# Ripple Effects of StoryArk in the Stillwater Area Public Schools

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February 28, 2021

# Ripple Effects of StoryArk

January 2021, Stillwater Area Public Schools' Office of Equity and Integration and StoryArk organized a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation to document the impacts of the programming in the Stillwater Area Public Schools. StoryArk and school district staff, students, professional artists and Emerging Professionals participated in two online discussions. These core themes emerged from the process.

## Building impactful relationships

Students and staff were energized and inspired by personal and organizational connections they've made through StoryArk. A prominent subtheme for students was the deepened sense of community they have gained.

*I found people who go through the same things I go through and it made me feel less alone.*

## Cultivating voice, pride and empowerment

Students emphasized the power of elevating their own voices. Staff witnessed the power of students finding their voices and finding that what they have to say is important and holds weight

*Students say it is immediately empowering to share stories about themselves.*

## Creating an accepting space for self-expression

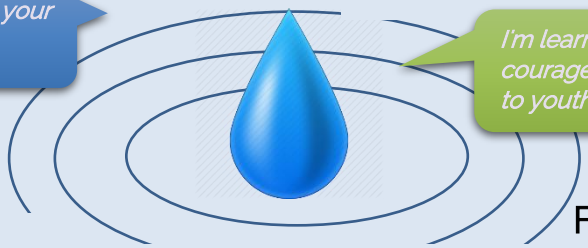
Students emphasized that StoryArk has created space in which they could feel safe to express themselves. Some even shared that StoryArk was crucial for helping them work through personal mental health struggles.

*StoryArk is a safe place to share your creativity and vision.*

## Learning about through learning among

Learning from each other was a prominent theme for students and staff. Staff, many of whom were in teaching positions, spoke highly of how much they had learned from, and with, the students.

*I'm learning to be brave and courageous and speak the truth thanks to youth inspiration.*



## Learning life skills through experiences

StoryArk has created opportunities for students to gain a broad range career and life skills, including skills needed for future employment, creative skills, and teamwork.

*It's made it easier to talk with people. In interviews and jobs, I now know how to approach the situation when I'm meeting someone new.*

## Unleashing creativity through a student-initiated process

Staff emphasized the role of the student-initiated process, noting how rare it is for students to be given the opportunity to lead.

*The greatest strength of StoryArk is that it seeks to nurture students' strengths. The fact that the projects are student-initiated and led validates these students. They are, to some extent, students who do not receive a lot of recognition. Creativity is often not valued.*

## Failing forward, learning from challenges

Students and staff described a range of challenges they've had to work through, from time management, to collaboration, to maintaining closeness during the pandemic.

*Sometimes, with a room full of creative people and their powerful voices, it can be challenging trying to write or finish a project while making sure everyone is heard.*

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## Background

StoryArk is a non-profit arts organization that helps students in middle and high school initiate creative teams in which they tell their stories using a variety of formats. The students create narrative podcasts, short films, comedic web series and a literary magazine that publishes prose, poetry and visual arts. The experience is transformative, not only for the students themselves, but for their audiences who gain empathy and understanding of the student experience. The organization's mission is to empower student voices and equip young artists to thrive.

StoryArk's process emphasizes students working in teams that build a sense of belonging and empowerment, as youth work together to create their stories. In their creative process, professional writers, actors, directors, cinematographers, editors and filmmakers serve as mentors who share their skills and wisdom as needed with youth.

StoryArk utilizes a Braided Funding approach, weaving multiple sources of funding comprised of numerous stakeholders involved in the initiative, including Stillwater Area Public Schools Achievement and Integration funding.

With an interest in documenting how the StoryArk mission unfolds, Stillwater Area Public Schools contracted with the author, a leader in the use of Ripple Effects Mapping (REM), to conduct a virtual REM evaluation in January 2021. StoryArk and school district staff organized two mapping processes, one for program staff (which included StoryArk employees, school district liaisons/educators and professional artists) and one for students and former students (Emerging Professionals) who now work as mentors for the organization. This report outlines the process and findings from these REM sessions.

## Ripple Effects Mapping Process

Ripple Effects Mapping is an evaluation method that engages a range of program participants to retrospectively, and visually, map the chain of effects resulting from a program or complex collaboration. The REM process combines elements of Appreciative Inquiry,[1] mind mapping, group interviewing, and qualitative data analysis. More information about the process is available at www.z.umn.edu/rembook.

REM typically involves a face-to-face group session in which participants interview each other using Appreciative Inquiry questions, report out their interview findings, and the facilitator creates a mind map with the interview data, documenting the chain of effects of

[1] Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based organizational development process, increasingly used in evaluation, that involves the art and practice of asking questions that build on the successful, effective and energizing experiences of those involved with a program.. For an overview see https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/appreciative_inquiry.

the program. Because the COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face interaction unsafe, this REM process was designed using Zoom online meeting software.

The evaluation was conducted over two online sessions held on January 8 and 22. On January 8, 18 staff and 16 students/Emerging Professionals met in separate Zoom sessions to interview each other using Appreciative Inquiry questions to reflect on their experiences with the program. The program director paired participants in Zoom "break-out rooms" to interview each other and type their responses in a Google Form. These were the questions they asked each other:

- What is a highlight or success you had or observed based on your involvement with Story Ark? What resulted from these successes?
- What new or deepened connections or friendships with others (individuals or organizations) have you made as a result of your involvement with Story Ark? What did these connections lead to?
- Please share some of the strengths and challenges that you have experienced with Story Ark's student initiated/student led process.
- What impact did going virtual during the pandemic have on your ability to build relationships within Story Ark?
- Please share some words, phrases or specific stories that capture what the *StoryArk community* means to you.

After the January 8 sessions, the evaluator used qualitative data analysis methods to generate themes from the interview responses and draft Ripple Effects Maps that were shared with all participants before the second sessions. During the January 22 sessions, group members edited the themes, suggesting different ways to group the data, and added new ripple effects of the program to the maps. In addition, the groups discussed some of the biggest challenges for StoryArk moving forward and added this information to the mind maps.

## Themes

Each group agreed upon themes and sub-themes to organize the ripple maps. Similar themes emerged in both sessions, but themes for one group were sometimes considered subthemes for the other group, and wording choices varied. For example, the students emphasized a major theme about the ways that StoryArk had created an accepting safe for self-expression, a home for the heart. Staff emphasized a theme about unleashing creativity. Students were more comfortable using the word "power" in a theme title, while staff preferred the term "empowerment." Both groups emphasized the importance of the program in building impactful relationships, cultivating voice and pride, nurturing employability and life skills, and learning from challenges. The table on the next page shows the specific theme and sub-theme titles for staff and students.

| Themes and subthemes from staff | Themes and subthemes from students |
|---|---|
| **Building impactful and interconnected relationships**<br>• Inspiring others<br>• Connecting organizations<br>• Deepening personal connections and friendships<br>• Connecting with students | **Building impactful relationships**<br>• Deepening friendships<br>• Connecting with staff<br>• Growing a sense of community/second family |
| **Cultivating voice, pride and empowerment**<br>• Endeavoring to create a safe space<br>• Building pride and confidence | **Cultivating character**<br>• Voice<br>• Pride and confidence<br>• Power |
| **Nurturing passion, employability skills and opportunities, from participants to Emerging Professionals** | **Learning life skills through experiences**<br>• Creating artistic opportunities<br>• Collaboration<br>• Enhancing career skills |
| **Learning about through learning among**<br>• Promoting empathy and mutual learning<br>• Adapting to the pandemic | **Creating an accepting space for self-expression**<br>• A home for the heart<br>• Providing a supportive community<br>• Promoting empathy and mutual learning<br>• Maintaining this space during the pandemic |
| **Unleashing creativity through a student-initiated process** | |
| **Failing forward, ongoing challenges for the work**<br>• Failure as part of the learning process<br>• Timeliness and logistics<br>• Strengthening student leadership<br>• Letting go of control<br>• Pandemic-related | **Challenges**<br>• Time management and scheduling<br>• Learning to collaborate<br>• Growing from a student-led initiative<br>• Pandemic-related |

To communicate insights from both groups, the discussion below combines the responses from students and staff into seven overarching themes:

- Building impactful relationships
- Cultivating voice, pride and empowerment
- Creating an accepting space for self-expression
- Learning about through learning among
- Learning life skills through experiences
- Unleashing creativity through a student-initiated process; and
- Failing forward, learning from challenges

Below are summaries of each of these themes with illustrative quotes from participants. Complete images of the ripple map themes and interview data from each group are included in the Appendices of this report.

## Building impactful relationships

The Appreciative Inquiry interview included a question about relationships that participants had built as a result of StoryArk. Large sections of each group's ripple maps were about these relationships and their impacts. Staff spoke about the importance of connections with staff from other organizations, as well as with students. Staff were energized and inspired by these connections, and many of these connections have deepened to become friendships. A staff member highlighted that the StoryArk community has meant far more than she can articulate with words alone: *playing and creating with these talented individuals, from Minnesota and California, has been absolutely incredible*. Staff also spoke in about new and strengthened relationships among organizations, including school districts, arts organizations, youth and social service agencies.

