Many of my students are not just feeling the tension between childhood and maturity, but also between foreign and American cultures, native and acquired languages, and the lure of the street against their morality. The Identity Project met them at a crucial crossroads in their lives. It offered them movement/physicality, poetry, photography, and performance as a lens through which they could express, explore, and discover their sense of who they are.

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- Kaidi McQuade, Director of Performing Arts, Roger Williams Middle School, RI
Alesandra Zsiba is a documentary storyteller, dance artist, and poet at heart. As Founding Artist of The Identity Project, Alesandra’s pedagogical approach is rooted in an artistic practice that honors educating the whole child and creating self-made meaning in learning. Through documentary photography and poetry workshops, and spoken word and movement metaphor workshops, Alesandra guides students through the process of building a creative family, becoming proud, surprising themselves, and honoring the seat of their originality.

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The most threatening health crisis facing children in America is the exposure to adverse childhood experiences.

- American Journal of Preventative Medicine

IMAGINATION has the power to save you. In relation to a personal history of trauma, your capacity to imagine other options for your future is what will ultimately save your life.

- Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, Founder of The Trauma Center & Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University Medical School
The nature of identity is heavily layered. When we begin to wade through its depths we find that at its core there lies the brilliance of “I” — a beaming originality, a collection of truths, wind-woven and honest; a clear reflection of who we are. Expressing this brilliance can be a hugely affirming and self-actualizing process for anyone, at any stage in life.

When we focus in on America’s underserved youth, this process becomes difficult because the layers of identity thicken. Sifting through an inheritance that is often multicultural and multilingual, embedded with the stress and traumas of growing up in poverty, America’s young people are hungry for a sense of self that empowers, emboldens, and enlivens.

The Identity Project responds directly to this need by introducing the concept of personal acts of literacy. If we simplify literacy to mean “any process of understanding and communicating,” then personal acts of literacy are the ways in which we walk out into the world and express our truths, our brilliance of “I”.

The Identity Project taps into the transformative potential of this concept and guides young people through the process of creating personal acts of literacy that heal and empower. By inviting young people to use the vocabularies of documentary storytelling and performance as a means for exploration of self, students learn that their voices are valuable, worthy, and original, and that they are capable of making great meaning in this world.
VISION

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I am from my mother loves me no matter what happens.

My home it sounds like baby lotion and roses.

I am from my heritage will not be forgotten.

And my music sounds like my mother, grandmother, Bachata, Regueton, Cala and the Ocean.

I am from arguments and problems.

I am from Earth Broken.

I am from people that are angry everyday in there life.

My heart beats faster when I see a cute boy.
CONTENTS

THE PROGRAM:

9 DESCRIPTION
10 IMPLEMENTATION OVERVIEW
13 PARTNERS

THE PORTRAIT PROJECTS:

17 A HOUSE MADE OF WATER
18 DECIR ADIOS, HIJO
21 WE RISE
23 THE FAST WIND OF PEOPLE POINTING
24 I WISH I WILL BE VICTORIOUS
25 I AM A NOTE TO BE SUNG
27 THE SOUND OF SNOW IN DECEMBER
28 I AM THE SOUND OF CURIOSITY WARMING

TESTIMONIALS

AWARDS, EXHIBITIONS & PUBLICATIONS
THE PROGRAM
The Identity Project is an innovative program that engages students in critically reflective identity work through a specialized curriculum in documentary storytelling, performance, and project-based literacy learning.

Ultimately, this program cultivates empowerment and illuminates the voices of youth, while simultaneously providing an opportunity for self-actualization and self-advocacy through an applied empathy practice.

Grounded in a pedagogical framework that is, at its core, an asset pedagogy, The Identity Project situates student experience at the center of the learning process. Whether it be through experimental or intuitive knowledge, young people have a wealth of existing personal resources that can help shape and inform a vital learning community.

Over the course of an implementation, The Identity Project builds on students’ innate storytelling abilities by cultivating skills in documentary storytelling and performance in order to explore and enrich students’ sense of voice, narrative, and identity, and ultimately deepen students’ feelings of self-worth and educational empowerment. The project culminates in showcase of student’s documentary storytelling skills, celebrating their mastery of 21st century skills, including critical thinking, creative problem solving, collaborative investigation, growth mindset, social emotional learning, communication, and invention.
IMPLEMENTATION OVERVIEW

I. PACKAGES:
The Identity Project can be delivered in the following implementation packages.

6 WEEKS - 3 sessions per week

12 WEEKS - 3 sessions per week

Because our program directly addresses Common Core State Standards cultivated in elementary, middle and high school curricula, we are able to successfully partner with following classes and programs throughout the school day.

