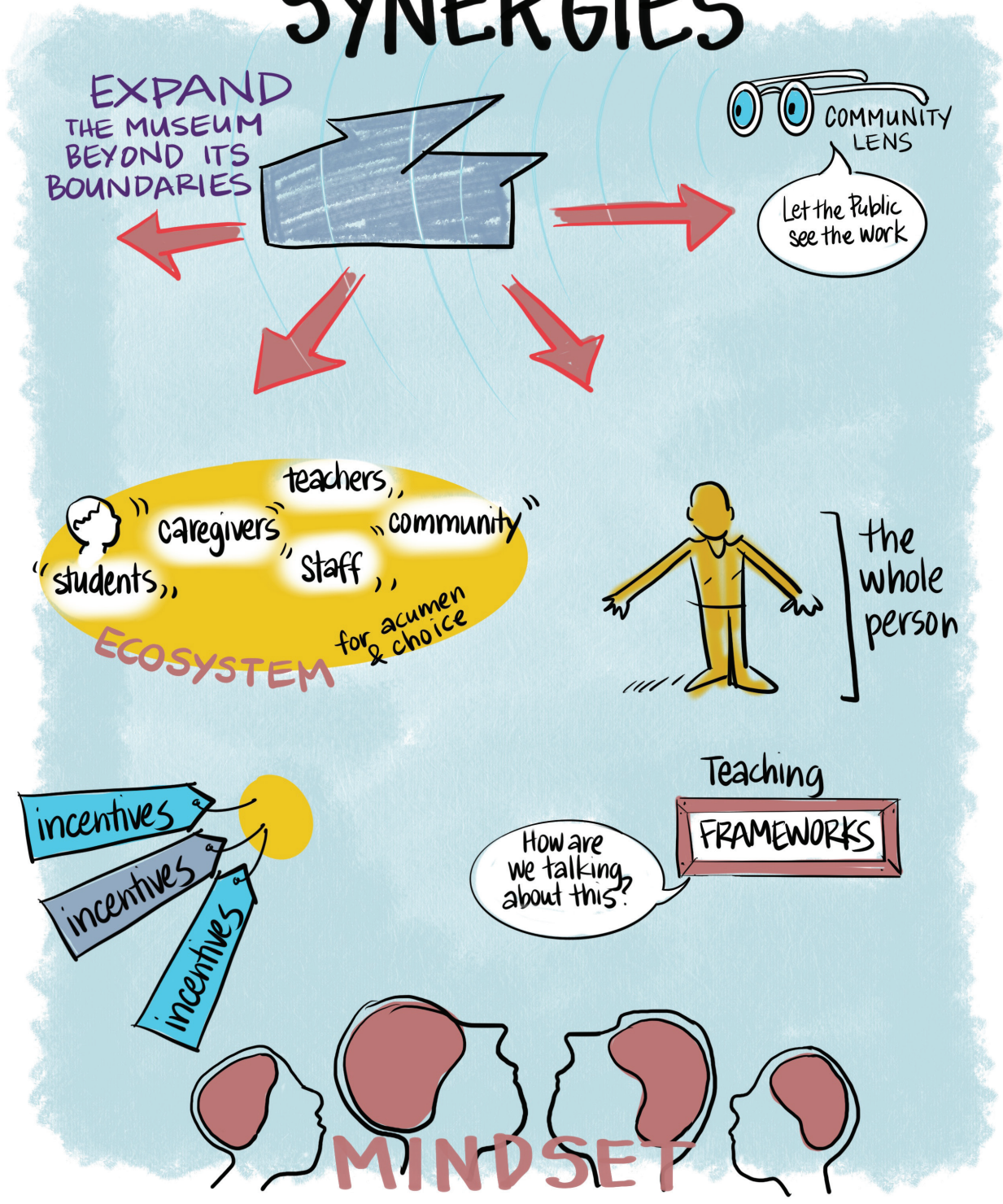
textures hands on

generational stories abstract, yet identify faces

IN GALLERY ACTIVITY

July 6, 2023 WittmannStudios.com

SYNERGIES





Join the Museum's Early Childhood Participant Action Group!

In August 2021, the Denver Art Museum started work on a 3-year grant to help early childhood educators, families, and children integrate art and creativity into their lives and work using an approach called Participatory Action Research (PAR). In PAR, researchers and community members work together to understand problematic situations and change them for the better. This team is called a Participant Action Group (PAG).

We're currently looking for caregivers (e.g., parents, grandparents, etc.), teachers, and school or daycare administrators from diverse backgrounds with lived and/or professional experience in early childhood education to join the Participant Action Group for this project. Individuals who identify as immigrants, refugees, and people of color are especially encouraged to apply, as are people who feel:

- Passionate about the role art plays in young people's lives,
- Invested in the development of children ages 0-5 years old,
- And committed to advocating for the wellbeing of their communities.

As part of the PAG, you would work alongside caregivers, educators, and other professionals as well as Denver Art Museum staff to shape the future of early childhood initiatives at the museum and out in communities. Tasked with amplifying the role of art and creativity in the lives of early learners across the Denver metro area, this group will meet regularly to design, evaluate, and then iterate on an early childhood version of the museum's [Art Lives Here / El Arte Vive Aquí](#) program.