*Some of the greatest strengths I have witnessed have come from seeing the inter-connectivity and commitment the students and leaders have displayed to each other. They lean on each other and are all there to assist one another. They know they have a community in which they can trust.*

*I had the opportunity to develop professional relationships with Equity Leaders from Mankato and Hastings as we are engaged in cross-district StoryArk programming. We meet regularly and engage in a process of "gracious professionalism" where we share resources and experiences.*

The students spoke about the friendships they've made in StoryArk, and how the program helped them connect with people they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to meet. They spoke about the importance of the relationships they've built with StoryArk staff, highlighting the opportunity to remain engaged with StoryArk after high school as an Emerging Professional. A student reported that the staff provided a safe space for them to share stories, and assisted students with things they needed - not just about writing, but also emotional needs.

*I found people who go through the same things I go through and it made me feel less alone.*

A prominent subtheme for students was the deepened sense of community they have gained through StoryArk. As one student noted, it was like a family you could choose to be part of. Another student noted that StoryArk made her feel like she had a community and taught her what a community really is. She got the opportunity to really listen to other people's stories and learn that community can't happen without listening.

*Community can't happen without listening.*

## Cultivating voice, pride, and empowerment

Both the student and staff sessions highlighted the ways that StoryArk has cultivated student voice, pride, and empowerment. The students emphasized the power of elevating their own voices. One student noted that being a part of this group has helped her raise her voice on issues that are not covered by media. Another noted that StoryArk is always able to tell the absent narrative. In addition to helping youth find their voices, the program also helped them build pride and confidence through their performances. Several students described their pride in being able to perform in front of large groups of people, and their acquired skill in speaking out loud to peers and adults

*I have seen many young student leaders and in particular BIPOC student leaders authentically elevate their voices on racial justice issues in a psychologically-safe learning environment.*

Staff witnessed all this. One staff member spoke about students finding their voices and learning that what they have to say is important and holds weight. Another staff member noted that: *being a minority myself, the phrase/mantra, "making space for the marginalized voices" will always hold a special place in my heart.* Several participants shared stories about student voice and pride. One staff member described a shy student, who initially only wanted to write, started to come out of his shell and finally (after a year and a half) decided to take a part in a performance. Over time, he became much more comfortable and took on larger parts in performances. Another staff member observed the Carnation podcast group sharing their work with families in a mobile home community: *I spent much of my time during this experience observing the non-verbal behavior of the families (who were native Spanish speakers) and what I witnessed was pride oozing out of every pore.*

*I witnessed pride oozing out of every pore.*

*Students say it is immediately empowering to share stories about themselves.*

## Creating an accepting space for self-expression

A particularly strong theme among students was the success of StoryArk in creating space in which they could feel safe to express themselves. Some even shared that StoryArk was crucial for helping them work through personal mental health struggles. One student spoke about being depressed in junior high and early high school years, and StoryArk provided a safe space to explore his feelings, connect with the world, and try new things. Another student spoke about how StoryArk is a starting point for who he is today and who he is going to be creatively, emotionally, and professionally. A student noted that it is somewhat cliché to think of StoryArk as family, but that's how it feels: *It's such a safe community that we can share any topic such*

*StoryArk is the home for my heart.*

*StoryArk has always been a place where I felt accepted for who I was, and the people there have been there for me through all of the mental health problems I've had, and they always welcome me back. I think that really was influential when I was struggling, I may not have seen it, but I would have been in a much darker place without it.*

*as political, environmental, and overall scary topics . . . that are what we can talk about without feeling judged.*

Staff members spoke about this safe space as well, noting that they *endeavor* to create a safe space for students. As stated by one staff member, *StoryArk is a community where students are accepted and feel safe, where similarities and differences are honored, where students can be challenged, a place to agree and disagree, a place where students can be themselves. StoryArk is a place people want to be.*

> *StoryArk is a safe place to share your creativity and vision.*

## Learning about through learning among

Learning from each other was a prominent theme in both the student and staff interviews. The students spoke about how important it was for them to learn from the Emerging Professionals, students who were just a few years older: *It is less intimidating to have people who are a few years older than you vs. industry professionals. Students know what students want, generally.* Students also described the process of learning together, and deeply listening to each other.

> *It think that it has given so many opportunities for students to make choices, a challenge being that through student-led initiatives, everyone is learning alongside you.*

When the pandemic hit, students had to transition to Zoom, and this impacted their learning. However, the majority of comments about this transition were positive. The Zoom meetings were more accessible and promoted a different type of closeness. As stated by one student: *It was positive because it helped people become comfortable during an uncomfortable time. For example, if they felt uncomfortable, they could simply turn of their camera and microphone while still being a part of the group, and in their own space.*

> *One strength that I love about StoryArk is that everyone leaves feeling heard and we most of the time reach a common ground.*

Other students commented that moving online opened up connections with artists from outside the Stillwater area*: Going online resulted is my ability to meet people outside of the valley, we were able to broaden our horizons and make connections with professionals and students that we wouldn't have met otherwise.*

Staff, many of whom were in teaching positions, spoke highly of how much they had learned from, and with, the students. One staff member noted that there is an optimism among the youth, and a mindset of looking at different options to solve a problem or tell a story. Another staff member spoke of intercultural learning*: It has taught me that we can appreciate each other's values and that we are more alike than we are different. These relationships have added so much to my life.*

Staff also had positive things to say about the move to online meetings during the pandemic. The virtual sessions allowed the program to expand in unexpected ways, and helped staff learn about how to connect in the online world. One staff member noted that moving online reinforced the importance of check-ins at the beginning of meetings.

*Things I've learned: how to deal with current issues - youth insights are so deep. Learning to be reflective. I'm learning to be brave and courageous and speak the truth thanks to youth inspiration.*

Transportation barriers were no longer an issue, which one staff member noted had caused a large "opportunity gap" in the past, and it became possible to engage students and artists from across the entire state of Minnesota, as well as in Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

*In a world that is so polarized, teaching youth to speak in stories helps us all grow in empathy and understanding of each other.*

## Learning life skills through experiences

StoryArk has helped students gain a broad range of career and life skills, including skills needed for future employment, creative skills, and teamwork skills. Students shared a sense of pride in their growing artistic skills. One student spoke about his increased writing skills as well as improved voice acting skills, which in turn helped him with becoming more involved in speech programs after school. Beyond the artistic skills developed in StoryArk, this same student noted: *My involvement with HUSH has opened more doors for me in StoryArk, which has helped me beef up my resume, as well as allow me an outlet to process trauma.*

*Without StoryArk I wouldn't be as good of a writer as I am now. I have so many skills now that I use in my everyday life, and I have more confidence in voicing my opinion.*

A staff member commented that StoryArk's biggest strength has been the kids' growth in their craft and abilities. *That's an invaluable skill and the earlier it's learned, the better.* An instructor described two kids he knew who decided to pursue film as a career based on their experiences in StoryArk, and they are college students now: *So from seeing this as a hobby to having them pursue these careers is very rewarding. Both of them are going to do tremendous work.*

*StoryArk has helped me get video editing jobs ever since I graduated high school. StoryArk launched my videoediting career.*

*Being surrounded by a diverse group of ideas helped me grow as a person.*

Beyond the creative skills gained, students gained the types of skills they will need for future employment. Several students spoke about the importance of learning to work in teams: *A highlight would be completing a story with other people. I liked working with team. I learned how to appreciate teamwork.* One of the Emerging Professionals mentioned that she was able to make a deeper connection with another Emerging Professional because they had to work in teams.

Students and staff also described student growth in skill acquisition: *It's made it easier to talk with people. In interviews and jobs, I now know how to approach the situation when I'm meeting someone new.* Students had to learn time management skills because of the need to balance their school and extracurricular activities, as well as employment in some cases. One student spoke about learning how to respond more quickly to emails. Another spoke of learning how to work with different personality types.

*Networking -- I got an internship, and I was able to use my StoryArk network to help me create a video series for my internship.*

## Unleashing creativity through a student-initiated process

While students emphasized the safe space as an impetus for their creativity, staff placed more emphasis on the role of student-initiated process as a spark for creativity. One staff member expressed this well: *The greatest strength of StoryArk is that it seeks to nurture students' strengths. The fact that the projects are student-initiated and led validates these students. They are, to some extent, students who do not receive a lot of recognition. Creativity is often not valued.*

*It was adults letting us think for ourselves and didn't tell us what to do. It gave me a chance to think with a open mind for the first time and not have to think about what other people want.*

Another staff member noted that it is rare for students to be given the opportunity to lead, and that this leadership adds credibility to the students' voices.