- ELA Classrooms
- composition classes
- college & career readiness classes
- library studies classes
- performing & visual arts classes
- writing/study center time
- extracurriculars
- clubs & sports

II. LEARNING PHASES:
1. Introduction to Documentary Storytelling
2. Personal Narrative & Poetry
3. Visual Literacy & Photography
4. Final Portrait Projects & Performances

III. TARGET COMPETENCIES & SKILLS:
- creative problem-solving
- collaborative investigation
- growth mindset-set
- social emotional learning
- empathy
- communication
- invention
- critical thinking
- teamwork
- meaning-making
PARTNER SCHOOLS 2011-2015

Roger Williams Middle School (RI)
Highlander Charter School (RI)
Maury Elementary School (DC)
C.W. Harris Elementary School (DC)
Harriet Tubman Elementary School (DC)
Smothers Elementary School (DC)
Hart Middle School (DC)
Sligo Adventist School (MD)
Miss Porter’s School (CT)
Kingswood Oxford School (CT)

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS 2011-2015

The Literacy Lab (DC)
Young Playwrights Theater (DC)
Providence CityArts For Youth (RI)
Providence After School Association (RI)
AmeriCorps (RI)

FORTHCOMING PARTNERSHIPS 2016

National Cathedral School (DC)
Fannie Lou Hammer Freedom High School (NY)
Big Picture Learning (NY)
THE PORTRAIT PROJECTS
A House Made of Water

by Johny Rodriguez

I am from a belief in ghosts
From a place where I am invisible and nobody could hear me
From a place where they say...

Be careful what you do or who you hang out with.

I am from this wish, I wish I had a time machine
Where I could go back and fix all my mistakes.

I am from a house made of water
And, I have so many dreams of who I want to be.

I am from, “I know deep down in my bones
That nobody could bring me down, no matter what.”

I am from last night while I was falling asleep
I thought about what my life is going to be in the future...

How am I going to look?

My music sounds like my feet stepping on ice
And my footsteps running around the house.

I am from a place where nobody could find me.
A House Made of Water

by Johenly Rodriguez

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My music sounds like my feet stepping on ice
and my footsteps running around the house.

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Decir Adios, Hijo
by Brian Mendoza

Step One:
I start like this . . .
My eyes close the night before
I try and talk myself through it
I try and talk myself through it
All night.

Step Two:
In the morning I look
straight at her
I have so many questions
My hands shake as
I pack my bags
I'm watching the three most
Beautiful girls of my life cry
I tell my sisters that everything
Is going to be fine
When I know it's not
We're getting into the taxi
And I hear her voice
But I don't look at her.

Step Three:
"This is how you and your sisters
will do this, are you listening?"
I don't know.
"Estas escuchando?"
No, I can't believe this.
"Say goodbye. Decir adios, hijo."
"Adios, Mami."

Step Four:
And, I just sit there
In my seat on the plane
Knowing I'm not going to see her
And, I'm thinking about her
Like CDs think about turning
Like brains think about learning
Like painters think about mixing
Like dads think about fixing
I'm thinking about her and
thinking
Did I make a mistake?
Cometo un error?
Or could there be such a thing
As a right mistake?
We Rise by The Identity Project Ensemble at Roger Williams Middle School

Does knowing you've done your hardest thing make you feel a little lighter?

It should make you light enough to rise.

I rise when my guardian angel cries

I rise when people try and make up lies

I rise when my hater dies

I rise when I close my eyes

I rise when white men stop killing colored guys

I rise when people stop name-calling over mine

I rise while everybody sighs

I rise while my plane flies

I rise because even though I might want to fall

I am a balloon in small hands

Reaching up to the sky

And the more I do

The more you'll see

That I will make it

With only Me.
We Rise

by The Identity Project Ensemble at Roger Williams Middle School

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make you feel a little lighter?
It should make you light enough to rise . . .

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I rise when people try and make up lies
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I rise when white men stop killing colored guys
I rise when people stop name-calling over mine
I rise while everybody sighs
I rise while my plane flies
I rise because even though I might want to fall
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Reaching up to the sky
And the more I do
The more you'll see
That I will make it
With only Me.
The Fast Wind of People Pointing
by Johny Ramos

I am from the belief in wild imaginations
Surprise hills and shuffling cards that shuffle
I am from, "Mirar con las manos y tocar con los ojos."
I am from the wish that brownies made themselves
I am from another dream
And I have chaotic dreams of who I want to be
I am from, "I know deep down in my bones that anything is possible"
I am from last night while I was falling asleep
I thought about theater and being BIG
I am from a movie
And my music sounds like
Loud noises and horrible beats
Cars beeping in harmony
People tripping on stairs, clapping against steps, ugly laughs
And the fast wind of people pointing
I am from Johny Ramos.
I Wish I Will Be Victorious

by Muktar Shokeye

When I think of home
The first thing I think of is loving and caring
Twisting ears and slapping.
Home smells like laundry and church.
It brings us together when lies tear us apart.
My heart beats faster when I get something new.
I am from this wish
I wish I will be victorious.
I am from last night while I was falling asleep
I dreamed of my life as a genius.
I Am a Note to Be Sung

by Ariana Wheeler

I am from a place where music makes sense
When I was born, words are written on a page
My first memory, my grandma, as usual
Sometimes I wish I was a note to be sung
And, sometimes I feel sad when no one lets me finish -
What I’m saying.
I never told you that I have a different personality
Last night while I was falling asleep I thought about notes dancing.
I am from a place where smiles are only something
To be happy about.
I am from a belief that people need to be themselves.

