

THINKING THROUGH ART

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

A TRANSFORMATIVE MUSEUM-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

Executive Summary, May 2024

THINKING THROUGH ART AT THE GARDNER MUSEUM

Thinking Through Art (TTA) builds on over 30 years of collaboration between the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Boston Public Schools. TTA provides professional development, visual art curriculum materials, and access to the Museum for Boston Public Schools teachers and students. Since 2017, TTA has served almost 300 teachers and 18,000 students from more than 75% of Boston's schools. While Gardner Museum visits are an essential component of TTA, a key feature of the program is that it builds capacity within schools by targeting teacher practice and locating the majority of student instruction in the classroom, led by the teacher. TTA aims to bring students from across the city into the Gardner Museum and make it a place of belonging for them, while improving teacher practice and classroom culture so that all students have opportunities to experience the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of visual art.

STUDY OVERVIEW

This first-of-its kind study aims to determine how well TTA supports the strategic initiatives of the Boston Public Schools: increased teacher ability to provide culturally responsive instruction, and gains in social-emotional learning and critical thinking among students. Data was collected from over 700 students in 55 classrooms at the beginning and end of the 2022-23 school year, including TTA participants and a control group.

STUDY FINDINGS

Thinking Through Art increases teachers' capacity to practice student-centered, culturally responsive instruction.

Researchers video recorded teachers leading open-ended discussions about works of art. Researchers created instruments to analyze teacher behaviors and score them on the degree to which they are being culturally responsive, including fostering an environment of respect, establishing equitable teaching practices, centering students' diverse lived experiences, and encouraging both the interrogation of assumptions and the exploration of new perspectives.

95%

of Thinking Through Art teachers had high Culturally Responsive Instruction scores at the end of the school year

TTA teachers' scores in culturally responsive instruction grew 20% from the beginning to the end of the year, nearly ten times the growth of control teachers. TTA teachers ended the school year with higher scores than their control group counterparts: 95% of TTA teachers had high scores on culturally responsive instruction, and 97% were centering their students' ideas and queries. The improvement of TTA teacher behaviors compared to the growth in the control group is statistically significant, meaning that we can conclude that TTA was the cause of this increase in teachers' skills demonstrating culturally responsive and student-centered practices.

Thinking Through Art increases students' social-emotional learning, including their self-confidence and their ability to learn with and from others.

Researchers created an instrument to code and score students' positive social-emotional behaviors in videos of classes engaging in discussions about works of art. Across four categories of social-emotional learning, including confidence, relationship skills, respect for multiple perspectives, and participating in a community of learners, TTA classes grew 27%. This was statistically significant when compared to an average increase of 16% for the control group classes. TTA classes ended the year with higher social-emotional learning scores than the control group classes: 73% of TTA classes had high social-emotional learning scores, compared to 53% of control classes. Differences between the TTA and control group are significant whether looking at art or other types of images, which suggests that the social-emotional growth can transfer from art to other subjects.

73%

of Thinking Through Art classes had high social-emotional learning scores, compared to 53% of control classes

Thinking Through Art increases students' capacity to construct meaning, provide evidence for their claims, and to reason critically.

In addition to whole-class instruments, students responded individually to the image orally or in writing, and researchers scored these responses for critical thinking. TTA students increased their use of evidence to support their interpretive claims by 39%, while the control students became slightly *less* likely to use evidence, during the school year. TTA students got better at synthesizing multiple types of thinking and improved their reasoning scores by 19% from beginning to end of the school year, while the control group students demonstrated a considerable *decline* of 46%. Our findings for these types of critical thinking, which are the most relevant to Boston Public Schools, showed statistical significance, leading us to conclude that it is because of TTA that students developed these cognitive skills at this rate.

Thinking Through Art's impacts are greatest for students in the early grades, contributing to learning how to be an engaged, collaborative student.

TTA students in grades PreK–2 had more substantial growth than their control group counterparts in every social-emotional learning category. There are particularly stark differences in scores for respecting multiple possibilities (TTA students' scores increased by 43% while control group students' scores decreased) and creating a community of learners (where TTA students scores increased over 80% from the beginning to the end of the year while control students' scores grew only 8%). These findings are statistically significant, indicating the transformative impact of TTA on Boston's youngest students.

81%

Growth in K-2nd grade students' Community of Learners score

Stronger teacher engagement in Thinking Through Art leads to stronger positive student outcomes.

TTA asks teachers to attend multiple professional development workshops, lead six TTA classroom lessons, and bring students to the Gardner Museum for two guided visits. In a survey, TTA teachers noted how participation in this program led to an increase in comfort talking with students about art, as well as their feeling of connection with the Gardner Museum. 74% of TTA teachers who met or exceeded program participation expectations had high scores in culturally responsive instruction by the end of the school year, which correlates with high student scores on students' critical reasoning. In addition, 63% of TTA teachers who met or exceeded these expectations had classes with high scores in the social-emotional category of students' ability to contribute to a community of learners by the end of the school year. These findings indicate that the teachers' increased skills and positive attitudes about art and museums through TTA are transferred to their students.

THE PROMISE OF MUSEUM-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Study findings affirm that there are concrete, intentional elements of the TTA model that could be influential in addressing some of the challenges facing public schools. When visual art is accompanied by a dedication to student-centered teaching, students are inspired to believe they can learn, that some things do spark their curiosity, and that they have something to offer to their community of learners. This study demonstrates the impact that would result from giving more students regular opportunities to ponder and discuss visual art together.

The TTA program is grounded in an expansive view of what resources a museum has to offer that are aligned with the priorities and needs of public schools. Integrating museums into teacher professional development and school curriculum provides a great advantage for teachers and students in urban public schools. The results of this study strongly suggest the benefits that museums can offer to public school systems.

The results of this study strongly support the continuation of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's TTA program in partnership with Boston Public Schools. Teachers can enroll confident that they will add effective elements to their teaching practice and that their students will benefit. The results are strong enough to warrant Boston Public Schools considering ways to support, endorse, or even adopt the program more broadly. Using the findings of this study as a starting point, Boston Public Schools and the Gardner Museum could nourish these seeds of transformation by coming together with shared goals to combine their resources in new ways.

For more information regarding TTA and the Impact Study, please visit gardnermuseum.org/tta or contact:

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The lead sponsor of the Thinking Through Art program is the Vertex Foundation. Additional support is generously provided by the Rowland Foundation, Yawkey Foundation, The Beker Foundation, Liberty Mutual Foundation, The Hamilton Company Charitable Foundation, Thomas Anthony Pappas Charitable Foundation, and Janet Burke Mann Foundation. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum also receives operating support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which is supported by the state of Massachusetts and the National Endowment for the Arts.