A student commented that *we are so involved in all the administrative decisions, what kind of projects we want to pursue, how we want the meetings to look, and how we want to get more people involved. It's a blessing to give that power to kids to learn from, so people get inspired by other people.*

*Inspiring is the word that captures it all. The artists who worked with the students were nervous at first and found that they not only liked it, but they were so inspired by the students. Country songwriter Jeff Dayton, said, "Come interested, leave inspired."*

A staff member described how a team of three students started the Carnation podcast, grew their team and went on to win a cultural diversity award, impacting many listeners who gained insights into deportation, depression, and anxiety through youth stories: *They created stories that impact our future and create greater empathy.*

*These experiences are TRULY student led. The adults are guides who walk alongside the students and not the experts. The inclusivity of the process and this message is conveyed to all participants.*

## Failing forward, learning from challenges

Each of the two sessions included a discussion of the challenges students and staff have faced in StoryArk. Students spoke about challenges of time management, learning to collaborate, overcoming fears, and maintaining group cohesion during the pandemic. Regarding time management, a student commented that is was hard to remain on track

with projects when the team members had become friends. Several students felt that collaboration was challenging: *Sometimes we talk over each other because everyone is so filled with ideas. We're all loud in the group, which contributes to not hearing everybody's ideas.* It was a learning experience to discover how to work through creative differences among students. As stated by one student: *Especially for younger and newer students, learning how to communicate and collaborate with other people can be difficult. When working together on a project, your ideas may not always be the best idea for the group and navigating that relationship and keeping everything positive and respectful can be a challenge.*

*Sometimes with a room full of creative people and their powerful voices it can be challenging while trying to write or finish a project while making sure everyone is heard.*

Students also noted the challenge of overcoming fear and gain confidence to speak up. Interestingly, one student mentioned that speaking up with peers was a bit more difficult than speaking up with adults: *Sometimes it can be very frightening because with an adult you can show whatever opinion but with students you're quite scared to hurt others so you have to cope with a more respectful approach.*

*It gives the opportunities to fail. Schools protect from failing, but failing is one of the best lessons, it builds resilience.*

The staff discussion focused on subthemes about how difficult it is to let go of control and a implement a student-led effort, about logistics and transportation issues, challenges during the pandemic.

A staff member commented that *sometimes it's messy to let go of control and allow the process to unfold organically with students*. Another teacher commented that: *The greatest challenge for me, as an educator, was struggling to not step in and take charge. I also experienced difficulty getting the kids together, getting them to respond to emails or texts to set up meetings, sometimes no one showing for the meetings. Once there, we were very productive.*

Another staff member commented that the students can be disorganized and procrastinate, and that not all of them could drive or had consistent internet access. In addition, students were sometimes only interested in one aspect of the creative process, so they would give all their energy to that part, but once that is done and it's time for something else, their interest would shift.

*Students developmentally are not adults. While it's student initiated and student led, we still have to be there to hold them accountable. They depend on the energy of the staff to keep them moving toward their goals.*

*Not being physically in place, the process changes. We would have people get up and brainstorm on the boards, now we are limited to one person's ideas at a time, and it is harder to bounce ideas off each other. It's less energetic because students are Zoomed out.*

Finally, both staff and students had concerns about the need to move online during the pandemic. While many noted the benefits of Zoom meetings, several people felt that the connection online wasn't as rich: *It wasn't a genuine connection because they are not right there. It's not human connection. You couldn't feel a vibe through a screen.*

## Analyzing the maps with pre-existing frameworks

The themes discussed above were generated directly from the interview responses, but another way of exploring the results from Ripple Effects Mapping is to analyze the responses using pre-existing frameworks about the intended results of the program. This approach allows the evaluator to "test" the findings according to a relevant theory or framework.

In this case, we used two frameworks to examine the data. First, we used the primary outcomes from StoryArk's logic model, asking if the items reporting by participants in the two REM sessions were evidence of student gains in:

- Artistic skills
- Awareness of other cultural perspectives (intercultural skills)
- Employability skills
- Sense or community/belonging; and
- Technological literacy

### StoryArk's Logic Model

| StoryArk Logic Model | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Outcomes - Students develop:** | **Short Term** | **Intermediate** | **Long Term** |
| **Artistic Skills** | Students master the ability to initiate and drive their own creative processes | Students develop artistic skills that help them create original works that can go on reels, resumes and applications | Student are equipped with the skills they feel they need to move forward in their professional journeys |
| **Awareness of Other Cultural Perspectives (intercultural skills)** | Students learn to work with divergent perspectives within their own group (strengthen interpersonal skills) | Students learn be in effective dialogue with similar but diverse peers (develop culturally inclusive communication) | Students gain intercultural agility (can recognize, incorporate and leverage divergent perspectives) |
| **Employability Skills** | Students develop collaboration skills (ability to give constructive criticism, navigate conflict, take feedback, responsibly adapt in uncertainty) | Students take a project leadership position as head writer, film editor, film director, film producer, audio editor, improv leader | *Students help replicate and grow programming.<br>*Students become pre-professional mentors at StoryArk |
| **Sense of Community/Belonging** | Students feel they're accepted for their ideas as their authentic selves | Students form a sense of community with their StoryArk team | Student feel they have a strong platform to reach the wider community |
| **Technological Literacy** | Students can utilize a variety of digital devices (e.g., computers, smartphones, tablets) and interfaces (e.g., e-mail, internet, social media, cloud computing) to communicate, troubleshoot and problem solve | Students gain the ability to assess, acquire and communicate information in a fully digital environment | Students can effectively consume, create, authenticate and share digital content, and can easily adapt to new technologies |

Second, we used a framework focusing more on the broader, collective impacts of StoryArk. The outcomes in the Logic Model pertain primarily to the individual experiences of students in the program, and we knew from the ripple mapping sessions that there were

other, broader, collective impacts beyond the direct experiences of students that were also worth exploring during this analysis.

From an earlier experience evaluating an arts-based leadership development program, the lead evaluator suggested using William Cleveland's Arts Based Community Development Ecosystem map[2] to analyze the data. Cleveland's ecosystem focuses on the ways that arts-centered activity contributes to the sustained advancement of human dignity, health, and/or productivity within a community. These include arts-based activities in four domains that:

- Educate and inform us about ourselves and the world
- Inspire and mobilize individuals or groups
- Nurture and heal people and/or communities; and
- Build and improve community capacity and/or infrastructure

Interestingly, Cleveland envisioned youth arts programming at the intersection of all these domains.

William Cleveland's Arts-based Community Development Ecosystem

**The Art-based Community Development Ecosystem**

Once the ripple maps were reviewed by core program staff, a team involving the lead evaluator, StoryArk's director, a StoryArk Emerging Professional, and two school district representatives, met to code the data. The team was interesting in learning the extent to which the ripple mapping data provided evidence of impact in each of these domains. This full team met initially on February 4 over Zoom, using a Google spreadsheet to review each item from the student ripple map, determining if each item was evidence of any of the five

[2] Cleveland, William. 2011. *Arts-based Community Development: Mapping the Terrain*. Animating Democracy: A Program of Americans for the Arts. Retrieved from https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/BCleveland%20Trend%20Paper.pdf

student outcomes or four collective impacts. The group then agreed that the lead evaluator and the Emerging Professional could meet the following week to go through the same process with the staff ripple map.

The team members needed to come to agreement about when a specific effect could be counted as evidence of an outcome or collective impact. The teams often coded effects under more than one category because many of the comments touched on more than one of the outcomes or impacts. The results of this coding are shown in the tables in Appendices C and D.

**Interpreting the tables.** This coding process makes it possible to compare the proportions of outcomes and impacts. These proportions are not like grades where 90% would be an "A" or 80% would be a "B." It would be impossible for a specific outcome to be present in every ripple effect reported. But it is useful to identify the outcomes and impacts with the highest proportions of ripple effects, as well as the ranking of these proportions.

For the students, the dominant student outcome was about sense of community (54% of reported effects), followed by artistic skills (43% of effects), employability skills (38% of effects), intercultural skills (30% of effects), and technological literacy (11% of effects). The dominant collective impact reported by students was educate and inform (36% of effects), followed by nurture and heal (33% of effects), inspire and mobilize (12% of effects) and build and improve (3% of effects).

For the staff, the dominant student outcome was artistic skills (42% of reported effects), followed by sense of community (22% of effects), employability skills (18% of effects), intercultural skills (12% of effects) and technological literacy (9% of effects). The dominant collective impact reported by staff was nurture and heal (30% of reported effects), followed by educate and inform (26% of effects), build and improve (16% of effects), and inspire and mobilize (15% of effects).

Comparing the group results for student outcomes, it is interesting to see the stronger emphasis on sense of community among the students. Students were also more likely than staff to report outcomes related to employability and intercultural skills. For both students and staff, artistic skills and technological literacy were reported in similar proportions.

The strongest areas of collective impact for both students and staff were "educate and inform" and "nurture and heal." For both groups, however, there were also many examples of the program inspiring and mobilizing youth, staff, as well as the broader community. Staff had more things to say about ways that StoryArk was having an impact on building and improving social and civic capacity in the Stillwater area.