I am from "I know deep down in my bones that I can become my real self in the front of someone."

I am from "I love lo que tu bes no es lo que es y lo que tu cres es lo que tu si bes.

And, I have incredible dreams of who I want to be"

I am from the sound of \( \text{bachata, reggaon, merenke y salsa} \)

and, my music sounds like Chinese singing, Chickens clucking, coffee making and birds and wind howling.
The Sound of Snow in December

by Johny Ramos

My music sounds like wild fire, growing loud and destroying everything in its way,
    red and flowing with destruction
My music sounds like a language responding in another sequence
My music sounds like the brushing of my hair when I can't think of anything,
    strand by strand, making a wave like song
My music sounds like the feeling of my slippers wrapping around my feet as a blanket
My music sounds like a chill I get through my shirt backstage
My music sounds like the overwhelming heat of my sweater challenging my slippers
My music sounds like my pencil scratching against my paper not able to hear anyone who is around me
My music sounds like realizing who is gonna be my next teacher boring us with a quarter and a half of information
My music sounds like the expectation it will snow this December.
The Sound of Curiosity Warming

by The Identity Project Ensemble at Roger Williams Middle School

Sometimes I imagine I have a room inside me
inside this room there is another room,
I am alone in this place where no one has been.
And my music comes crashing in like waves
Water rushing into my mouth, my head feels light and almost
Empty. And, I try not to taste the salt.

I am from a darkness that I can’t release; it fills me up inside,
Because I am from something deadly
From an angel and a devil
From broken earth and broken hearts
From people who are angry every day of their lives
And from people who cry when they’re crazy happy and crazy sad.

I am from waking up with the sun and watching for the moon
Finally when its quiet again, I think about
“Am I really proud, or am I making others proud, and not myself?”
“Who have I hurt?”
“Why do I pray?”
“Am I really so different?”

It’s hard to say and hard to write
So in small letters on the back of this page, I’m thinking about
“Am I going to be alive in ten years?”
I don’t know...

At night, before I close my eyes she tells me
“Sometimes you just need to learn how to float before you can learn how to swim”
And I think, what will happen when I walk out that door?
Is this a place where I matter?
THE TESTIMONIALS
In The Identity Project I learned that I AM SMART. I learned that I can do new things, that I can dance and write a poem. I didn't know that, but now I know!

- Jeiry, RI (6th grade)

When I started this program I didn't want to do it at all. I was scared. I was like, 'No way, why would I want to express my feelings?" and stuff like that. But actually, with Alesandra's help, I liked it a lot. It makes me feel like if I get it out there, I'll get it off my mind. And, now I think I LIKE TO EXPRESS MYSELF this way.

- Brian, RI (8th grade)

I learned through The Identity Project to trust myself, and that MY IDEAS CAN BE VALID AND BEAUTIFUL. Most of all I learned that my first thought is usually my best thought, and I shouldn't over-think too much. It is so important to take creative risks and really just go for something, it generally leads to the most intriguing and beautiful work.

- Alex, CT (12th grade)
AWARDS & EXHIBITIONS

Winner of LaunchU, Oberlin College's accelerator program and pitch competition for entrepreneurs (2016)

Gallery exhibit at the Arts Education Partnership National Forum on Arts Education (2013)

Winner of Joy of Giving Something Fourth Quarter 2013 Photography Contest, The Forward Thinking Museum

Recipient of Emerging Photographers Award, Santa Fe Photographic Workshops (2010)

WRITING HONORS & PUBLICATIONS

Advancing Arts Education Through Expanded Day - The Identity Project feature (Wallace Foundation, 2013)

The Identity Project Book (published by Providence After School Alliance & CityArts For Youth, 2013)
I am from a place that isn't a city. When I was born on my first day, I had when I was born at a sunny day. I sometimes wish to fly and sometimes I feel sad when I'm alone. I never told. I live in Washington DC last night while I was falling asleep. I thought I was at school. I am from Mexico. A song goes like this: 'la, la, la.'
Alesandra Zsiba is a documentary storyteller, dance artist, and a poet at heart. As Founding Artist of The Identity Project, Alesandra's pedagogical approach is rooted in an artistic practice that honors educating the whole child and creating self-made meaning in learning. Through documentary photography and poetry workshops, and spoken word and movement metaphor workshops, Alesandra guides students through the process of building a creative family, becoming proud, surprising themselves, and honoring the seat of their originality. Alesandra has studied and been on the staff of nationally recognized arts organizations such as the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, Duke Center for Documentary Studies, and the School at The International Center of Photography. Alesandra graduated from Oberlin College with a B.A. in Interdisciplinary Performance, and is proud to have served a year in AmeriCorps. Alesandra is currently a Master's candidate at the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College. Please reach out via the information below:

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