This is a **paid** opportunity (\$50/hr) to share your experience with us and help shape the DAM's early childhood programming for years to come. Other benefits include occasional free museum access and invitations to special events.

We're asking for a 6-month commitment, from March through August 2023, with the option to continue as a part of the PAG for up to an additional year. Meetings will be held approximately every other week for the first three months (March - May) and then approximately once a month for the remainder of the project period (June - August). Meetings will be two hours long with the days, times, and locations yet to be determined, and there may be additional paid research opportunities or preparation activities as part of the project.

Applications to join the PAG are due on Monday, February 20, 2023. [Here is a link to the application form](#). Email pag@denverartmuseum.org or call 720-913-0129 with any questions. And thank you for considering leading this impactful work alongside us!

Racial Equity, Anti-Discrimination & Free Expression at the Denver Art Museum

As an institution, we believe the Denver Art Museum is both a platform for and an amplifier of the voices of people of all races. We acknowledge that Black lives matter and communities of color – Latinx, Indigenous, Black, and others – have been underrepresented in art museums over decades, both internally and externally. We are committed to elevating all voices, artworks and perspectives and strive to support racial equity inside and out.

We prohibit discrimination against any person or organization based on age, race, sex, color, creed, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, transgender status, gender identity, gender expression, ancestry, marital status, veteran status, political service or affiliation, genetic information, or disability, as well as any other status protected by federal, state, or local law.

We strive to provide a professional and positive work environment for our employees. The Museum expressly prohibits any form of employee harassment based on age, race, sex, color, creed, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, transgender status, gender identity, gender expression, ancestry, marital status, veteran status, political service or affiliation, genetic information, disability, or any other applicable status protected by federal, state, or local law. Actions based on these, or any legally protected characteristic will not be tolerated.

We encourage the freedom of gender expression and/or gender presentation. As an institution, we do not create barriers that may prevent any employee from expressing behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and appearances that represent their authentic personality or culture. Qualified candidates are expected to exemplify the DAM's internal values, which include being dynamic, respectful, inclusive, creative, and curious. The ability to maintain effective and positive working relationships with visitors, employees, volunteers, representatives of public and private entities, policy making bodies, and contractors is critical to the success of Participant Action Group (PAG) members.



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Memorandum of Understanding

The Learning Lab – Early Childhood Pilot – Spring 2024

Clayton Early Learning

Partner Name

***The Learning Lab** is a cohort-based training program for early childhood educators developed by the Denver Art Museum in partnership with Clayton Early Learning. Its goal is to support early childhood teachers in building their skills and their confidence incorporating art and creativity into the classroom and using out-of-classroom spaces for creative learning.*

Between February and June, we are piloting a five-part series that includes three teacher training sessions, a custom visit to the Denver Art Museum for participating PreK teachers and their classrooms, and finally, a VIP visit to the Denver Art Museum for the families of those students.

Participating teachers, coaches, and education managers will each receive a \$400 honorarium for their time and energy. We are also pursuing ~7 hours of Colorado Shines PDIS credit for the educators; however, those applications are ongoing and inclusion in the information system is not guaranteed.

What you can expect from us as a partner:

- Email onboarding and communication with cohort members
- Hosting all program activities at the Denver Art Museum
- Providing transportation support as needed for cohort members, classroom visits, and the family visit
- Providing live interpretation in Spanish as necessary
- Providing a \$400 honoraria for each cohort member, up to 10 members
- Delivery of three teacher training sessions on the following topics: Exploring Art & Identity, Building a Creative Toolkit, Designing Object-Oriented Lessons
- Applying for Colorado Shines PDIS credit for the above three training sessions
- Coordination of up to 5 half-day custom visits to the museum for participating PreK classrooms
- Coordination of 1 VIP visit to the museum for cohort members, their students, and their students' families
- Organization and facilitation of surveys, interviews, focus groups, and/or a general debrief meeting to gather feedback from the partner site
- Sharing data and insights with the Clayton Research & Evaluation team
- Access to the museum and invitations to events and programs for Clayton staff and families during the pilot period



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What we expect from you as a partner:

- Selecting up to 10 cohort members from among Clayton’s teachers, coaches, and education managers and providing their contact information to the DAM project team
- Establishing clear attendance expectations with cohort members and holding them accountable during the pilot
- Collaborating with DAM staff throughout the process to surface questions and find creative solutions (e.g. program dates, participant attendance, etc.)
- Booking transportation (with funding support from the DAM as needed) for classroom visits and the family visit to the Museum
- Engaging in conversations with DAM staff to plan for a new Learning Lab cohort during the 2024-2025 school year
- Participating in surveys, interviews, focus groups, and/or a debrief meeting to share feedback with DAM staff and our grant evaluator

This document acts as an official agreement between the Denver Art Museum and Clayton Early Learning for an early childhood pilot of the Learning Lab in February to June 2024. Please sign to identify that you have read the program details above and agree to participate in this pilot. If at any point this agreement is not fulfilled on either partner’s end, a conversation will be needed to assess the impacts on the partnership.

Signature of Administrator/Supervisor

Date

Printed Name

Role

Signature of DAM representative

Date

Printed Name

Role

DAM Point of Contact
Claudia Muñoz
cmunoz@denverartmuseum.org

Thank you for your interest in working with the Denver Art Museum on this new educator-focused program. We look forward to collaborating!