# Concluding thoughts

## From the author

The impacts of StoryArk are multi-faceted and deep. This Ripple Effects Mapping evaluation documented the many pathways in which the program is meeting its mission to empower student voices and equip young artists to thrive. From the student perspective, the program has offered a crucial sense of community and belonging that has created a safe environment in which they can unleash their creativity and grow. From a staff perspective, the program has pushed the envelope in terms of giving students the power to initiate and lead the creative process.

All of the intended student outcomes of the StoryArk program were documented in this Ripple Effects Mapping process. It is also affirming to see the evidence of collective impact, especially in the areas of education and nurturing/healing. StoryArk is not designed as a mental health intervention, but its emphasis on community building and artistic expression has clearly impacted the social and emotional well-being of participating students, and many of the staff. In addition, StoryArk is not specifically a career preparation effort, but it has clearly given students workforce and life skills that will be extremely helpful in their careers.

A next step for documenting the collective impact of StoryArk might be to conduct an evaluation like this one with program audiences such as parents, non-StoryArk teachers, and other community members who've attended StoryArk experiences or have witnessed student growth.

## From Stephani Atkins, StoryArk Executive Director

From its inception, the heart of StoryArk has been its student led, student initiated creative process. This report has reaffirmed for us the power of providing a nurturing space for young people to gather and share their experience through storytelling. Stories provide a way to gain understanding and empathy not only of each other, but also for ourselves. StoryArk remains committed to empowering, uplifting and amplifying youth voices. Students know what is best for students; underserved communities know what is best for their communities. StoryArk's role is to provide the resources, skills and encouragement youth need to tell the story they want to tell. The mission is vital, and to that end, we commit to supporting what is most important, removing barriers to participation, and improving upon all areas detailed in this report.

## From Marci Levy-Maguire, Learning and Innovation Assessment and Data Coordinator, and Eric Anderson, Achievement and Integration Coordinator

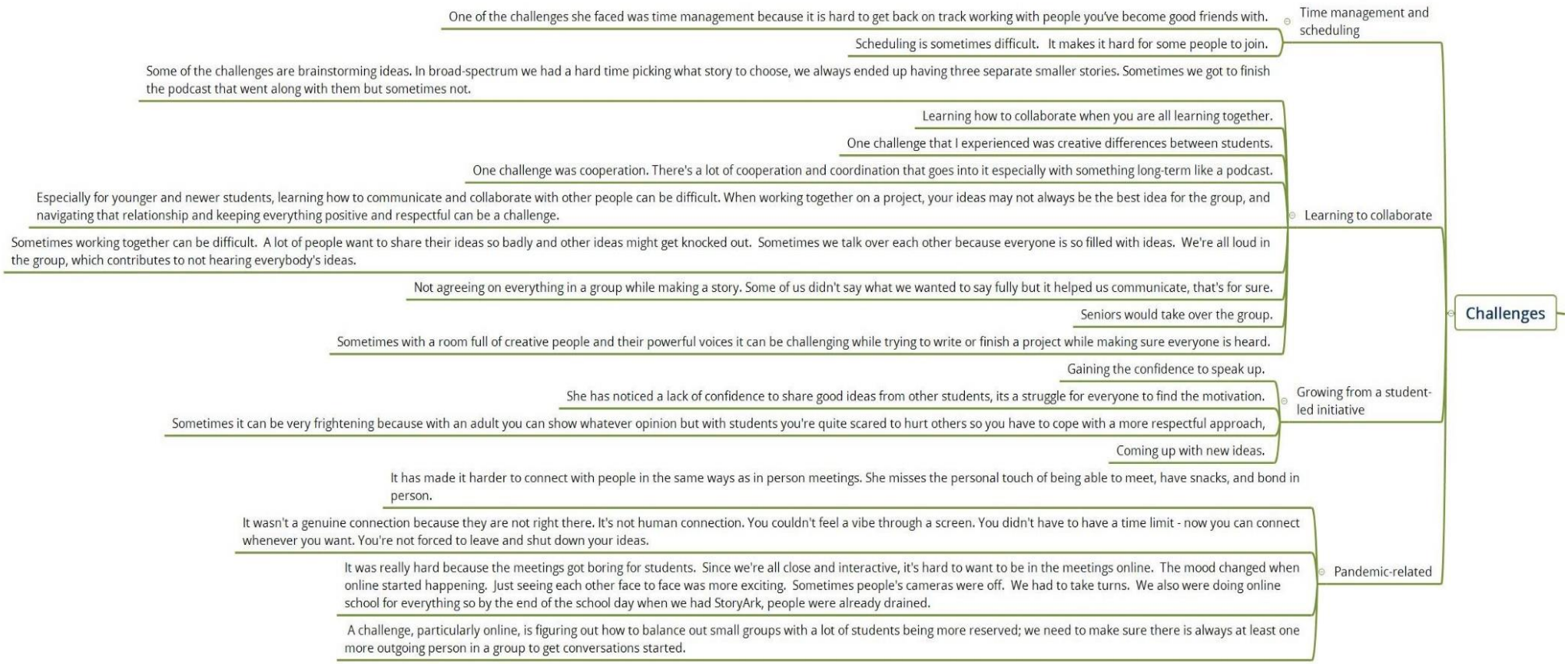
The outcomes of the Stillwater Area Public Schools/StoryArk partnership program evaluation are clearly aligned with our district's Profile of a Stillwater Graduate, which includes collaborator, critical thinker, creator, communicator, and self-advocate. As we implement lessons we have learned from educating during a pandemic and a world-wide

focus on social justice, we have the opportunity to innovate through disruption. One of the intentional focal points of the district's achievement and integration work has been social justice within the educational context. This Ripple Map Effect evaluation indicates that this work has led to positive outcomes for students and staff. It also provides a model for infusing student voice and choice, student leadership, reflections on identity and identity development, a focus on college and career skills, and a strong sense of belonging throughout ALL of our academic programs. As we expand and strengthen our high school Pathways programs, reevaluate our middle school model, and enhance our elementary programs, we encourage district decision-makers to consider the philosophies and practices that have made the Stillwater Area Public Schools/StoryArk partnership so successful.

# Appendix A: Sections of the student ripple map

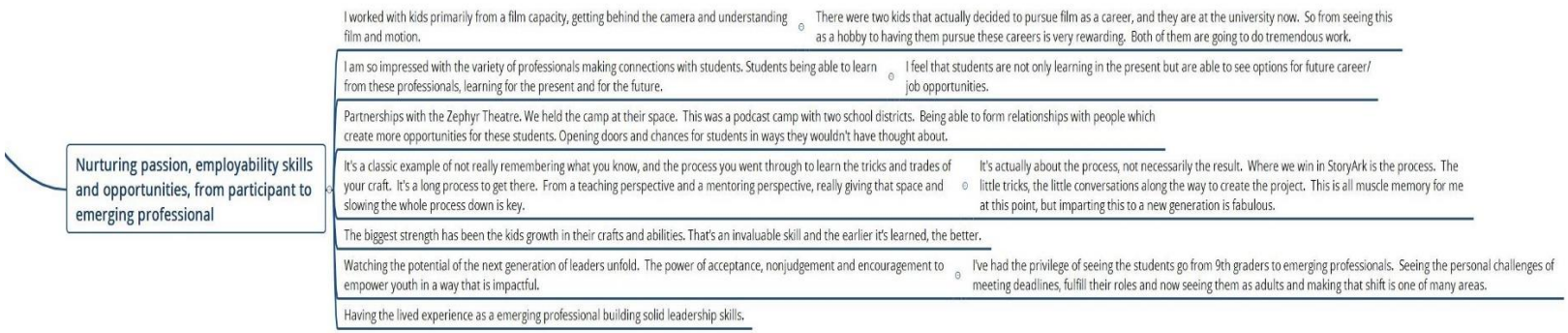
- **Creating an accepting space for self-expression**
  - A home for the heart
    - He got in the habit of writing regularly for a while and realized it had a positive impact on his mental health. Now he is making an effort to write more on his own, and at times other than just NaNoWriMo.
    - StoryArk has always been a place where I felt accepted for who I was, and the people there have been there for me through all of the mental health problems I've had, and they always welcome me back. I think that really was influential when I was struggling, I may not have seen it, but I would have been in a much darker place with out it.
    - A highlight I had with StoryArk was the podcast camp, it really helped me develop my writing style for certain subjects, as well as process some emotional issues.
    - He was significantly depressed in junior high/early high school, and StoryArk provided a safe space to explore his feelings and encouraged him to heal and grow more than he feels he would have been able to on his own. It gave him a reason to reach out and connect with the world, and to branch out and try new things.
    - My previous experience with StoryArk (HUSH) helped me develop voice acting skills, which in turn helped me with the extracurricular activity, speech. My involvement with HUSH has opened more doors for me in StoryArk, which has helped me beef up my resume, as well as allow me an outlet to process trauma.
    - "StoryArk is the home for my heart." StoryArk was a starting point for who he is today and who he is going to be creatively/emotionally/professionally.
      - There was also, back when we recorded in the basement of a house in Wisconsin, when Stephani's car got stuck in the house's driveway and we all got together to help push it out.
    - Subconciously figured things out about myself when we were creating stories together. I didn't realize until quarantine and I had time to think how much it opened up things about myself.
  - Providing a supportive community
    - StoryArk has been so considerate and is such an accepting and validating community and I feel like in StoryArk student voices are being heard.
    - When I think of StoryArk, I think of a supportive community. They always are open to your ideas and encourage us to become involved in anything that we have want be a part of.
    - It means we have an open community where we can discuss our issues or stuff we want to talk about through stories so other people can interpret in a way that's meaningful to them.
    - Builds a safe space to take concessions and communication and it's important to recognize that.
    - The StoryArk community is something that has been in my life since elementary school, and I feel like StoryArk itself is an amazing concept, but it's the people that make it worth keeping in my life. The community may be a little spread out right now, but it still feels pretty homogeneous.
    - The StoryArk community is a supportive and inspiring group. I never feel judged when I share my ideas and everyone is open-minded. I would call them a second family.
    - Family (she says it's cliche), welcoming, confident boosting, creative group, us being creative is really helpful in making sure everyone works together, an environment and community not only people who work but the community outside. it's such a safe community that we can share any topic such as political, environmental, and overall scary topics (especially what happened on Wednesday - topics like that are what we can talk about without feeling judged).
    - Navigating her identity through StoryArk helped her branch out her interests and find ways to express herself through creativity such as poems.
    - Safe, warm, understanding, kind.
    - Connecting with and relating to people with similar experiences.
  - Promoting empathy and mutual learning
    - Learning how to deal with lots of personalities and appreciate others also learned a lot about myself and how to improve myself.
    - Getting to learn from people that are more on our level - it is less intimidating to have people who are a few years older than you vs. industry professionals. Students know what students want, generally.
    - It think that it has given so many opportunities for students to make choices, a challenge being that through student-led initiatives, everyone is learning alongside you.
    - It means diverse, understanding and leadership.
    - One strength that I love about StoryArk is that everyone leaves feeling heard and we most of the time reach a common ground.
    - For film, we started making our own films in the spring, and that was really exciting because we had been doing writing and podcasting. We had little meetings in the StoryArk meeting, which was fun. The space was so relaxing, it felt like home. Everyone was so comfortable and we shared our ideas. That's the place we were the most excited because we were able to see our ideas come to life.
      - We'd go and film in certain locations, Chill Koot Cafe, to film and we'd meet the workers, and it was fun to see everybody's acting skills, and we had a ceremony where we saw everybody's film. That was the funnest day.
  - Maintaining this space during the pandemic
    - It surprisingly improved a lot of relationships. StoryArk did a really good job transitioning to online.
    - Online I could talk and be my true self. I was able to be more confident.
    - During the pandemic, we had to transition online which was difficult in the beginning since we weren't able to record our podcasts in the studio. But then we figured a solution to record on Zoom.
    - Going virtual was nice because it was easier to connect with different people from different places but it was hard to make the connections I made with people pre-pandemic with people I met post pandemic.
    - Going online resulted is my ability to meet people outside of the valley, we were able to broaden our horizons and make connections with professionals and students that we wouldn't have met otherwise.
    - It was positive because it helped people become comfortable during an uncomfortable time. For example if they felt uncomfortable they could simply turn of their camera and mic whilst still being apart of the group, and in their own space.
    - Normal everyday little things (like side talking or even smiling at your friends) or any daily interaction is much harder to do through virtual meeting. But it also made it easier to reach out to more people and boundaries were not a problem.
    - My impact was mostly positive, I like doing online because it's safer and you're more accountable for joining. I remember in school I would have other priorities before a broad spectrum so being online makes that easier.
    - It's a little harder, she thrives with in-person contact (body language, and public action) but its a blessing in disguise because people are more accountable for joining zooms and no worries like transportation and dressing.
    - I got professionals and people from all over the world to connect with but difficult because you cant feel the vibe.
    - At college he likely would not have been able to participate in StoryArk, or at least not as much as he can now.
    - He was sad that getting more involved at college meant not being able to stay as involved with StoryArk, so he was thrilled when Stephani reached out early during the pandemic to get involved with creating online programming. Ultimately, the online nature is a blessing and a curse. It allows him to meet people he wouldn't have otherwise met and to be able to join StoryArk more often. However, there's less opportunity to meet people outside of StoryArk and chat with them and deepen relationships. Hopefully after the pandemic, we can connect more in person.
    - I feel like i wouldn't have been able to participate in as much with StoryArk if it weren't online, so even when the pandemic is over, it would be great to have an online option for students. I would love to be in person but if someone can't make it, the online option is definitely awesome.

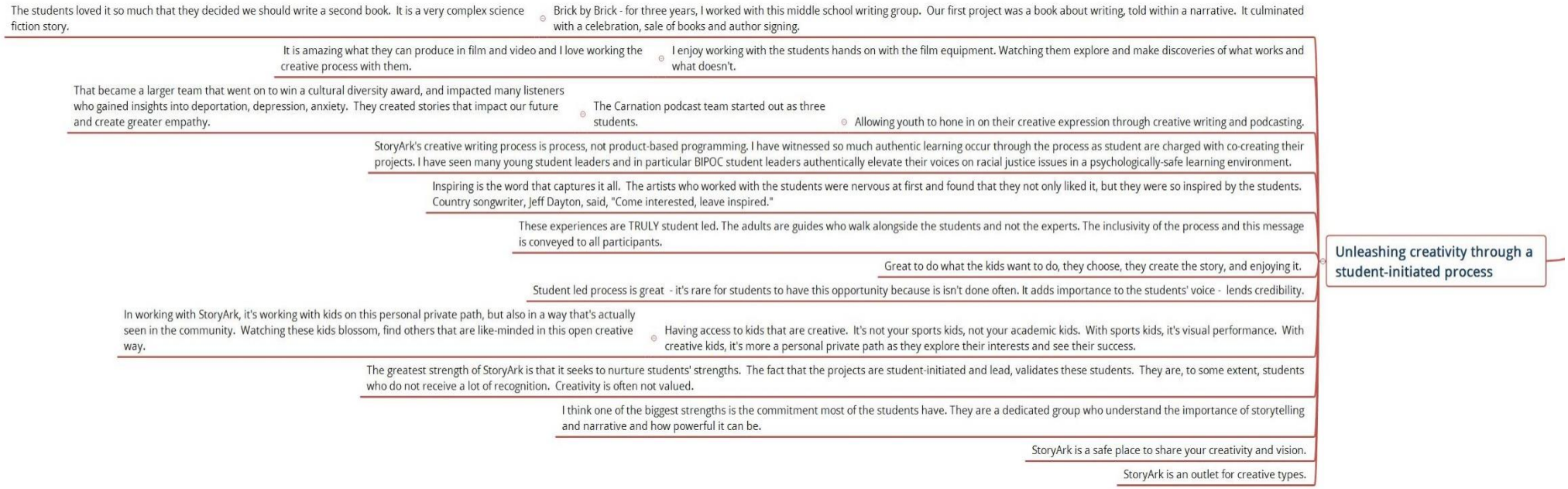
Cultivating character
Voice
A highlight is finding my own voice, also learning not to be bossy, learned how to communicate with people, secondly got into video editing because of StoryArk that then translated to being my main income.
In the beginning, when I joined in 9th grade, we had the opportunity to make podcasts and write stories and I really enjoyed it. I didn't know that it would be heard by so many people. It was cool to have an audience and voice my own opinion.
Being a part of this group helped me raise my voice on issues that are not covered by media.
Being to speak out in public being in a group of people who are more opinionated that I am definitely helped me and made my voice louder.
StoryArk is always able to tell the absent narrative.
The StoryArk community means being able to share your story with reporters.
StoryArk allows students to really use their stories and help them.
Pride and confidence
Being able to perform in front of a large group of people. It helped my confidence and stage presence. I'm more comfortable to speak out loud to my peers.
One of the best highlights was the Phpps awards. Basically, we had our writing rooms after school, and we were able to create stories from our lives, or that we've heard in the world. We got to create whatever you wanted and share that with the whole Stillwater community. It was like an awards ceremony. Some people won awards based off of their writing. It was a great accomplishment. We were able to share our stories online and with our community so people could learn from our past experiences and what we were talking about.
Power
We are so involved in all the administrative decisions, what kind of projects we want to pursue, how we want the meetings to look, and how we want to get more people involved. It's a blessing to give that power to kids to learn from, so people get inspired by other people.
It wasn't even about students being leaders it was adults letting us think for ourselves and didn't tell us what to do. It gave me a chance to think with a open mind for the first time and not have to think about what other people want. The adults let us do whatever and be us.
Learned the power of elevating student voice.
Learning life skills through experiences
Creating artistic opportunities
I would say that StoryArk has made a positive impact on me. I've gotten so many opportunities. Without StoryArk I wouldn't be as good of a writer as I am now. I have so many skills now that I use in my everyday life, and I have more confidence in voicing my opinion.
There's a lot of learning opportunities. I got all these fantastic opportunities to improve skills.
My previous experience with StoryArk (HUSH) helped me develop voice acting skills, which in turn helped me with the extracurricular activity, speech. My involvement with HUSH has opened more doors for me in StoryArk, which has helped me beef up my resume, as well as allow me an outlet to process trauma.
She has been in StoryArk for 4-5 years and because of that she has been able to work upon her success, StoryArk live host (MCE) she organized it. She is now an Emerging Professional.
My involvement with StoryArk had led to many opportunities. For example, I had a poem published in the Boom magazine and performed it live in from of others. I also had the chance to recite my poem to the school board. To add on, I've met amazing individuals from different districts and shared unique ideas with one another.
Collaborating
A highlight would be completing a story with other people. I liked working with team. I learned how to appreciate team work.
Being surrounded by a diverse group of ideas helped me grow as a person.
One of the strengths she's experienced is working with like-minded people (which is hard to find at Stillwater's homogeneous community.)
The group came up with awesome ideas and we could voice our opinion. It could be a make-believe story or a real one. The possibilities are endless.
Overwhelming amount of ideas from people, and great collaboration.
Enhancing career skills
StoryArk has provided the connections and experiences to prepare me for my future career in film.
It has taught me responsibility by balancing my school and work life.
Networking -- I got an internship, and I was able to use my StoryArk network to help me create a video series for my internship.
StoryArk has helped me get video editing jobs ever since I graduated high school. StoryArk launched my videoediting career.
I did a lot of formatting with the Boom site newsletter. I had a multi-media class in college, and it was really helpful to have that prior knowledge to help me through that class.
It's made it easier to talk with people. In interviews and jobs, I now know how to approach the situation when I'm meeting someone new.
I got better at emails, which helped me get jobs. They taught me how to email and respond quickly.
She was able to have a job because of her involvement with StoryArk. A job that gave her the opportunity to do something she enjoyed and go into a job with familiar faces.
Learning how to work with different personality types.
He decided he wanted to do it professionally and learned a lot from classes about mistakes he made when he was younger and how he can improve. Overall, he's really glad that StoryArk is here.
Memories of our initial recording studio - driving there was always a fun experience, and sometimes students would fall asleep on the couch together. He also changed his major to do more sound design related things because started doing it with StoryArk and realized that he really missed it at college.


Challenges
Time management and scheduling
One of the challenges she faced was time management because it is hard to get back on track working with people you've become good friends with.
Scheduling is sometimes difficult. It makes it hard for some people to join.
Learning to collaborate
Some of the challenges are brainstorming ideas. In broad-spectrum we had a hard time picking what story to choose, we always ended up having three separate smaller stories. Sometimes we got to finish the podcast that went along with them but sometimes not.
Learning how to collaborate when you are all learning together.
One challenge that I experienced was creative differences between students.
One challenge was cooperation. There's a lot of cooperation and coordination that goes into it especially with something long-term like a podcast.
Especially for younger and newer students, learning how to communicate and collaborate with other people can be difficult. When working together on a project, your ideas may not always be the best idea for the group, and navigating that relationship and keeping everything positive and respectful can be a challenge.
Sometimes working together can be difficult. A lot of people want to share their ideas so badly and other ideas might get knocked out. Sometimes we talk over each other because everyone is so filled with ideas. We're all loud in the group, which contributes to not hearing everybody's ideas.
Not agreeing on everything in a group while making a story. Some of us didn't say what we wanted to say fully but it helped us communicate, that's for sure.
Seniors would take over the group.
Sometimes with a room full of creative people and their powerful voices it can be challenging while trying to write or finish a project while making sure everyone is heard.
Growing from a student-led initiative
Gaining the confidence to speak up.
She has noticed a lack of confidence to share good ideas from other students, its a struggle for everyone to find the motivation.
Sometimes it can be very frightening because with an adult you can show whatever opinion but with students you're quite scared to hurt others so you have to cope with a more respectful approach,
Coming up with new ideas.
Pandemic-related
It has made it harder to connect with people in the same ways as in person meetings. She misses the personal touch of being able to meet, have snacks, and bond in person.
It wasn't a genuine connection because they are not right there. It's not human connection. You couldn't feel a vibe through a screen. You didn't have to have a time limit - now you can connect whenever you want. You're not forced to leave and shut down your ideas.
It was really hard because the meetings got boring for students. Since we're all close and interactive, it's hard to want to be in the meetings online. The mood changed when online started happening. Just seeing each other face to face was more exciting. Sometimes people's cameras were off. We had to take turns. We also were doing online school for everything so by the end of the school day when we had StoryArk, people were already drained.
A challenge, particularly online, is figuring out how to balance out small groups with a lot of students being more reserved; we need to make sure there is always at least one more outgoing person in a group to get conversations started.

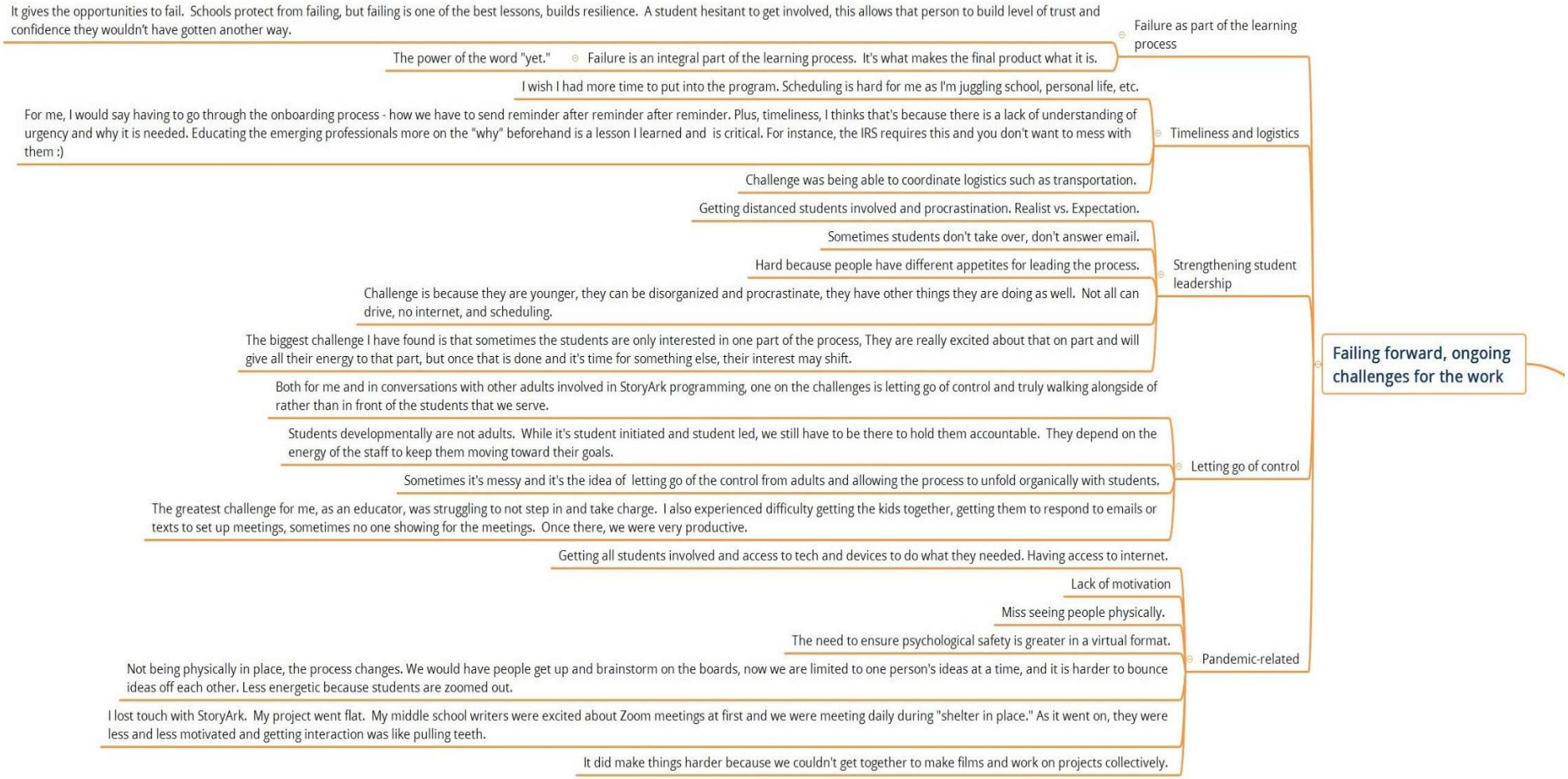
# Appendix B Sections of the staff ripple map

Cultivating voice, pride and empowerment
Endeavoring to create a safe space
Voice
Biggest connection with Steph - understanding the philosophy around the storytelling and how that gives power and can serve you as a larger community member, as a youth with a voice, as a friend, as a colleague.
Being a minority myself, the phrase/mantra, "making space for the marginalized voices" will always hold a special place in my heart.
Witnessing students who seem to have their voice lost among the hubbub of life, find their voice and find that what the have to say is important and holds weight.
I believe this results in these kids having more confidence in who they are and what they can accomplish, which goes a long way in this thing we call life.
Being able to reclaim their own narratives and exploring their identities in an authentic way. Move confidence and validation from their experiences and authentically finding their voices.
Empowerment
StoryArk is an amazing community for students of all backgrounds to get together to collaborate and share stories. The diversity they bring is amazing, and it shows in the work. The student shares what is on their mind and their experiences, no matter the subject. It is amazing to see the students grow not only as storytellers, but as individuals. Stephanie has done an amazing job mentoring the students and giving them an outlet to speak their minds.
The joy and power they feel from being part of StoryArk is obvious by not only the amount of students that continue to be part of the program, but by the number of emerging professionals that come back to help teach.
Bravery, empowerment, broader community leaders nurtured
St.Croix Valley Foundation looked to StoryArk for students who could share their experience in their Conversations of the Valley event; I am learning so much from these youth from my participation with them. I learn something every time.
Things I've learned: how to deal with the current issues - youth insights are so deep. Learning to be reflective. I'm learning to be brave and courageous and speak the truth thanks to youth inspiration.
Empowering, sharing, creating, collectiveness, team work.
Empowering. Uplifting. Critical friends. Narrative.
When Steph told me I wanted the emerging professionals to drive summer programming, I thought she was insane. It was not my previous experience, and I was skeptical the students could do it.
I was proven wrong. This is the most empowering piece that I have seen in nonprofit work with my own limited experience with nonprofits. Giving students a voice and the buy-in. There are so many pieces you could see being successful: youth mentoring. For me, it has really changed my perspective on what youth can do if you give them voice.
Students say it is immediately empowering to share stories about themselves.
Building pride and confidence
DaVinci Fest - students volunteered and stayed all day explaining what StoryArk is all about and their particular project, a book about writing.
Their pride and professionalism was astounding.
Seeing the kids take on challenges that are foreign to them and overcome the inherent difficulties is so rewarding.
The results are that the students blossom and gain in confidence and belief in themselves. They can do anything.
Boom Site Literary Journal - this journal was initiated by a student and completely student led. The journal was an opportunity for students to showcase their typically unrecognized work.
The release party, which was well attended, was evidence of the pride the students and their families took in the project and their own pieces published.
Positivity, confidence building - when they see the final product, its great to see their reactions. Pride in their work. Ability to have student ownership.
It gives the opportunities to fail. Schools protect from failing, but failing is one of the best lessons, builds resilience. A student hesitant to get involved, this allows that person to build level of trust and confidence they wouldn't have gotten another way.
A highlight was when our Carnation podcast group shared their work with families at the Family Means Community Center in the Cimarron Mobile Home Community.
I spent much of my time during this experience observing the non-verbal behavior of the families (who were native Spanish speakers) and what I witnessed was pride "oozing out of every pore."
I still carry that mental map with me and draw upon it when I am in need of a reminder as to the "why" we do this important work.
One of the coolest things was at the end of the year StoryArk Festival, response from the kids-interested in kids, opening of eyes into new stories and loved the students getting together -- all different backgrounds and experiences.
Being in recording room, where stories are told -- they are raw and beautiful -- highlight-opening up and sharing stories is a highlight.
Success is elevating voices and creating new families-friendships, a voice, comfort they did not have before -- come somewhere and feel safe-- students can be themselves.
Getting to work with all the students. The focus on the student and the creative process. Second part - tracking the confidence level of the students in Hush junior.
Kids are underestimated, and StoryArk gives us the chance to uplift them and hear their voices. They can make a difference in this world and that we shouldn't underestimate their potential impact.
People believing that they have good ideas and things to bring to the table.
One really shy student, who only wanted to write, started to come out of their shell and finally (after a year and a half) decided to actually take a part in the performance. He became much more comfortable and is now involved in much larger parts. His attitude has changed in all aspects of his involvement.
StoryArk film festival in August - it's film, podcasting, music.
The success of watching the kids embrace what they've done. Looking around that room and watching their eyes light up. It's the validation. It's a different kid walking out of that auditorium.
The smiles and laughter of the students that are enjoying the class.
The challenges are getting to the shy students, however after a couple of classes they always come out their shells.


Nurturing passion, employability skills and opportunities, from participant to emerging professional
I worked with kids primarily from a film capacity, getting behind the camera and understanding film and motion.
There were two kids that actually decided to pursue film as a career, and they are at the university now. So from seeing this as a hobby to having them pursue these careers is very rewarding. Both of them are going to do tremendous work.
I am so impressed with the variety of professionals making connections with students. Students being able to learn from these professionals, learning for the present and for the future.
I feel that students are not only learning in the present but are able to see options for future career/ job opportunities.
Partnerships with the Zephyr Theatre. We held the camp at their space. This was a podcast camp with two school districts. Being able to form relationships with people which create more opportunities for these students. Opening doors and chances for students in ways they wouldn't have thought about.
It's a classic example of not really remembering what you know, and the process you went through to learn the tricks and trades of your craft. It's a long process to get there. From a teaching perspective and a mentoring perspective, really giving that space and slowing the whole process down is key.
It's actually about the process, not necessarily the result. Where we win in StoryArk is the process. The little tricks, the little conversations along the way to create the project. This is all muscle memory for me at this point, but imparting this to a new generation is fabulous.
The biggest strength has been the kids growth in their crafts and abilities. That's an invaluable skill and the earlier it's learned, the better.
Watching the potential of the next generation of leaders unfold. The power of acceptance, nonjudgement and encouragement to empower youth in a way that is impactful.
I've had the privilege of seeing the students go from 9th graders to emerging professionals. Seeing the personal challenges of meeting deadlines, fulfill their roles and now seeing them as adults and making that shift is one of many areas.
Having the lived experience as a emerging professional building solid leadership skills.


Unleashing creativity through a student-initiated process
The students loved it so much that they decided we should write a second book. It is a very complex science fiction story.
Brick by Brick - for three years, I worked with this middle school writing group. Our first project was a book about writing, told within a narrative. It culminated with a celebration, sale of books and author signing.
It is amazing what they can produce in film and video and I love working the creative process with them.
I enjoy working with the students hands on with the film equipment. Watching them explore and make discoveries of what works and what doesn't.
That became a larger team that went on to win a cultural diversity award, and impacted many listeners who gained insights into deportation, depression, anxiety. They created stories that impact our future and create greater empathy.
The Carnation podcast team started out as three students.
Allowing youth to hone in on their creative expression through creative writing and podcasting.
StoryArk's creative writing process is process, not product-based programming. I have witnessed so much authentic learning occur through the process as student are charged with co-creating their projects. I have seen many young student leaders and in particular BIPOC student leaders authentically elevate their voices on racial justice issues in a psychologically-safe learning environment.
Inspiring is the word that captures it all. The artists who worked with the students were nervous at first and found that they not only liked it, but they were so inspired by the students. Country songwriter, Jeff Dayton, said, "Come interested, leave inspired."
These experiences are TRULY student led. The adults are guides who walk alongside the students and not the experts. The inclusivity of the process and this message is conveyed to all participants.
Great to do what the kids want to do, they choose, they create the story, and enjoying it.
Student led process is great - it's rare for students to have this opportunity because is isn't done often. It adds importance to the students' voice - lends credibility.
In working with StoryArk, it's working with kids on this personal private path, but also in a way that's actually seen in the community. Watching these kids blossom, find others that are like-minded in this open creative way.
Having access to kids that are creative. It's not your sports kids, not your academic kids. With sports kids, it's visual performance. With creative kids, it's more a personal private path as they explore their interests and see their success.
The greatest strength of StoryArk is that it seeks to nurture students' strengths. The fact that the projects are student-initiated and lead, validates these students. They are, to some extent, students who do not receive a lot of recognition. Creativity is often not valued.
I think one of the biggest strengths is the commitment most of the students have. They are a dedicated group who understand the importance of storytelling and narrative and how powerful it can be.
StoryArk is a safe place to share your creativity and vision.
StoryArk is an outlet for creative types.

Learning about, through learning among
Promoting empathy and mutual learning
Adapting to the pandemic
It has taught me to that we can appreciate each other's values and that we are more alike than we are different. These relationships have added so much to my life.
The first meeting of broad spectrum these beautiful students walked in wearing hijabs. It took less than five minutes for all of my preconceived notions to fade away.
Connection, community, empathy, understanding, cultural humility, "empower, uplift, and amplify." I came from a conservative Christian background and there were people in my life who were fearful of Muslims.
In a world that is so polarized, teaching youth to speak in stories helps us all grow in empathy and understanding of each other.
Our Broad Spectrum podcast group created the following narrative three years ago that truly captures the richness of this work: "Our stories provide context and meaning for our lives and can inspire us to think more deeply about how we fit into the world and about the responsibilities that we have to each other."
StoryArk is a community where students are accepted and feel safe, where similarities and differences are honored, where students can be challenged, a place to agree and disagree, a place where students can be themselves. StoryArk is a place people want to be.
See a different side of my students and see them take ownership. Emerging professionals guiding them, I learned a lot as well.
The learning experience was mutual. I did not have to beg to have artists return the next year. Student and parent responses were overwhelmingly positive.
Summer Intensive - artists from the area were invited to work with students, teaching them and coaching them.
There's an optimism, and a mindset of looking at different options to solve a problem or tell a story. And it comes from many perspectives. It's really a perseverance that is endemic in these kids, identify other paths to take. Now more than ever we find many things we can't do. Their method of exploring options is more about what we can do, and getting it from so many perspectives is incredible. It's from a 12 year old who doesn't know the answers, but knows the questions. It's from kids in underserved communities. You end up growing something that is far more amazing that what you intended.
Through StoryArk I have been able to build upon my teaching skills and now work with other organizations leading classrooms in film production. I have a better understanding of how to make things more approachable for students and help them learn the basics to storytelling.
Helped students feel more at ease with the pandemic and created their "own little escape" during this tumultuous time.
Relationships were actually strengthened. Need to responsively adapt instantaneously and participants all pulled together so that this transition happened successfully.
Hang out more often.
Huge plus, so nice to be able to meet with anyone across the country-so much easier, own comfortable space.
We have limited face time together so maximizing and preparing for our meetings is key. We have also learned to be open and honest and as efficient as possible in our communications.
Enabled to see more people at one time, easy to connect
Given us as an organization to broaden reach, so going virtual let's us have a wider aspect.
This allowed us to expand and different relationships in a good in unexpected ways and we hope to maintain it. I gained a real appreciation for connecting in the online world. It reinforced the importance of check-ins at the beginning of meetings.
With the diversity of our students, we were able to break down the transportation barrier. We were able to engage students from all across the entire state of MN, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.
Crazy enough, going virtual actually removed barriers. We found the virtual writers room to be a creative engaging space.
It also allows us to access artists in residence from all over the world truly creating "world class" programming.
Going entirely virtual actually served to eliminate the huge opportunity gap caused by needing to transport students to and from StoryArk's learning experiences.
We have also worked hard to ensure the psychological safety of our participants in these virtual learning environments.
The circumstances served to eliminate an opportunity gap to transport students. Allowed us to access artists all over the country/world.
I would not have had a relationship with these amazing people were it not for going virtual. For that, I am eternally grateful.
Going virtual was a huge factor in being able to connect with more students around the state. It makes it accessible and scalable in ways that being in person wasn't able to.
By really LISTENING and then sharing each other's experiences.
As in school, it is awesome to be able to connect in some aspect with students but it is definitely harder to get to know everyone individually, but so much better than nothing. I think about what COVID would have been like 20 years ago....Virtual connection would not even be an option.


Failing forward, ongoing challenges for the work
Failure as part of the learning process
It gives the opportunities to fail. Schools protect from failing, but failing is one of the best lessons, builds resilience. A student hesitant to get involved, this allows that person to build level of trust and confidence they wouldn't have gotten another way.
Failure is an integral part of the learning process. It's what makes the final product what it is.
The power of the word "yet."
Timeliness and logistics
I wish I had more time to put into the program. Scheduling is hard for me as I'm juggling school, personal life, etc.
For me, I would say having to go through the onboarding process - how we have to send reminder after reminder after reminder. Plus, timeliness, I thinks that's because there is a lack of understanding of urgency and why it is needed. Educating the emerging professionals more on the "why" beforehand is a lesson I learned and is critical. For instance, the IRS requires this and you don't want to mess with them :)
Challenge was being able to coordinate logistics such as transportation.
Strengthening student leadership
Getting distanced students involved and procrastination. Realist vs. Expectation.
Sometimes students don't take over, don't answer email.
Hard because people have different appetites for leading the process.
Challenge is because they are younger, they can be disorganized and procrastinate, they have other things they are doing as well. Not all can drive, no internet, and scheduling.
The biggest challenge I have found is that sometimes the students are only interested in one part of the process, They are really excited about that on part and will give all their energy to that part, but once that is done and it's time for something else, their interest may shift.
Letting go of control
Both for me and in conversations with other adults involved in StoryArk programming, one on the challenges is letting go of control and truly walking alongside of rather than in front of the students that we serve.
Students developmentally are not adults. While it's student initiated and student led, we still have to be there to hold them accountable. They depend on the energy of the staff to keep them moving toward their goals.
Sometimes it's messy and it's the idea of letting go of the control from adults and allowing the process to unfold organically with students.
The greatest challenge for me, as an educator, was struggling to not step in and take charge. I also experienced difficulty getting the kids together, getting them to respond to emails or texts to set up meetings, sometimes no one showing for the meetings. Once there, we were very productive.
Pandemic-related
Getting all students involved and access to tech and devices to do what they needed. Having access to internet.
Lack of motivation
Miss seeing people physically.
The need to ensure psychological safety is greater in a virtual format.
Not being physically in place, the process changes. We would have people get up and brainstorm on the boards, now we are limited to one person's ideas at a time, and it is harder to bounce ideas off each other. Less energetic because students are zoomed out.
I lost touch with StoryArk. My project went flat. My middle school writers were excited about Zoom meetings at first and we were meeting daily during "shelter in place." As it went on, they were less and less motivated and getting interaction was like pulling teeth.
It did make things harder because we couldn't get together to make films and work on projects collectively.

# Appendix C: Results table, student ripple effects mapping session

(Of 100 reported effects, the number and percentage counted for each outcome and impact)

| | | Count of reported effects | Percentage of 100 reported effects | Examples |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student outcomes | Sense of community/belonging | 54 | 54% | The StoryArk community is a supportive and inspiring group. I never feel judged when I share my ideas and everyone is open-minded. I would call them a second family. |
| | Artistic skills | 43 | 43% | Navigating her identity through StoryArk helped her branch out her interests and find ways to express herself through creativity such as poems. |
| | Employability skills | 38 | 38% | StoryArk has provided the connections and experiences to prepare me for my future career in film. |
| | Intercultural skills | 30 | 30% | Made her feel like she had a community and taught her what a community really is. She got the opportunity to really listen to other peoples story and that community can't happen without listening. |
| | Technological literacy | 11 | 11% | During the pandemic, we had to transition online which was difficult in the beginning since we weren't able to record our podcasts in the studio. But then we figured a solution to record on Zoom. |
| Collective impacts | Educate and inform | 36 | 36% | Getting to learn from people that are more on our level - it is less intimidating to have people who are a few years older than you vs industry professionals. Students know what students want, generally. |
| | Nurture and heal | 33 | 33% | He got in the habit of writing regularly for a while and realized it had a positive impact on his mental health. Now he is making an effort to write more on his own, and at times other than just NaNoWriMo. |
| | Inspire and mobilize | 12 | 12% | Now, when starting individual creative projects, he is able to remember how other people worked on things in StoryArk to draw inspiration/ideas from, and can ask himself how he would work on the project if there were other people involved. |
| | Build and improve (community capacity) | 3 | 3% | We were able to share our stories online and with our community so people could learn from our past experiences and what we were talking about. |

# Appendix D: Results table, staff ripple effects mapping session

(Of 117 effects, the number and percentage counted for each outcome and impact)

| | | Count of reported effects | Percentage of 117 reported effects | Illustrative examples |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student outcomes | Artistic skills | 49 | 42% | Summer Intensive - artists from the area were invited to work with students, teaching them and coaching them. |
| | Sense of community/belonging | 26 | 22% | Community-family, and all have love for each other. Check-in with energy and health, having connection. Students sharing stories is everything. |
| | Employability skills | 21 | 18% | I feel that students are not only learning in the present but are able to see options for future career/job opportunities. |
| | Intercultural skills | 14 | 12% | One of the coolest things was at the end of the year StoryArk Festival, response from the kids-interested in kids, opening of eyes into new stories and loved the students getting together -- all different backgrounds and experiences. |
| | Technological literacy | 10 | 9% | I enjoy working with the students hands on with the film equipment. Watching them explore and make discoveries of what works and what doesn't. |
| Collective impacts | Nurture and heal | 35 | 30% | Watching the potential of the next generation of leaders unfold. The power of acceptance, nonjudgement and encouragement to empower youth in a way that is impactful. |
| | Educate and inform | 31 | 26% | Through StoryArk I have been able to build upon my teaching skills and now work with other organizations leading classrooms in film production. I have a better understanding of how to make things more approachable for students and help them learn the basics to storytelling. |
| | Build and improve (community capacity) | 19 | 16% | St.Croix Valley Foundation looked to StoryArk for students who could share their experience in their Conversations of the Valley event. |
| | Inspire and mobilize | 18 | 15% | Students say it is immediately empowering to share stories about themselves. |